

The West Wing Weekly  
7.07: "The Debate" (Part I)  
Guest: Lawrence O'Donnell

[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 season 7, episode 7, "The Debate."

JOSH: It was written by L.O.D; Lawrence O'Donnell. It was directed by A.G; Alex Graves and it first aired on November 6<sup>th</sup> 2005.

HRISHI: And this is the first episode of two that we're going to spend talking about this episode.

JOSH: Look at us supersizing it.

HRISHI: There is a lot to talk about. This episode aired live. They did an East Coast feed and a West Coast feed and it's just an extraordinary and unique episode in *The West Wing* cannon and we thought it merited something more. Next week we're going to have a special discussion with two debate prep experts. Actually, it's the two sides who prepared the presidential candidates for the 2012 presidential debate. On the Obama team we have Ronald Klain returning to the podcast.

JOSH: Citizen Klain.

HRISHI: And on the Romney team we have Beth Myers coming to give her perspective as well. In the meantime, we're joined by a very special guest, Lawrence O'Donnell himself.

JOSH: Huzzah!

LAWRENCE: Great to be here.

HRISHI: Thanks for joining us again. Lawrence, I heard you say this was the hardest writing assignment you've ever had. Do you still stand by that?

LAWRENCE: Yes, no question about it. It obviously broke the mold of what we were doing at *The West Wing*. It broke the mold of episodic TV generally and it was one of those things that I didn't know if it could be done. That's stage one of doubt. Stage two of doubt is I didn't know if it could be done by me and no one did and this is kind of the brilliance and bravery of John Wells because a live episode was John Wells idea. He threw that out there possibly even in our first week of meetings but very early on.

JOSH: But I think according to him you were the only person to respond positively and then then you ultimately volunteered to write it.

LAWRENCE: Ah, that could be true, what John was trying to do was, as you do in the seventh year of a series, is trying to inject energy through different methods and *ER* had done a live episode and I think even John would tell you it wasn't really great. But it was brave, it was brave and I, a lot of people showed up to watch it because it was brave and the trouble with *ER* is, as a shooting exercise, the show really didn't lend itself to being done live. It actually would suffer somewhat by being done live and that's true of just about every TV drama. So, the only arena that I could think of in which we could be actually hyper-realistic, *The West Wing* would actually go to another level of realism, would be by going live with an actual debate because debates are live TV shows.

HRISHI: Oh so John's idea was let's do a live episode not specifically let's do a live episode that centers around a debate?

LAWRENCE: Yeah, it was let's do a live episode, which is I'm sure the way the discussion began at *ER* years earlier and then the question became what would that live episode be and I don't really remember any alternatives coming up because as soon as this was an option, the production challenges were difficult but they were all understandable right from the start. Whereas, you know, a live episode where were trying to run through the hallways of the Warner Brothers set, that would involve production challenges that were kind of unimaginable.

JOSH: That would have been a disaster.

HRISHI: Yeah.

LAWRENCE: Yeah, I think disaster would have been a fair description of what that would have been.

HRISHI: And in this sense doing a live debate is the opposite of unimaginable because these are actual live productions that happen regularly.

LAWRENCE: Yes, and so there's a model to use and I followed it as strictly as I possibly could from set design all the way through to every element of it. But the original concept that had to be dealt with I would say in the writer's room was my idea to not do this the way anyone else would do a debate episode and in fact *The West Wing* had done a debate episode. Which is the debate is presumed to be boring.

HRISHI: Right.

LAWRENCE: Therefore, we will cut away from it to the players backstage and that's the way you will see it in any film that has a political debate. They will always cut away from the debate because the scary horrible boredom of the debate will kill the drama so you know, were always going to the reaction backstage and the players backstage and also we're doing that because they are easier to shoot than the debate and my conceit was no, once they step on the stage, this becomes a live television debate and we never leave that stage.

JOSH: Were Jimmy Smits and Alan Alda on board right away? Or was there any persuasion?

LAWRENCE: Yes they were, they've both done a lot of stage work and that's what this really was. This was a play with two performances and every frame of every second of this is live. The backstage stuff that begins the debate, that's all live and in any other show that all would have been filmed ahead of time and packaged and just attached to the live piece but our claim needed to be this is live television from start to finish. So, when you see Ron Silver backstage, when you see Janeane Garofalo backstage working with their candidates that is happening live and they are walking them to that stage live. Every single bit of it is live.

[West Wing Episode 7.07 excerpt]

*SHEILA: Bruno's going to walk you to the stage, ok?*

*VINICK: Yeah.*

*BRUNO: Don't worry about getting everything in in every answer, we can fill in the blanks with the press in the spin room afterwards. Remember two-minute answers.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I love that we do get a mini walk and talk.

