

The West Wing Weekly
7.06: "The Al Smith Dinner"

[Intro Music]

JOSH: You're listening to *The West Wing Weekly*. I'm Joshua Malina.

HRISHI: And I'm Hrishikesh Hirway, and today, we're talking about episode 6 from season 7, "The Al Smith Dinner."

JOSH: It was directed by Lesli Linka Glatter, or Lesli Linda Glatter - as autocorrect would have me say - and it was written by Eli Attie, or Eli Attic as [both Josh and Hrishikesh laugh] - as autocorrect would have me say.

HRISHI: Is this gonna be a thing for the rest of the episode?

JOSH: It's going to be a thing, or a think. We'll see.

HRISHI: [laughs] In this episode both candidates are gearing up for the Al Smith Dinner, a real thing that happens in New York, as we'll discuss later. And the entire episode, and indeed the dinner, is framed around their respective positions on abortion. There's a negative attack ad that comes out from an independent committee funded by big Republican donors, and it escalates everything between what has been, so far, a mostly civil campaign between Santos and Vinick. Also, Will takes over Toby's old job.

JOSH: Huzzah.

HRISHI: I really like this episode.

JOSH: I like this episode too.

HRISHI: I really liked the season 6 primary campaigning episodes, and I really like the season 7 campaign episodes, too.

JOSH: Yeah. As do I. I think Eli does a very good job in the writing of, sort of, building a credible escalation in campaigning in this episode, and the back and forth.

HRISHI: Yeah. The back and forth is what I really like. We've talked a little about it already in that we're getting into some of the stuff we didn't get to have with the Bartlet campaign, you know, some of the real nitty gritty of what you have to do, and this episode is all about the nitty gritty of really almost like a minute-by-minute reaction from one side to the other about what they're doing, and then, meanwhile, there are these external actions that cause both sides to have to react as well.

JOSH: Yes. This is similar to...what is the other episode that we've recently discussed where it was back and forth, and immediate reactions, where I felt that it, maybe at times, strained credibility?

HRISHI: It was the one where Santos was going to do his reserve duty training.

JOSH: That's right. That, and the broken bed. Exactly. Somehow this one felt - although I enjoyed that other episode as well - this one felt entirely plausible to me.

HRISHI: Yeah. I think also it felt both nittier and grittier, because I think the parsing of their stances on abortion requires, like, a kind of subtlety here...

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: ...that's really interesting. It's a similar kind of thing with the invocation of the military service, where the democratic candidate gets to try and court national security, you know, even though he's coming from the left on so many things because of his military record. Here it's a similar kind of dynamic where you have these two candidates who are trying to express something original about themselves, only instead of national security and border patrol, it's about abortion.

JOSH: And interesting also to see how the candidates' positioning of their actual views affects their ability to open up their appeal a little bit to the "other side," but also affects, of course, the support they receive from their base.

HRISHI: Yeah, and there's just some element of math involved - 'okay, we can pick up these many points by going to people who are outside of our normal base, but then do we lose an equal number on the other side, or do we get to hold on to those?' You know, there's, I'm sure somewhere a lot of Excel spreadsheets being crunched.

JOSH: Yes. Exactly. It felt that way to me, and one of the interesting tensions of this episode is sort of the juxtaposition of that kind of political calculus with very, very important issues. So, you know, the political stakes versus the ethical stakes.

HRISHI: Mmm hmm. And the Nebraska steaks.

JOSH: Indeed.

HRISHI: I mean, and the Omaha steaks.

JOSH: [chuckling] and the Omaha steaks... autocorrect.

HRISHI: [laughing] Man, I need autocorrect. We need auto-fact-check-correct.

JOSH: Man, that would slow us down.

HRISHI: Well no - it's 'auto'! It would happen for us. Not to be confused with the guy who works on the Santos campaign: Otto. Correct.

JOSH: Ha ha. Hey - I'm with ya.

HRISHI: Okay, so we start the episode 63 days before election day. The episode starts 63 days before election day. The Santos campaign is in Dearborn, Michigan, and the Vinick team is at their campaign headquarters in Washington D.C. On the Santos side, they're continuing their debate about debates. Basically, Santos wants to engage in a debate with Vinick 'cause he needs to prove himself still. And that's really the best platform for him to get face time with the American people.

JOSH: Yes, and at the same time he wants to avoid the optics of seeming desperate.

HRISHI: Yeah. That's what I love about this episode - the push and pull between trying to get what you want, and not trying to look bad for seeming to want the thing that you want.

JOSH: Right. It's kinda like dating.

HRISHI: Yeah. It definitely is. That's maybe why you liked this episode. It's kind of like *The Bachelor*, maybe? I still haven't seen it, but I imagine there's some parallels around being coy and being direct.

JOSH: Yeah. That must be it. I didn't connect the two in my mind, but I think you're right. It comes down to [chuckling] my enjoyment of *The Bachelor*. *Bachelor in Paradise* is starting soon. I think by the time this airs, *Bachelor in Paradise* will have convened, and uh, just very heady exciting times for any television watcher...of discriminating taste.

HRISHI: They could just do another version that's *The Bachelor*, or *The Bachelorette: On the Campaign Trail*, and it might mirror something like this.

JOSH: Yes. And it might draw no viewers.

HRISHI: Or it might draw a lot, and you end up with Donald Trump as the president.

JOSH: Also possible.

HRISHI: I just realized where our reality show metaphor [cross talk] was leading, which was to 2016.

JOSH: [cross talk] Right.

JOSH: Yeah. There you go. I think it was... Andrew Yang in the second of the second debates - 2b was it? Where he scored points for what was an obviously pre-scripted comment - wait, now I have to look it up.

HRISHI: Andrew Yang - Phillips Exeter Academy.

JOSH: Oh really? I didn't know. So Andrew Yang's quote was:

[Democratic Primary debate 2b excerpt]

ANDREW YANG: We're up here with makeup on our faces, and our rehearsed attack lines, playing roles in this reality TV show. It's one reason why we elected a reality TV star as our president. We need to be laser-focused on solving the real challenges of today.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I love that he sort of calls out rehearsed attack lines as he's delivering a [cross talk] rehearsed attack line.