LAWRENCE: Yeah, and that was really fun to write. I have to say that as a dramatist it was really fun to be backstage in the beginning where we were, it was fun to see Alan Alda admit how terrified he was to be going on that stage because as a character he'd been presented as a very confident guy and certainly a confident political performer and to see that the live television debate reduces them all to jello before it starts. And once they get out there if they can find a rhythm, if they can find a stride, they can find their voices again but when they're about to go on that stage they are in terror.

HRISHI: So, we just recently watched it on Netflix.

LAWRENCE: Oh, don't do that. I just discovered Netflix cut eight minutes of the debate.

HRISHI: What?

LAWRENCE: This is a consumer warning it's very important.

JOSH: I noticed it looked brief.

LAWRENCE: It's very important. Netflix cut eight minutes of the debate and I discovered that by watching the Netflix version yesterday and as soon as they got to the first exchange I went wait a minute. Alan had more to say. And I looked down at the bottom of the screen and it's. And the debate episode is exactly the same length on Netflix as all of the rest of *The West Wing* episodes when I saw that I realized they had to cut eight minutes so then I got the DVD and I saw all the pieces they cut out and they cut out a lot including full exchanges on issues like the death penalty just gone from the Netflix version.

HRISHI: No kidding.

LAWRENCE: And what that does is it flattens the energy of the performances there are energy notes that are ignited right away in the first question and answer about the border that you don't see in the edited version on Netflix.

[West Wing Episode 7.07 excerpt]

*VINICK: We need to make a statement that says we mean it this time. That we're really cracking down on illegal immigration and we need that statement to be heard loud and clear on the other side of the border where everyone knows how easy it is to get into this country. I want everyone on the other side of the border to start thinking about how hard it is to get into this country. That's the kind of sensible solution you can expect from a Vinick White House.*

[end excerpt]

LAWRENCE: And that energy is pulled out constantly throughout the short 43-minute *Netflix* version. The debate was actually 50 minutes on *NBC*. *NBC* cut the commercial breaks. By the way when you're watch on Netflix you're going to watch through those fades into what you think are commercial breaks.

HRISHI: Right.

LAWRENCE: No. Some of those fades are just fades into Netflix edits. There was only one commercial break in the debate at the 30-minute mark and what *NBC* did to make up for it was they padded a bunch of commercials after our credits rolled at the end but that also made it an even bigger challenge for the actors. Because I'm telling you as a veteran of live television myself, you just can't wait for the next commercial cause it's a breather, you're off for three minutes. They didn't get that break in the live show until 30 minutes in and they got exactly one break.

JOSH: Oooof.

HRISHI: And did you know it was going to run 50 minutes.

LAWRENCE: Yeah, it was written to run 50 minutes. John negotiated with NBC to eliminate commercial breaks to do it because we were presenting this as a special event. And as a live campaign debate we needed audience buy in a bunch of ways and if we started going to commercials, you know, every ten minutes we would have broken the spell [cross talk] that we were trying to create of what this actually was.

HRISHI: [cross talk] Ah.

JOSH: Why on earth does Netflix have an edited version?

LAWRENCE: I want every listener to *The West Wing Weekly* podcast to ask Netflix that question. What was the problem with their real estate that they couldn't slip in?

HRISHI: Especially in a platform where air times don't matter.

LAWRENCE: You would think. And what breaks my heart about it is both on the DVD and in the Netflix version they are using the West Coast version of the debate instead of the East Coast version which was the first run and in the first run sitting right behind Forrest Sawyer is my mother. And in the second run sitting in that same seat is Oscar winner Josh Singer, *West Wing* writer and I'm sorry I think America wants to see my mother in that seat not Josh Singer in that seat.

JOSH: They could have at least dressed him as your mother. Qualitatively did you feel that one run at it was better than the other? Was the West Coast decided to be the better version?

LAWRENCE: No, there wasn't because what happened is different lines were flubbed in different versions so Alex Graves and I after the fact when we were thinking about the DVD, we were saying maybe what we should do is edit together East Coast and West Coast. And I think we may have actually done that for a possible re-run of the episode but the DVD says that it is the West Coast version and it is because my mother's not in it and that's the proof.

HRISHI: What's a line that might have been flubbed?

LAWRENCE: Well, you know Jimmy for example in the West Coast version mixes up two tax brackets.

[West Wing Episode 7.07 excerpt]

*SANTOS: No, no that won't help at all, the uninsured are in the 35% tax bracket not in the 10% bracket so your deduction would only give them a 10% discount*

[end excerpt]

LAWRENCE: He refers to the 10 percent bracket when he means the 35 so he flips those and so the thing he says after that if you're following it and you know math doesn't actually make sense but it goes by at 100 miles an hour. So, it's little things.

JOSH: That also felt to me like a real debate moment, like the kind of thing a candidate could do, just invert two.

LAWRENCE: Well exactly and that's one of the advantages of any kind of flub and I have to say, Alan was brilliant when he stumbled on a line, he was brilliant at making it look like just a normal human speech adjustment.

[West Wing Episode 7.07 excerpt]

SANTOS: *Security guards?*

VINICK: *The Federal Government contributes about every, [mumbles] seven cents from each dollar that's spent on public schools*

[end excerpt]

LAWRENCE: There's nothing by way of performance flubs that I think were even noticeable to the audience.

JOSH: The other little gaff that I noticed was I think in a discussion about global warming. At one point, I think, probably Alan as Vinick is supposed to have referred to it as a theory but doesn't use that word and Jimmy says 'theory'?

[West Wing Episode 7:07 excerpt]

VINICK: *The same people who told us we're going to run out of oil by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are now trying to scare us with global warming.*

SANTOS: *Theories!*

VINICK: *Yeah, global warming theories. That's all it is.*

[end excerpt]

LAWRENCE: It's a very weird thing because I agree with you, I saw that on *Netflix* on the DVD the word 'theory' from Alan the first time comes though very clearly.

[West Wing Episode 7.07 excerpt]

VINICK: *The same people who told you that we we're going to run out of oil by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are now trying to scare us with global warming theory.*

SANTOS: *Theories!*

VINICK: *Yeah, global warming theories. That's all it is.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Ahh, interesting.

LAWRENCE: So I can't figure that out.

JOSH: Huh, that's odd.

LAWRENCE: So, I mean once you're in there editing this for *Netflix*, there are different thing you might end up doing accidentally even to touching a piece of audio here or there in the piece.

HRISHI: So, you mentioned your mothers only in the East Coast version. Did the whole audience change?

[Audio from filming "The Debate"]

LAWRENCE: *Hi I'm Lawrence O'Donnell, I work with Alex. I'm one of the Executive Producers of the show. I wrote this little play you're going to see here tonight. Now there's enough showbiz*

*professionals here tonight to know that the very, very, very best place to watch a live TV show is at home. Right, you all get it, so you've come to the single worst place to actually watch what this show is.*

[end excerpt]

LAWRENCE: Yes, there were two audiences, it was two performances of a play and in the second audience there's actually a bunch of *West Wing* writers who were sitting there behind Forrest Sawyer. Lauren Schmidt is back there and of course the heckler back there is the great Chris Misiano.

HRISHI: So, here's another clip from the documentary from the DVD extras with Lawrence and Alex Graves talking about the heckler.

[Excerpt from Documentary]

*LAWRENCE: And, we'll have a heckler who I guess will be off screen Alex unless you want to see him?*

*ALEX: No, the heckler will be Chris Misiano.*

*CHRIS: Somehow, people around here, I don't know where they've gotten this impression that I can be adamant and a little bit of a pit bull, I think that they, they're going to capitalise on that and throw me in there.*

*ALEX: If truth be told I have the opposite opinion in every way about him but I'm so crazy about Chris that I just thought I wish he was here and I want him to be part of it so I'm forcing him to be here by putting him in the show.*

*CHRIS: I hope he gives me a lot of direction because I'll need it*

[end excerpt]

[West Wing Episode 7.07 excerpt]

*VINICK: That's a lie*

*HECKLER: You're the liar*

*SAWYER: Please*

*[Audience boos]*

[end excerpt]

LAWRENCE: Who is in both episodes as the heckler in the audience who has to get dragged out, so that's his, I believe one performance as an actor in *The West Wing*.

JOSH: They could have had you do it but then people would have been like, why is Bartlet's father [cross talk] heckling the debate?

LAWRENCE: [cross talk] Yeah, that's right.

HRISHI: What about Teri Polo, she's so prominently visible behind Forrest Sawyer I felt like that couldn't have changed between the two episodes right, that's a part of the story.