HRISHI: [cross talk] In a rehearsed attack line!

JOSH: Yeah. That's very meta. Well done. I never meta attack line I didn't like...

HRISHI: [chuckling] The timing, again, is great, you know - we're talking about this debate episode while debates are happening all around us. And it goes to show, there are people who are being talked about, even if they're not being talked about in the most flattering of ways, they're being talked about right now, who weren't being talked about before the debates started.

JOSH: Indeed.

HRISHI: And so you can see why Santos needs it and Vinick doesn't want it because he can just run out the clock, essentially.

JOSH: Yes, exactly. That nine-point lead is ample.

HRISHI: Mm hmm. So here's one issue that I have, based on the mechanics of *The West Wing* that we already know, that we have already established in our podcast, and I think, really, that any sophisticated television viewer knows as well - I mean there's a certain element of 'we know we're in episode six.' We're in the middle of the season, and Sheila keeps saying things like:

[West Wing Episode 7.06 excerpt]

SHEILA: He's the next President of the United States.

VINICK: *Would you please stop saying that?*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Which, to me, feels like they're reviewing too much, because you know that in *The West Wing*, if someone celebrates their success too early, it doesn't work out for them.

JOSH: Hmmm. Hubris.

HRISHI: Yeah. And Sheila doesn't go outside. She doesn't turn around three times or spit, or anything.

JOSH: That's a fair point. It didn't occur to me as it happened. So you're saying you think Santos is going to win.

HRISHI: I feel like they're setting things up in a three-act structure, where each act takes several episodes to play out, where we're getting this idea of 'yeah - okay - Santos is the underdog.' But we already know that. This feels a little bit like reinforcing it a little bit too much.

JOSH: Hmmm.

HRISHI: I mean, we've seen it in many *West Wing* episodes where they celebrate something in the cold open, only to have the rest of the episode be about them trying to solve the problems that come up immediately afterwards.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: Even Bruno says:

[West Wing Episode 7.06 excerpt]

BRUNO: Santos pulled out of North Dakota and West Virginia. There was not a single state we're not competing in. We could win all 50. Get used to it, Senator.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And later he's feeling even better, and posits that they will win 53 states.

HRISHI: [chuckling] That's right.

JOSH: And then through the power of suggestion, Vinick then says something about someone being 53 feet away from him. I was hoping that 53 would then be name-checked, or number-checked, throughout the episode.

HRISHI: Haha. That's good. I like that. It feels realistic.

JOSH: Yes, I thought so too.

HRISHI: Yeah. It's a nice detail. If you're wondering who Al Smith is, luckily in the cold open we get a - can I call it a 'tele-Brama'?

JOSH: Oooh - I went with 'Bram-splanation', but sure.

HRISHI: [chuckling] Well, Bram's not doing the -splanation himself.

JOSH: Oh no? Oh you're right. He poses the question.

HRISHI: Tele-Brama.

JOSH: [laughing] Yeah.

HRISHI: He asks:

[West Wing Episode 7.06 excerpt]

BRAM: Who's Al Smith, anyway?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And, you know, and this is where it just gets silly, but you've got to get the business of TV done. Bram says:

[West Wing Episode 7.06 excerpt]

BRAM: Why's the dinner such a big deal?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Alright.

JOSH: Why don't you come over here and sit on my lap, Bram, and I'll teach you a little bit about politics.

HRISHI: I love that scene, that line. It really feels like everybody's like, "Well, we're just doing this thing that we need to do." [cross talk] The way that...

JOSH: [cross talk] That's right.

HRISHI: The way Matthew Del Negro delivers that line is almost like he's in on it, too. He's like - he almost turns to the camera...

JOSH: ...and winks...

HRISHI: ...spiritually and says...

JOSH: "Well somebody's gotta ask!"

HRISHI: Exactly. So why's the dinner such a big deal that you would name an episode after it?

JOSH: It would have been funny if the next line were just Santos saying, "You're fired."

HRISHI: [laughing] Right! Exactly!

JOSH: "You don't know anything."

HRISHI: "How did you get into this room?" So yeah - the dinner is held in honor of Alfred E. Smith - not to be confused with Newman - four-time governor of New York, first Catholic candidate nominated for president back in the '20s. It is held on the third Thursday of October. It's hosted by the Archbishop of New York. It's a benefit, and all the dinner's proceeds go to benefiting the neediest children of New York, regardless of race, creed or color.

JOSH: Very nice.

HRISHI: It's been a place where presidential candidates speak since 1960. JFK and Richard Nixon spoke at it, and almost without exception - there have been a couple of exceptions - and those are kind of hinted at here. In 1996 President Clinton was not invited to speak because of a bill that he vetoed - a bill that would have outlawed late-term abortions.

JOSH: Yeah, I think that this episode, in its way, is sort of referencing that.

HRISHI: Yep. And also in 2004, John Kerry, who is a Catholic - a pro-choice Roman Catholic - was also not invited. Neither Kerry nor Bush were invited. There's some speculation that the real reason behind that was because Kerry is pro-choice. You'd think there would be a lot of excitement, or interest in having a presidential Catholic candidate appear, but because of his pro-choice views that didn't happen, and so I think that was a lot of fuel for this episode, too.

JOSH: So they're good with helping the kids regardless of creed, but not so much with inviting candidates [cross talk] regardless of creed.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right.

HRISHI: No, I mean, I think creed really makes a big difference, sometimes the going gets a little rocky for some of those candidates.

JOSH: Great Apollo's ghost - well done.

[Rocky excerpt]

ROCKY: ADRIAN!

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Okay, so [long pause] by the way, there's a kind of a 'roast-y' quality to the Al Smith Dinner in terms of what the candidates say. And John F. Kennedy kind of kicked that off. He had this zinger that has gotten referenced in the years since, which was about the *Wall Street Journal* criticizing Nixon...

JOSH: Sure.