LAWRENCE: No, no, you had to have that. That's written, part of the piece, you know the wife is guided down to their seat and that's a liturgy in Presidential Debates, you often see that. And the person who I consulted the most about this was Jim Lehrer who has moderated more Presidential Debates than anyone in the history of televised Presidential Debates. And he, of course, was doing that for PBS and so Jim Lehrer was the first person I offered the Moderator part to in our debate. And this was after talking to him over the course of several weeks about little factors in the debate. And he thought about it for a couple of days because we had become real telephone pals at this point about this project and he was invested in it. He thought about it for a couple of days and he finally called me back and said I can't do it because PBS has a rule against us appearing in fictional work. And I wrote that rule. And so, that was as solid of a rejection as I could get. And then actually I asked Tim Russert who was at NBC and a dear friend of mine. He'd moderated Presidential Debates, he thought about it and realized he couldn't do it. He thought about it for a day and said I can't do it; I can't violate this position I have here with the viewer. I asked Tom Brokaw who I thought would be possibly available to do it because he was in retirement, the semi-retirement stage. He said to me instantly, right away, absolutely not, I have never appeared in any fictional treatment at all and I've been asked to do it since *The Candidate*, the Robert Redford movie and I have refused every single time, and so what I loved about Tom was he was so clear and definitive about it, you know, this should not be done and, luckily, Forrest Sawyer at that moment was out of the news business, he was actually on a faculty, and I knew that, so we went to Forrest and Forrest could do it. And this happens all the time. It happens in off-Broadway plays, when you don't have enough budget. Whenever you aren't able to get that thing you think you want and you end up with something else, and this can also include an actor, you realize at a certain point, oh this is perfect. Forrest Sawyer is actually perfect because he had all that gravitas of the anchorman because he was one. And so everything was there.

[Forrest Sawyer audio]

*FORREST: Lawrence and I have worked together at NBC and he called and said, you know what we'd really like is somebody who's done this sort of thing before, would you do it? And I said Ok, sure, but how much do I have to pay you?*

[end excerpt]

LAWRENCE: And yet he was just removed enough from your daily consumption of television news that he didn't jar anyone. In fiction, the way I think possibly Tim could have or Tom Brokaw certainly could have and Jim Lehrer could have and so we were very, very lucky with Forrest I think.

JOSH: And now he knows he was 4<sup>th</sup> choice. Welcome to Hollywood.

LAWRENCE: You know I don't, Yeah, I don't think I told him at the time. And I think there's a statute of limitations on this particular knowledge. You can let it go at a certain point. You know with Jim Lehrer I had a very important moment in the preparation of this thing because one of the challenges of it visually is they're just locked down at a podium and they're stuck with these horrible, stupid rules and I'm going to need to break the rules to make this more cinematic, more watchable.

[West Wing Episode 7.07 excerpt]

*VINICK: We could go on with this ritual and let the rules control how much you're going to learn about the next President of the United States. Or we could have a debate Lincoln would have been proud of. We could junk the rules.*

[end excerpt]

LAWRENCE: An issue that basically, as a challenge to Jimmy, the message in that is I am so confident I don't need the rules and the decision for Jimmy in that moment is, 'uh-oh' if I let the rules go, what's going to happen. Does Alan Alda have a plan, that he's going to work outside of

the rules. But if Jimmy doesn't accept Alan's proposal then Jimmy's going to look weak, that's all in there. And I lay all of this out to Jim Lehrer and it's my final discussion with him about actual content and the way the debate is going to work. And I say, so, Alan Alda's going to say let's just junk the rules and do this the right way, the way Lincoln would do it and Jimmy's going to say, he's going to accept the challenge and say ok because if he doesn't accept the challenge he's going to look weak. And then we're going to just junk the rules and it'll be a much more freewheeling discussion. And there's a pause and I'm waiting for Jim Lehrer to say that would be ridiculous. And Jim Lehrer who has moderated more Presidential Debates than anyone alive says "I've been expecting someone to do that for years." I think oh great, oh fantastic. He knew right away that that's a brilliant tactic and they should do it and so I had that certification for that big break in the liturgy of debates.

HRISHI: Lawrence, you've brought up something that Josh and I recently talked about when Chris Matthews was on, in an episode of *The West Wing* when he was doing his hard ball grilling in an episode. We were talking about this very collision of having a fictional setting for a non-fiction news person and I have to say that I fall in the Tom Brokaw camp of things where it does jar me to see someone, especially in a world like *The West Wing* where we'd established fictional news outlets and news personalities like on Capitol Beat and on The Taylor Reid Show. So, I'm curious why, I could see sort of two ways into it, because Forrest Sawyer is so great and he does just naturally radiate everything that he's supposed to. Did you ever think maybe about having Forrest Sawyer come in and do this part but using a different name?