HRISHI: And he said "that's like *L'Osservatore Romano* criticizing the Pope."

[sound effect: crickets chirp]

JOSH: Wowza. Insert cricket sound.

HRISHI: [laughing] No - it killed. I think it killed.

JOSH: I'm sure it did then.

HRISHI: Yeah. He could read the room.

JOSH: I guess so.

HRISHI: That's a room that likes a good Pope joke. And I think Nixon responded by trying to make some joke about how...

JOSH: ...the Jews were ruining the country?

HRISHI: [laughing] Essentially.

JOSH: Which probably played well. No. I take that back.

HRISHI: He made a joke about - I don't know - maybe 'joke' is too generous. He made a comment about JFK wearing a black tie to what is a white tie affair.

JOSH: Hm, I like it.

HRISHI: Do you?

JOSH: Yeah - I like appearance jokes. Go for it.

HRISHI: It's like, "How dare you wear that brand of monocle? Did you see his top hat?"

JOSH: [laughing] "That doesn't go with his cane!"

HRISHI: Alright, so back to our episode.

JOSH: Sure.

HRISHI: Bram says, "A ballroom full of Catholics should be your crowd. Vinick doesn't even go to church." And Santos' final line in the tele-Brama made me laugh. He said:

[West Wing Episode 7.06 excerpt]

SANTOS: That's just what I need. A contest of who gets the most boos for the line 'I support a woman's right to choose?'

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I like this, not only for the internal rhyme, also because the first time I heard it, I thought he was talking about who would get the most alcohol.

JOSH: Oh, nice.

HRISHI: Like as a prize. I really misheard it - for just a second. A contest for who gets the most booze.

JOSH: Yeah. You get extra enjoyment by not having the closed caption on.

HRISHI: That's right. I guess I couldn't fall for that if I had...

JOSH: Yeah that killed it for me.

HRISHI: And then Santos has a very relatable moment. Well actually, both candidates have relatable food moments. Santos puts a cookie in his mouth and then pats his gut when he sees himself in the mirror and then he puts down the cookie and picks up some grapes.

JOSH: Yes. Remarkable self-control.

HRISHI: And Arnie Vinick gets into his office, and he looks down to what seems to be, based on his expression, a very disappointing-looking burger.

JOSH: Yes. I would rather they had cut to Arnie Vinick eating out of a 3 gallon container of ice cream...

HRISHI: [laughing]

JOSH: ...but that's just me. I'm big on callbacks.

HRISHI: You know how private detectives have a bottle of whiskey in their bottom drawer?

JOSH: Sure...

HRISHI: [laughing] I'm going to start keeping a 3 gallon tub of ice cream in the bottom drawer of my desk at the studio.

JOSH: Or just a flask of ice cream in your hip pocket.

HRISHI: A hip flask of ice cream would probably melt enough to the point where I'd just be sipping it.

JOSH: Chocolate hip flask is my favorite flavor of ice cream.

HRISHI: Chocolate hip flask is my favorite band at Lollapalooza this year.

JOSH: [laughs]

HRISHI: So both candidates are watching the same news program about their coverage, because they're both news hounds, and also slightly narcissistic.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: And then a commercial airs. Neither of them know about it, but a commercial airs. It's paid for by the Committee for the Integrity of Human Life, and it attacks Santos for his pro-choice views, which are, in actuality very close to Vinick's.

[West Wing Episode 7.06 excerpt]

ANNOUNCER: This November, America faces a vote of conscience. Matt Santos on human life:

TV SANTOS: Do I want to limit access to abortion? No.

SANTOS: Turn on MSNBC. [TV continues underneath]

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I like how that moment plays out, and how they both are seeing the ad realizing 'this isn't coming from us - is it coming from the other guy?' and then in fact it's coming from a third party, this Five Twenty Seven.

HRISHI: I like how they both react to it like it's bad news.

JOSH: Mm hmm.

HRISHI: That's what I really love about this episode - that these factors, again, that should potentially be helping one side or another, it's all bad for everyone.

JOSH: Yeah. I had to keep pausing through this episode and think about each new event, and how it might affect... because it's interesting how everything cuts both ways.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: The nuance and the subtlety is kinda fascinating.

HRISHI: Yeah, it really is. It takes this from a 'campaign episode of the week' kind of setup, into a really thoughtful place.

JOSH: I also like the idea that each calls their aide to camp and says "turn on MSNBC" as if it actually could happen so quickly that they could catch the rest of the 30 second ad currently airing. "Got it!"

HRISHI: [laughing] Yeah. So this ad is bad for everyone because it becomes this external catalyst in a potential negative ad war between the two sides. And I love how they talk about this in the episode. It has this feeling of almost like cold war, mutually assured nuclear...

JOSH: ...I was just about to say - Cuban missile crisis. Yeah. There's this feeling of super-high stakes, which of course it is - Presidential campaign - and the feeling that this situation is fraught. It's so sensitive that any little move, even not instigated by one side or the other, could set off this domino effect into an explosion.

HRISHI: Yeah, they've lived so far in this kind of uneasy calm where neither side is going negative, even though the RNC is coming up with negative ads against Santos, and the Santos campaign have tried to come up with some of their own as well.

JOSH: Josh is measuring people for a chicken suit.

HRISHI: [laughing] Right?

JOSH: He's like "I got another one in me!"

HRISHI: But neither candidate actually wants to go negative. Even though they know this can be an effective tool, they both have good *West Wing*-y idealistic cores that really want just to keep things clean; keep things about the issues, but then this Committee for the Integrity of Human Life comes in and throws a wrench into the works.

JOSH: And then it immediately sets off a sort of 'how do we react to avoid this?' and 'who's going to denounce this spot?' Can Vinick himself even denounce it, or is that a loss for him?

HRISHI: Yeah. That uneasy calm has been punctured so it's like 'what are the choices here?' The only option to try and get back to some measure of relative calm is for them to denounce it immediately and vehemently so that they can say 'look we weren't behind it' and go back to things as usual, but in the absence of that it feels like they're implicitly endorsing the ad, and therefore we're off to the races in negative ads. And people are split on it. The RNC chairman shows up and he says he is not going to denounce it.