LAWRENCE: No, and so here's the behind the curtain thing about this particular arena. If you write a part for a news anchor in a script and you say we want to cast an actor, the actors who they send in, in L.A. are a mix of actors and local working anchor men who are only known in L.A. We used a couple of those local L.A. anchor talents on different years of *The West Wing*. It is very, very rare in my experience of this to see an actor play an anchorman well. It is just a very strange challenge I think in our culture because our audience knows the ways of anchor men so well and so I can argue this either way but I think someone like Chris Matthews in the small dose that he was used in, in that episode that I wrote where he's questioning Alan Alda, it is to me worth it because I know Chris is going to get that part right. That's the number one reason, he's going to get that part exactly right. I think in *The West Wing* the Taylor Reid part was done very well- very, very well. But in general, if you looked across to other shows that have done this kind of thing, other movies when they cast someone to do this, to me it's sometimes like when someone's playing a baseball player and you go jeez, that's not really the way he would throw. And I actually find Chris Matthews to be just about the perfect version of this because he's so idiosyncratic. I think one of the biggest acting challenges you could have is say let's cast someone to play Chris Matthews, that would be really, really hard.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Have you ever played yourself?

LAWRENCE: I have, I've played myself a few times and I always do something other than what I am in my show, it's something else. I think the closest I've come to doing the guy on my show was in *Curb your Enthusiasm* where Larry David asked me to do a bit and he kind of wrote it to me and so he knew exactly what he wanted me to do.

HRISHI: I mean, that's got to be strange to be there as yourself, but also reading, you write your own scripts that you deliver on air but now you're reading somebody else's script.

LAWRENCE: It's not stranger than what I do every night if we want to slip into that for a second.

HRISHI: I do want to yeah. Is it a character you're playing?

LAWRENCE: When I started anchoring shows at MSNBC it was as just kind of a volunteer fill in and to me it was like when, you know, George Plimpton would go to spring training with the New



York Yankees and pitch an inning in spring training or something. I felt like that, I felt that this is someone is inviting me into this odd experiment that I did not ask to do and so I would go in there and pretend in my mind to be an anchorman. And I'm still doing that. I am playing Jack Nicholson playing an anchor-man in broadcast news and there's still a fair amount of that in what I do on my *MSNBC* show. I always say, I always say that I wish I was writing this stuff and handing it to Alan Alda or handing it to Jimmy Smits to go out there and sit in that chair and do it instead of me. And look, that's what *The Debate* episode is. Most of what you hear in that debate episode on both the Democrat and the Republican side, are things that I actually think about the world. And what I do now is I write those things and the sad part for me is that I have to say them myself.

JOSH: You did a tremendous job writing this episode and it quite a wonder, I think. It is balanced and interesting and without feeling like a civics lesson. It is, as with the case of the best *West Wing* episodes, a pretty substantive civics lesson.

LAWRENCE: It was really tricky and what I always did, you know when I was working in the Senate, and I was trying to move something through on the Democratic side is I always listened. I always had to listen to the objections. I had to listen to the other side and I would hear Bob Dole say something, especially if he said something to me privately about the legislation. I would think that is a legitimate objection to this. You know, I still want to do it for the following reasons but what he just said is not crazy. And when I was working in the Senate, we had Republicans like Arnold Vinick in the Senate. They just had, as Alan says in his closing statement, he just believes less in government than Jimmy does, he believes more in freedom. And they were not the kinds of Republicans you see today. I don't know how I could write this debate today. I really don't because it would be one sided, the truth would be on one side and utter falsity would be on the other side and it'd just be bad. It'd just be bad drama to watch.

HRISHI: When I was thinking of you writing this episode, I imagined somebody playing chess against themselves.

LAWRENCE: Yes, that's exactly what I was doing and every once in a while I would paint myself into a corner and it would be like, oh gee, Jimmy doesn't have a comeback to this and that's the way it would be and that draft would go to the table and *The West Wing* staff would read it and they would not necessarily be specific but what they'd be saying frequently in the development of this script was I'm rooting for Vinick too much, Vinick is too good. So my Republican was overwhelming the Democrat in the early drafts of the debate and I couldn't see it but then when people would say it, I'd go home at night and I'd stare at it and I'd go, oh I can give Jimmy this or I can give him this. And so the part that had to get beefed up, the part that had to be made stronger was the Democratic part because the Republican part was actually the easiest side of this for me to write.

HRISHI: Do you think that might be because there was more excitement in the exercise of what you were talking about. You know, if you come in with a certain set of ideas sometimes it is more exciting to try and articulate the idea that you don't think like, to sharpen it but then maybe as a result the other side wasn't getting as much energy.

LAWRENCE: Well what's generally true, especially in our *West Wing* worlds, and in our *West Wing* writers' room is that the things that Alan Alda says in this debate are things that a lot of people had never heard before. And then there's just this incredibly easy and winning way in which the Republican candidate Arnold Vinick says things that no Republican has ever said. For example, when we talk about oil drilling in ANWR in the northern most regions of Alaska

[West Wing Episode 7.07 excerpt]

*VINICK: I saw an oil well in the parking lot of a McDonalds, in long beach just the other day. The Democrats are saying we can't put oil wells in a place so remote that only animals will see them. I wish we could put all of our oil wells there where no-one will ever see them.*

[end excerpt]

LAWRENCE: It's the most persuasive possible way, and the most human way he could have talked about it. And so that's one of the ways in which the Republican candidate was kind of overwhelming the debate, because the things he was saying were fresher than the things the Democratic candidate was saying because we've heard those things before. And oh, by the way, the oil well in the *McDonalds* parking lot, I saw that oil well in the McDonalds parking lot in Long Beach when we were down there at the Boeing factory shooting the C17 scenes where Jimmy Smits is at the C17 factory which was one of the best location shoots of my life. That was just a fabulous place to visit.

JOSH: Also, I think that stuff goes into *McDonalds* shakes, I might be wrong.

LAWRENCE: It could, it could.

JOSH: It's an essential ingredient. And I was going to say, just going back to that part about Africa, I, just re-enforced, that was the first time I'd heard anything about taxation in Africa. That really was fascinating and intriguing and well-played and I can't imagine something like that being discussed in a debate today.

LAWRENCE: Well, and the surprise of it was, that the Republican candidate who is normally presented as the heartless tax cutter who doesn't care about the social policy affected by the tax cuts, stupidly, as far as the debate audience is concerned, says that the solution, or one of the approaches to poverty in Africa is tax cuts, he gets laughed at. And then he takes you through an analysis at the end of which it's completely undeniable

[West Wing Episode 7.07 excerpt]

*VINICK: But taxes can't raise any money if they kill the economies. So, it turns out that the tragic unintended consequence of our good, our good, intentions towards Africa, our kindness is that we have encouraged those countries to lock themselves into a gruesome economic depression.*

[end excerpt]

LAWRENCE: And it is filled with feeling and sympathy and hopes for impoverished African people and so there's a lot of turns in that, and that's the kind of thing that was making *West Wing* crew over time who were all, who were liberals would say I really like this Vinick guy, I would vote for this Vinick guy. And it was because he wasn't a Republican without heart. He was using his heart to find the direction that was different from the direction that Liberals found.

JOSH: I like Vinick's rhetorical attack. He does that a couple of times.

[West Wing Episode 7.07 excerpt]

*FORREST: How many jobs would you create in your first term Senator?*

*VINICK: None.*

*AUDIENCE: angry noises*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And then he lets it just sit there, you know, almost as a gaff for a moment before then explaining what he has to say and kind of winning. It's like a rhetorical approach that he takes that I enjoy.

LAWRENCE: Yeah, it's a, there's another piece that's only in the DVD version, not on Netflix, where Forrest Sawyer asks them if they favour a moratorium on the federal death penalty and Jimmy's answer is yes. A one-word answer and then Alan's answer is No. A one-word answer.

[West Wing Episode 7.07 excerpt]

*FORREST: It is I believe a Republican Governor who has imposed a moratorium on the death penalty in Illinois and so Congressman, would you favor a moratorium on the Federal death penalty?*

*SANTOS: Yes.*

*FORREST: That's it?*

*SANTOS: That's it.*

*FORREST: Ok. Ah, Senator?*

*VINICK: No.*

*FORREST: That, That's it?*

*VINICK: I think we've covered that one*

*AUDIENCE: [laughs]*

*FORREST: Alright Sir.*

[end excerpt]

LAWRENCE: And the reason Alan gave a one-word answer is he just saw Jimmy give a one-word answer and he recognized right away what, just a, strong tactic that was and he wasn't going to let Jimmy have that moment of the one-word answer. And I learned that actually in my life working with Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan who would frequently, in venues like *Meet the Press* and places like that, give a one-word answer. There'd be a spot where it's just a very simple yes or no and it would always shock the momentum of the show because everybody's expecting more right there.

JOSH: It's disarming.

LAWRENCE: And it was always disarming, it's honest it's powerful and so it's one of those things that I've always said every debater should find the moment where they just give a one-word answer.

HRISHI: There's a moment from a town hall that Elizabeth Warren did where she gave a one-word answer and it was sort of a viral moment from that. And actually, Elizabeth Warren is the modern counterpart that I thought of most while watching Santos' answers in the debate. There's a moment where he says, ah, he says some people just want to say no and Elizabeth Warren in one of the Primary debates recently in response to [former Maryland congressman John] Delaney I think it was, you know she just said.