JOSH: That's Dean Norris as Steve Hodder. The fabulous Dean Norris, whom we all know from *Breaking Bad* and many, many, many other things, including Brad Whitford's post-*West Wing* series *The Good Guys*.

HRISHI: And also including Jimmy Smits' pre-*West Wing* series, *NYPD Blue*. We've had two guest stars who we know from other shows, Dean Norris and Peter Mackenzie, who recently showed up as George Rohr, the lobbyist for the Christian right.

JOSH: Mm hmm.

HRISHI: And in these two other shows we talked about Peter Mackenzie in *Hart of Dixie*, and we're talking about Dean Norris in *NYPD Blue*. In both cases, they played priests.

JOSH: Huh. God you're good. I don't know how you do it.

HRISHI: On *NYPD Blue*, Dean Norris played Father Jerry Downey. So I guess people get typecast for being on one side or the other of the abortion debate?

JOSH: Apparently.

HRISHI: Apparently. And what's interesting is that in the episode, both candidates are kind of pitted against their own parties. Here's how they put it in the meeting between Vinick and Hodder:

[*West Wing* Episode 7.06 excerpt]

VINICK: Do you realize how many states my pro-choice position puts on the table? Do you realize how we can grow this party if we're willing to reach out?

HODDER: I guess I'd like to see you unite the party that we have now. I'm not denouncin' that ad. I don't think you want to either, Arnie.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And on the other side of it, later on, after much consternation we have Leo and Santos talking about this pro-choice lobbying group endorsing one of the candidates or the other, and they're going to meet with them, and Leo says:

[West Wing Episode 7.06 excerpt]

LEO: Tell them you're taking the stage at the Al Smith Dinner right next to Vinick in defending a woman's right to choose. Be ready for me to be the only guy clapping.

SANTOS: So I'm the 'abortion without limits' guy, huh?

LEO: You're the pro-choice party. Gotta dance with the one who brung ya.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And much later in the episode we get their actual core positions on the thing, that kind of put them, actually a little bit on the other side of one another.

JOSH: Well, you're talking about Santos' later admission that he considers life to begin at conception?

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: I think what you're trying to say is that ultimately, and I think this is one of the strengths of this episode - and surprise turns - that when we get down to, regardless of the politics, what the candidates themselves believe, we discover - and I think it's quite a moment - that Santos confides to Leo that he believes that life begins at the moment of conception, regardless of what his political stance on abortion is, and Vinick further clarifies that he's a 'government stay out of our lives' Republican.

HRISHI: Yeah. He really says that the Republican party's macroscopic platform should be on the side of upholding Roe v. Wade.

[West Wing Episode 7.06 excerpt]

VINICK: *I joined this party because the Liberals were the ones who always wanted something the government, and we just wanted government to leave us alone. Especially when there's no consensus otherwise. I'm trying to lead the majority who agrees on that.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah, they're both kind of stunning concessions in their own ways. It's a mindbender.

HRISHI: Yeah, and it really bends them towards one another. The hair-splitting that has to go on in this to try and position one candidate in a different light than the other on their abortion stance is really neat.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: The other external factor that comes in besides this attack ad is the idea of an endorsement from a pro-choice lobbying group. That's yet another curveball that comes at them, because it is very bad for the Santos campaign to have a group that should be really at the core of Democratic support endorsing a Republican, and for Vinick, he also doesn't want that to happen, in a way, because even though he is a pro-choice candidate, getting the endorsement of a belief he has already publicly held is going to alienate people who disagree with that position.

JOSH: Right. It's what we discussed earlier, which is that it's almost with each new beat in this episode, somewhere in the background, my mind's crunching numbers, as are theirs. This endorsement feels like it could be the *coup de gras* for... it could be the end of Santos' campaign, but at the same time, Vinick's gotta wonder how many votes he's going to lose from his base if he gets this endorsement, or if in any way he seems to be courting it.

HRISHI: And that's the part that I'm so fascinated by. Vinick is a pro-choice candidate. There's his voting record. He knows it, but he has to do this dance where he has Ray Sullivan as his running mate; he makes this pledge of giving the nominations a special consideration or whatever - Ray Sullivan is going to be in charge of it, which means they're going to appoint pro-life judges.

JOSH: And he ultimately decides to go to the Al Smith Dinner and discuss his opposition to so-called 'partial birth abortion.'

HRISHI: Right. He's doing all these dance moves to try and balance out what is essentially his publicly-held position, which is that he's pro-choice. They're still trying to hold on to the idea that people who disagree with him will vote for him anyway, so he has to give all these concessions in opposition to his own beliefs.

JOSH: Right. Well said.

HRISHI: It's not like some kind of bargaining where you say, "I know you disagree with me on this, and that's not gonna change, but here are these other things that I stand for, and I want to try and convince you with that." It's still focused on the one issue of abortion and just trying to, I don't know, dress up a pro-life candidate in this artificial, anti-choice wardrobe. I don't know how people are actually going to buy it.

JOSH: No, I agree, which I think also speaks to why the two candidates are hesitant to get into that arena.

HRISHI: Because they know that the attack ad from Santos is going to be on hypocrisy.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: They know where the attack should be aimed because it's a weak spot that they acknowledge.

JOSH: Mm hmm.

HRISHI: It's really cool - it's really cool to shine a light on it.

JOSH: It is. I like when things get nuanced and super-complicated.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And also it speaks to, overall, a pretty crafty situation and framework that John Wells and company have created for this final season.

HRISHI: Yeah. Okay. Let's take a quick break, and when we come back - more *West Wing Weekly*.

[Ad break]

HRISHI: Let me switch gears here for a second onto a slightly more frivolous path. Three things, and this will eventually be a transition, but uh...

JOSH: I feel like I know what one of them's going to be, but let's see if you hit it.

HRISHI: [laughing] I think you know too. First, let's start with Bruno's tie. Did you notice Bruno's leopard-print tie?

JOSH: Mmm. I didn't, dammit!