[Excerpt from Democratic Primary Debate; Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts. Tuesday 30<sup>th</sup> July 2019]

*WARREN: You know I don't understand why anybody goes to all the trouble of running for President of the United States just to talk about what we really can't do and shouldn't fight for.*

[end audio]

HRISHI: There are a couple of moments like that that felt like echoes from this, you know from fourteen years ago. Clearly there were things that you were looking at historically but have you found that you can see this is how maybe, had echoes later on in the future.

LAWRENCE: Well, *The West Wing* live debate is now all over the democratic Presidential debates because they're debating Medicare for all.

HRISHI: Right.

LAWRENCE: That's what Jimmy Smits' proposed in *The West Wing* live debate and that was just a personal favorite of my own because in those days, especially right through the Obama years, starting with the Clinton years. The Democrats were always offering a kind of tortured hard to describe solution to getting health care coverage, which they would say was for everyone and all of those plans never were designed to cover everyone, they always left out millions of people. And the only plan that would ever cover everyone would be Medicare for all and so Jimmy gets caught up trying to defend his complicated plan, really powerfully cross-examined by Alan Alda about that and it throws Jimmy into doing something that was just a fantasy moment of mine, which is just to say, you know what, forget about my Healthcare plan, what I would really like to do. You know because so much of what politicians are doing out there is defending something they don't believe in because they think the thing they believe in is too far out and will lose the votes and so they're left with this terrible job of defending something that they know is flawed. And I wanted to see somebody in the moment, live, in the debate just make the decision, you know what, I'm not going to try to fight these challenges to my plan because the challenges he's coming up with are actually accurate. I'm going to tell you what I'd really like to do if I could. So then, a few years later Barack Obama is running for president and he says at a certain point if we were starting from the beginning, I would go basically with Medicare for all, but since we're starting where we are, were going to do my plan. And so, Barack Obama was the first inheritor in my mind of what was the Jimmy Smits' position.

JOSH: Yeah, it's fascinating. I was wondering as I watched how radical it would have been for someone, for a candidate in 2005 to say it.

LAWRENCE: Oh wildly. Here's what it would have been. Wildly radical and in my notion of the way this works, there are viewers out there who are watching that with whom Jimmy earns integrity by saying look this is what I'm proposing because this is what I think can pass, everybody understands that. And then, in an ideal world here's what I'd like to do. Everybody understands that, and then he goes on. And so, I believe that kind of answer gets more points for honesty than he could ever get in the details of his policy answers trying to defend something that he half believes in.

HRISHI: Plus, he gets the points of being able to point out structural problems in government. You know, Congressional gridlock is really the fault here not any reality about insurance plans or the cost of premiums or anything like that. Could I ask you a few technical questions about the-  
[crosstalk]

LAWRENCE: [crosstalk] Yes

HRISHI: making of the show? So, putting together a live broadcast is so fundamentally different in terms of the lighting and the directing and everything like that. I know Alex Graves directed this did he have to learn an entirely new way of directing, that kind of multi, that live multi cam directing. I've seen it before, Josh and I did a multi cam pilot years ago and what that director did, the way he sort of called out the shots was completely different.

JOSH: Also, our guy had the ability, he knew that he was calling it live and it was being recorded but he'd be able to go back later and edit.

HRISHI: That's true.

JOSH: When you're actually directing live, you know, what you see is what you get and every time Alex snaps his fingers and the next shot goes, if it's wrong the audience is seeing it.

[Audio clip of the episode rehearsal]

*You can hear Alan Alda speaking his lines, with technical people talking over the top and Alex snapping his fingers*

*GRAVES: Ready on 13 now*

*VINICK: Well I'm a grandparent now so I'm a little less strict, less strict than I use to be*

*\*Snaps fingers\**

*GRAVES: Ready 15 on 4*

*\*Snaps fingers\**

*VINICK: I'm going to cut Congress*

*GRAVES: Ready on 16 on 1 – veto*

*VINICK: allowance, then I'm going to force them to get control of spending.*

[end excerpt]

LAWRENCE: Yeah the only things that are comparable to the kind of directing Alex was doing in these two live performances, East coast and West coast are Saturday Night Live and sports because there's no editing, you don't get to go back and edit, it's really happening and so it was directing unlike any directing that Alex had ever done and this was like sports because we had a trailer outside of the studio that we were shooting in and he was out there in the trailer, he's not even in the same building where the actors are, it's a very long walk away from there and he's just calling camera shots that's all it is. There's no other function for the director once were underway except saying you know camera one, camera two, camera three, camera four, that's all it is. And so, it's unlike anything he'd ever done and so it's incredibly high pressure but for people who've actually done that for a living it's much easier than the normal film directing that Alex does. And so it was a fascinating challenge to see him rise to and so you know, we've rehearsed it enough that we know exactly when you're supposed go to this person, that person and that person and if you watch closely, and if you know we've rehearsed it, you will watch the camera go sometimes a second too soon to someone who should be interrupting his way in and instead the camera lands on him right before he's said something. It only happens a couple of times. But you know, we could've gotten a pro who wouldn't have to know anything about *The West Wing* really to sit there in the director's trailer and do this, but Alex did it, it was really brave of him to do it. I think it was great for us that he did it because having him there throughout our rehearsal process and thinking through all of the staging of this with Alex as opposed to someone I didn't know would have been, I think, much more disruptive for all of us and so we were really, really lucky that Alex was willing to do that. But that was an early discussion that we had privately, John Wells and I, was do we need to go to an outside live TV director? And when Alex wanted to do it, because he wanted the challenge, he wanted to jump off that cliff, we both just said well that's what we should do.