HRISHI: It's probably for the best.

JOSH: I didn't spot it.

HRISHI: Haha... Margaret's outfit is also pretty special in this episode. It's a particular shade of chartreuse, let's say, and I love it. It just feels like it's a great character choice. And then the last thing that I noticed in terms of appearance was a particular tan line formation [cross talk] on the back of Will's neck.

JOSH: [cross talk] [laughing]

JOSH: What the hell is going on?

HRISHI: [laughing] I was hoping you would have the answer.

JOSH: You know, I honestly have nothing to say that would be edifying on this issue. It is absolutely stunning. There is what appears to be what appears to be a white picket fence burned into the sunburn on the back of my neck, very noticeably at what I track to be about the 10 minute 40 second mark. It's difficult to get precise with Netflix.

HRISHI: Yeah - a little earlier, I think - around 10:30.

JOSH: 10:30 - take a look, people. And of course, we will post an embarrassing still. I don't know what to say!

HRISHI: It's on the back of your neck in a way that feels that it had to have been either some kind of weird collar or a piece of jewelry that was on your otherwise quite red neck.

JOSH: Yeah, it put me in mind of a very weird, odd moment I had one morning when I woke up and I had what looked like an imprint on my arm of some sort of letters of the alphabet, and then a little bit of ink - pen ink - that looked to me a little bit like a swastika, and I came into my wife and was like, "I think I was abducted by aliens - I've got a series of marks and messages." I never quite understood what the ink thing was. Apparently I'd leaned against a Nike shoe, and my wife figured out forensically that I had just the imprint of something that had an English word on it that had pushed against my arm.

HRISHI: Wait, do you have some weird limited edition swastika Nike?

JOSH: Not quite sure what the swastika was about. I guess it was just an unfortunate ink stain on my arm. But I literally was saying to my wife - and there's still that 9% of me that thinks I was abducted, and some sort of experiments were conducted, but my wife never lets me forget that. But here is again, I couldn't tell you, first of all as I think has been established earlier in this podcast, I'm very anti-sun, and I hate sunburn. So for me to get sunburned at all is odd because I hit the back of the neck hard and often, and also on the shoot day - I mean maybe I wasn't working the day before and I was out in the sun, seems very unlikely - but it's just absolutely inexplicable why there's these symmetric U-shaped marks of whiteness against the sunburn on

the back of my neck, made all the more puzzling by the fact that there's a pretty clear shot of Will's neck at around the 20 minute mark, in which there are no markings and no apparent sunburn.

HRISHI: [laughing] One of the things that I found so interesting was that you are so anti-sun, and yet you got that endorsement from the pro-sun lobby, [cross talk] which just really complicated things.

JOSH: [cross talk] Right - yeah that's a good point.

HRISHI: I remember you saying that you had taken a pretty long summer vacation because of your shortened schedule for the 7th season.

JOSH: That's a good point.

HRISHI: And so I was wondering if maybe this was the first thing that you filmed after coming back from whatever sun-drenched TV star vacation you had been on.

JOSH: [laughing] Yeah, possible, although wasn't I in the episode previous to this without sunburn? I dunno. The whole thing is a complete... maybe somebody out there can tell me what disease I'm going to get later in life that is marked by odd U-shaped markings [cross talk] 20 years earlier. I don't know.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Yeah.

HRISHI: Not so much a disease as a dis-'U'-se.

JOSH: [chuckling] Perhaps so, yes.

HRISHI: The storyline around Will, though, is that he is basically playing goalie for the White House. He is not to let any question in; he can't let anything past him.

JOSH: Right. Well said. But they send him out there without pads.

HRISHI: [laughing] That's right! And it's great to see you doing a press briefing. I believe your first scene for *The West Wing* ever was also a press briefing.

JOSH: That is true. That is indeed true. I've got worse at them. [Hrishi laughs] But in fairness, they've sent me out there without any information, quite intentionally on C.J.'s part, as to the situation with Toby Ziegler and the leak, and his admission. They're trying to give me full plausible deniability, not that I can deny any part in it myself, but I can deny any knowledge of anything because nobody's told me the first thing about this situation.

HRISHI: Yeah - Will is now the Communications Director. I was a little confused, because I thought we'd established that he was going to move into the old Will/Rob/Annabeth office. I thought that had been established, but then instead he moves into Toby's office.

JOSH: Yeah. Somebody was like 'we already paid for the ball, let's use it again.'

HRISHI: Hahaha! And there's no way that ball could be in the other office. I don't know.

JOSH: No.

HRISHI: Yeah, he moves into Toby's office, there's still a Spaldeen in the drawer, which is strange because it had been thoroughly raided by the Justice Department. What if there was a mini-USB in there with military secrets?

JOSH: I like that. Or what if it just in little Toby scrawl said 'here's what I'm going to do. I'm gonna leak the story about the military shuttle' just on the ball. Yeah. Not so thorough, the team that scanned the office.

HRISHI: There's a line that made me laugh too. Again, an unintentional one, but there's a reporter in one of the briefings that says:

[West Wing Episode 7.06 excerpt]

REPORTER: Will, did any of the White House senior staff know that Toby Ziegler was leaking national security secrets?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: It's the thing about just that phrasing 'was leaking national security information' made me laugh because I just imagined intel seeping out of his suit.

JOSH: [laughing] Yeah, we should have patched him up...

HRISHI: Yeah. But the strategy is, called by C.J., to let the press punch themselves out. That's what she says.

JOSH: Yeah, a little rope-a-dope.

HRISHI: Yeah, and it ends up actually working. After doing it enough times they stop asking questions about the leak and start asking about whatever minor thing that Will's briefing them about instead.

JOSH: And I love that Eli actually has Will come to drop by C.J.'s office, kind of expecting an 'attaboy' and he gets nothing from her.

HRISHI: [laughing] I love that too.

[West Wing Episode 7.06 excerpt]

WILL: Did you see today's briefing?

C.J.: Yeah. You need a better answer on the energy bill. Not your fault. DoE's been dickering around.

WILL: Right.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And then all the air goes out of the scene and I just walk out.

HRISHI: Yeah. I wrote 'Will wants a cookie from C.J. after the press strategy works.'

JOSH: [laughing] Yeah. Not getting it. I also laughed at how bluntly she put it to him.

[West Wing Episode 7.06 excerpt]

WILL: Don't you want me to have a shred of credibility in the briefing room?

C.J.: Your ignorance is your credibility. It's why I put you [fades out]

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And I thought maybe years later when he's out of the White House and he writes a book, she can blurb it by saying 'his ignorance is his credibility.'

HRISHI: [laughs] C.J. does not want to give him a cookie because she's like 'yeah - this was the plan. You just did it according to plan.'

JOSH: Yeah, he should be bringing *her* a cookie.

HRISHI: Right! Yeah. That strategy reminded me of an earlier *West Wing* episode. I was thinking about an exchange that Josh and Donna have where he says, "Getting political reporters to write about issues is like trying to get kids to eat their vegetables." Do you remember that?

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: And he's trying to get her to go along with it, and she's like:

[West Wing Episode 3.02 excerpt]

JOSH: Don't you want to know how it's like getting kids to eat their vegetables?

DONNA: Shave and shower.

JOSH: It helps if there's nothing else on their plate.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Mmm hmm.

HRISHI: And that's basically the strategy here, again.

JOSH: That's right.

HRISHI: But then I zoomed out to what the actual context of that quote was, and coincidentally, it was about them trying to get away from an issue story about how they messed up a thing with the RU-486 birth control legislation.

JOSH: Ah.

HRISHI: So it was an interesting coincidence that that quote that came up was also about RU-486.

JOSH: No. I am against 86.

HRISHI: [light chuckle]

JOSH: Did Josh Lyman's reference to *Chiller Theater* resonate with you on any level? He says at one point to Lou - they're talking about an ad:

[West Wing Episode 7.06 excerpt]

JOSH: Hey did you talk to Joey Lucas? She's got another version of our flip-flop spot without the monster 'Chiller Theater' music.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Not only did I not get that, it didn't even hit me in the brain hard enough for me to think 'let me go look that up.'

JOSH: Sure. Well that's because you're young and I am old. *Chiller Theater* maybe started in the '60s, but when I was a kid in the '70s it was - I don't even remember what the actual substance was. I guess they did these intros to old scary movies, or maybe it was an anthology series. I can't even remember, but what stuck with me and I suspect what stuck with millions of other young tri-staters was the intro graphic and music and sound. It was like a six-fingered human hand emerging from a swamp of blood, and there's a dead tree in the background and the letters 'Chiller' come out [music and sound effects play underneath], and then the hand kinda eats each letter, and there's just horrific music, and it's very scary, and as soon as I heard that - as I watched this episode on Netflix, I sent the image from the opening to my sister, and she just texted back like 'aaghhh!', 'cause I knew it would resonate with her.

HRISHI: There's another horror reference in here, too - one that I did catch - where Vinick calls Donna 'Tippi Hedren.'

JOSH: Yes! I wasn't even sure why the reference to Tippi Hedren, famously of *The Birds*, and other movies.

HRISHI: Yeah, I really hear people referencing Tippi Hedren in relation to *The Birds*, and I thought it was a little bit of a mean dig at Donna because I think the idea is that Tippi Hedren is running around, flapping her arms around, trying to get birds to stop attacking her head. But maybe it's just that he was saying that here's a pretty blonde woman.

JOSH: Yeah, I thought it might have been an old guy's way of saying 'the blonde.'

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Well, let's get to that now.

HRISHI: Yes!

JOSH: Donna's found her way back onto the campaign, and this is the one thing that, while I liked and sort of got the dramatic value of it, I wondered: 1) whether Lou would really do that behind Josh's back - probably, I would think she would have some sense of 'this is the kind of thing I should maybe run by him,' although knowing Lou, she's a bit of a maverick and maybe that's exactly why she didn't - but also it's interesting that Donna would have taken a position and immediately gone on camera without having touched base with Josh, who she knows objects to her being on the campaign.

HRISHI: I buy all of it, and I love all of it. Let's go to Lou for a second before we get to Donna, because it is through Lou's machinations that we get Donna back in this episode. Lou is a different kind of character than our normal set of heroes.

JOSH: True.

HRISHI: Really, even, she's different from Vinick, who at some level wants to have a campaign with no negative ads, and he says he's dreamt about this campaign. He's an idealist, just like Santos is, and really, at some level, Josh is, too, even though Josh is maybe a little bit more conflicted about it. But Lou has this kind of different ethical framework. She's on the side of our good guys, but she has a kind of 'ends justifies the means' way of thinking that I really appreciate in our story.

JOSH: You're right. It's refreshing, in its way, in this world.

HRISHI: Yeah. When they're talking about the value of responding to the attack ad with attack ads of their own, and the idea of being stuck in the quagmire of negative ads, she tells Josh this story about this guy that...

JOSH: ...guy falls in a hole! And we just leave him there because he wasn't going to vote for us anyway!

HRISHI: [laughing] Exactly! And we just calmly, quietly covered him up.

[West Wing Episode 7.06 excerpt]

LOU: I did the Merrianhoff Senate campaign. You know those charges that he had weird financial dealings with Taiwanese businessmen?

JOSH: He did.

LOU: Those were the charges. Anyway, we ran against Barrett, clean as a bar of soap. We hit him first with everything we could find. By the time he hit back, the voters thought it was just another ugly campaign; a pox on both our houses.

JOSH: You're proud of that?

LOU: I'm proud that Merrianhoff defends Medicare and Medicaid in the Senate. I'm proud that he votes against every reckless Republican tax cut. We're the blue team and there's a real war going on. Josh, do you want the right wing to get their judges?

JOSH: No.

LOU: Then stop being so queasy.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah, well that resonated to me also as a Trump-ai-yi-yi moment.

HRISHI: Yeah, of course.

JOSH: As we've now got...Trumpkin himself has appointed, I think, a quarter of all federal judges? I dunno - I read some astounding number.

HRISHI: Yeah, I also felt that a bit when Josh said, "I think we lose a negative ad war. I think the other side is better at this and I think they have more to work with." The other side being better at it, really I was like 'yeah.'

JOSH: Mm hmm.

HRISHI: 'That's been the case.' But Lou seems like a 'by any means necessary' kind of strategist. So, when it comes to Josh saying they need to appoint a female spokesperson respond to the anti-Santos ad, he describes someone '40s, soccer-mom,' so he's clearly not thinking about Donna. He doesn't even know that Lou has actually hired Donna the week previous to do mid-west press.

JOSH: Mm. I forgot about that myself.

HRISHI: And so it's not like she shows up working for them for the first time in this capacity. Lou's already hired her for this smaller, other role, and then she's pulling from her own bench, elevating somebody when they need it. So, to me, it makes complete sense, and Lou's incredulous that there's even an issue that Josh has with bringing her. She's like 'she was great,' and I feel that she gives the response that I was feeling when Josh talked to Donna the first time around, when she applied for a job and he said no. And so that's also my reasoning for why Donna would have taken the job doing press, without checking in with Josh, because she wants the job and here's somebody who's going to give it to her.

JOSH: Fair enough.

HRISHI: So we have a bit of a rehash of that, because Lou puts them in the room together and says 'work it out.'

JOSH: 'Work it out.'

HRISHI: And we get that same thing of Josh being like, 'but you hurt my feelings,' and Donna saying 'yeah but, you hurt mine first by not letting me grow in the job that I was capable of doing more in,' and really, they don't even get to actually resolve that in the moment because more news comes out when the news of the pro-choice lobby endorsing Vinick hits the wires.

JOSH: Mm hmm.

HRISHI: So ultimately, Josh, I think, at the end of the episode, you see the door opening a little bit for him because Donna has good ideas.

[West Wing Episode 7.06 excerpt]

DONNA: They're on their own side. They're an interest group jockeying for influence. You think they're supporters of a Republican no matter what their leadership says? Pull back. I bet 85% of them are dyed-in-the-sackcloth Santos supporters.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And then Josh is 'alright, let's put that in the poll.'

JOSH: 'You see? I told you I could come up with a good poll question.'

HRISHI: Exactly! Hey - one other Will question. How about that big pratfall towards the end of the episode?

[West Wing Episode 7.06 excerpt]

[diegetic banging and crashing noises]

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah, how'd that play for you? [laughing] I knew it was coming, so I was looking for it.

HRISHI: It played like the opposite of a deleted scene - how do I say this?

JOSH: Like the episode was running short? They're like 'so throw that thing back in.'

HRISHI: Yes! Exactly!

JOSH: Fair enough.

HRISHI: The pratfall itself, I thought, was very convincing, and I hope you were okay.

JOSH: Yes. It was good fun to do. It was one of those things where they get a stunt guy to show up, and I'm like 'trust me, I can fall out of a chair.'

HRISHI: Did they have a stunt guy?

JOSH: I don't remember exactly, but it's usually what happens. When an actor is going to do anything beyond just walk around, there's usually a lot of concern about safety and this and that, and anything that's like this, where you're literally going to fly out of a chair.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: They usually have someone, and they offer - sometimes even a double - to do it. I don't really recall whether that was the case or they were like '[expletive deleted] it, it's Josh, he's only got nine episodes left anyway.' I just like to do everything I can, and I am good at things like falling out of a chair. I'm sure they put some sort of mat down or something, but I remember just like 'I'll just fall out of my chair.'

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: 'I'll be okay.' Okay, so low grades for the fall, but I enjoyed doing it.

HRISHI: No no no! High grades for the fall. Low grades for the scene.

JOSH: Fair enough. It was not necessary.

HRISHI: The whole scene just felt like 'well...let's go see what Will's doing.'

JOSH: Yeah, and also who tied a ribbon around his ball, and was there a second date?

HRISHI: [laughing] And why - was this the same ball that had been wrapped in ribbon? Was it a different ball that was placed by somebody who wasn't aware of the presence of the first one?

JOSH: That's a very good question. We may never know, because nobody cares about Will.

HRISHI: If only somebody had the balls to ask these hard-hitting questions.

JOSH: Re-watching the... just the last bit on the 'falling out of the chair' bit. I wished that the second throw - my memory is that there were three... Apparently things are funny in threes, and so I successfully throw the ball against the wall and catch it the first time - the second time, I wished I had pitched it a little bit higher [cross talk] like I was increasing each time, rather than 'why the hell did he do that on the third throw?'

HRISHI: [cross talk] Right, setting it up.

HRISHI: Right, right.

JOSH: 'Why did he throw it so hard? Was he trying to fall over?' Yes. Yes he was trying to fall over. So I was a little bit critical of my own performance there. I think my second ball trajectory was slightly off.

HRISHI: You know, I think I would completely buy that, because as we've discussed, you are a lover of cheap thrills, like me.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: And a great example of a cheap thrill would be to try and see how far you could lean back in a chair without it tipping over...

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: ...while throwing a ball at just the right angle to keep your position intact, you know, it's not enough just to stay balanced in the chair. You also have to add this other element, and catch it, and how far can you push it? The idea of the cheap thrill is to get close to falling over.

JOSH: Of course. Without... right, right. That would have been a better approach to the scene. Were I to shoot it today, that would have been my approach. Yeah, got a lifetime of regret.

HRISHI: There's always the reboot.

JOSH: That's right, which - should we announce? Nah. Wait for later in the...

HRISHI: [chuckles] So I wanted to go back to the Lou philosophy and contrast it with...

JOSH: ...they're not booing, they're saying 'Lou.'

HRISHI: and I'm saying 'Bru-no.'

JOSH: Nice.

HRISHI: Bruno says to Vinick that there is a way for him to accept the endorsement from the pro-choice lobbying group and therefore cement his win in - this is the line that you were talking about:

[West Wing Episode 7.06 excerpt]

BRUNO: We'd win 53 states. A couple desert islands.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And no need for negative ads. There's something nice about this moment for Bruno. I feel like it's unwritten but I can't help but think about this moment of Bruno's, in his career, that it feels different, that this kind of discussion feels different from how Bruno talked about the Bartlet campaign when we first met him. There, he felt a little bit more like Lou, you know?

JOSH: Mm hmm.

HRISHI: Where he was like 'I'm the person who's here to help you win. You wanna do things like this, you wanna be lofty. I wanna help you win.' He says:

[West Wing Episode 7.06 excerpt]

BRUNO: Yeah we still win, but we win dirty. Wouldn't you rather outflank him on the left?

[end excerpt]

JOSH: You're right, that's a shift for him.

HRISHI: Yeah, and in the backstory I've created in my mind is that Bruno is looking at this as the - maybe the last campaign that he's ever going to work on. He's looking at the end of his career and he wants to sort of get away from - he knows he's picked a winner, basically. Either strategy means Vinick wins, and so he wants to go out with one where he really got to espouse the high-minded ideals that he usually has to undercut.

JOSH: Yeah, I think you're absolutely right. I'm planning to do a similar thing. When I sense that on my final acting job, I'm going to...try.

HRISHI: [laughing] Really go for it.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: And I like that - even if it's entirely just in my head, I like that coloration of his character. I mean it's not entirely in my head because he is saying that...

JOSH: ...no, I think you're absolutely onto something.

HRISHI: But Vinick decides against it. He says he is going to go to the Al Smith Dinner, essentially to try and veer away from his pro-choice positions by emphasizing his caveats. There's a great series of chess moves that they all kind of know in their head. He goes to the Al Smith Dinner, and he knows he's going to do it by trying to emphasize the caveats by saying he's against so-called 'partial birth abortion,' but that means that Santos is going to hit him with negative ads about his hypocrisy, and that means they're going to hit back with their negative ads and ultimately win because they're better at it.

JOSH: Right. The battle is joined in a negative fashion.

HRISHI: Yeah, and that's what it feels like the setup is when we finally get to the dinner, and we have this great final scene between the two of them in the kitchen.

JOSH: Epic ultimate scene in this episode.

HRISHI: Yeah. I love that we don't actually get - that the episode ends right before the actual dinner begins.

JOSH: For sure.

HRISHI: I like that way of titling the episode - it's what's beyond the door, but we never go past the door.

JOSH: Yeah, it's great. I love the way it's staged and shot by Lesli Linka Glatter. It's just a great episode. It looks great, the acting's great, it's well written. I love how it's shot, and I love how they're in this tense moment we can hear, just faintly, but we can hear that they're starting to be introduced, so they have final moments to hash out this debate thing.

HRISHI: Yeah. It seems like they're just gonna sit there in that tension and just wait to go out, but then Santos break the silence finally and says:

[West Wing Episode 7.06 excerpt]

SANTOS: Next time you decide to smear me maybe you'll have the guts to do it yourself.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah, there's a lot of rack-focusing back and forth, and you're wondering 'is either of these guys going to engage the other?'

HRISHI: Yeah, there's a little bit of spaghetti-western feeling to it, even though they're aren't actually looking at each other, you're like 'who's it going to be?' They get a moment where they both get to say what they really want.

[West Wing Episode 7.06 excerpt]

VINICK: No negative ads. No attacks on our speeches out there.

SANTOS: If we can have a real debate on the issues, just you and me.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: These are the things they really want, and they don't have Bruno, they don't have Lou or Josh or Sheila, or anybody getting in the way, and they come to this agreement. But I also really love that this moment of détente doesn't mean that they're buddies.

JOSH: No. At all. I was almost taken a little bit aback when Vinick turns and says "well you just signed your death warrant."

[West Wing Episode 7.06 excerpt]

VINICK: It's a hell of a way to end your campaign.

SANTOS: *Oh, I'm just getting started.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: What a great line, and kind of unexpected when they've just come to an agreement – what seems like a gentlemen's agreement.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: He's like 'alright sucker - you're done.'

HRISHI: Yeah! And Santos is like 'I'm just getting started.' It's so great! It does avoid a feeling of it being pat, you know, of being too cheesy – its like 'oh look, [cross talk] common ground achieved.' No. They're still out for blood.

JOSH: [cross talk] Right.

JOSH: It avoids a sentimental, sort of maudlin ending, in the best way possible. I also like the stillness of the moment, and the fact that we've got just the two candidates after 45 minutes of these candidates and their staffs discussing everything that happens at every step along the way - finally it's just the two guys, and that's where you can get something done.

HRISHI: Yeah. I'm going to end this with saying for the, I don't know, 6th time? Great episode.

JOSH: Great episode.

HRISHI: Alright!

JOSH: That does it for another - I'm think going to say it also - great episode of *The West Wing Weekly*.

HRISHI: [laughing]

JOSH: I know you love it when I say that. Great episode. Great work. Both of us. Attaboy. If you were here, I'd give you a cookie.

HRISHI: Oh thanks. If I were there, I'd remind you that we still have many episodes to go and watch out for hubris.

JOSH: That's right.

HRISHI: You'd give me a cookie, but I'd have to go outside, turn around three times and spit the cookie out.

JOSH: Spit the cookie out? Very nice.

HRISHI: Thanks so much to Zach McNeese, Margaret Miller and Nick Song for helping us make this episode and so many others.

JOSH: And thanks to Radiotopia. We're proud to be a member of Radiotopia, a group of cutting-edge podcasts. You can find out more about the others at radiotopia.fm.

HRISHI: And you can find out more about our show on our website, thewestwingweekly.com. We're also on Facebook and Instagram and Twitter, and time is running out to follow us on one of those places. It'll be like turning on MSNBC just to find the last 5 seconds of a negative attack ad. If you follow us now, you'll get a little bit of something, but if you wait any longer...

JOSH: Yeah, any second, we're going to start tweeting and posting really great stuff.

[both laugh]

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

HRISHI & JOSH: What's next?

[Outro Music]