HRISHI: But you did need to have a different crew?

LAWRENCE: Yeah there was no, there were virtually no crew from the show were there. There's a woman who you see hand a microphone to Alan in the middle of the piece, she's a pro. She does this, she's at the Oscars, she's at the Emmys.

JOSH: She looked like a pro.

LAWRENCE: Yeah, she's at all these live events in L.A. That's her job. Everybody else was an expert at live TV and luckily Los Angeles has experienced live crew because of the Oscars, the Emmy's, Golden Globes, things like that.

HRISHI: And so, there are shots of the camera people on stage, you know, that get caught sometimes from, those are people who are actually operating live cameras?

LAWRENCE: Yeah, they were operating cameras and those were all intended. What we wanted was, when they break out of their podiums, we want to show you that we're not set up for that, we're not ready for that. We also want to show you, in effect, that the director in the booth, if you wanna think, if you wanna pull back far enough to think about it, the director in the booth is what I'm watching because I know how live TV works, is the director in the booth is deciding I don't care how messy this is, I have to get this shot.

HRISHI: Right.

LAWRENCE: You know, I have to get a shot of Jimmy right now speaking and I don't care whose standing behind him.

JOSH: OK we're going to take a quick break now and when we come back, we'll have more with Lawrence O'Donnell and our talk about the debate.

[Ad break]

LAWRENCE: I think of the director in this show as one of the characters, I kind of love as a viewer watching the director go alright, I don't care grab that shot. That's was all intended that's all very specifically scripted.

HRISHI: That's great so that means you managed to write in both Chris Misiano and Alex Graves into an episode [crosstalk] as characters.

LAWRENCE: [crosstalk] yes, yes.

JOSH: I have a question about the set up for the actors. I presume that Alan and Jimmy had Teleprompters off camera that we cannot see. I was wondering, how about Forrest Sawyer? where's he getting? He was very good, everybody was great.

LAWRENCE: Yeah, Forrest Sawyer did not have a prompter as I recall. It's possible that we snuck one for Forrest but you know he was the one I knew; I knew nothing can go wrong with Forrest Sawyer because he's done this a million times. There's nothing about this live TV that's going to throw him, nothing. He's going to learn his lines and by the way he showed up knowing his lines, for the first rehearsal. He knew them all.

JOSH: Ah, so he had it down cold.

LAWRENCE: Yeah, he had it down.

HRISHI: Speaking of teleprompters, when we spoke with Alan Alda back in season six for our episode on 'In God We Trust', he had some things to tell us about this episode.

[Interview with Alan Alda – conducted by Hrishi & Josh in 2019 – excerpt]

*ALAN: The programs that were written the storylines that were developed were so good and I had that experience that still stands out for me as one of the happiest times I've had acting which was when Jimmy Smits and I did the live Presidential debate. That was an extraordinary time for me because it was almost like an improvisation in that there was a script but we didn't have time to learn the script because they kept changing it. Every time we rehearsed, they have a new few speeches in there so they only way we could do it and stick to what Lawrence O'Donnell had written and it was a wonderful wonderfully written debate. The only way we could stick to it was to use teleprompters so the problem I had with that was I couldn't read the teleprompters at the*

*distance that it as placed from me, so the character hadn't established wearing glasses so I couldn't put glasses on I had to go get fitted for contact lenses which I had never worn in my life and contact lenses are an abysmal torture for anyone whose never done it. You've gotta stick your own finger in your eye and it really doesn't feel good to see your finger coming towards your eye. So now were going to do a totally live television show. Not live on tape, live live where it's going out right then to millions of people and five minutes before were going on the air live, I'm still trying to stick my finger in my eye. I couldn't do it; I couldn't face it. I'd get an inch away and I'd stop. Meanwhile if I don't get that piece of glass in there, I'm not going to be able to read the lines [crosstalk].*

*JOSH: [crosstalk] There is no show*

*ALAN: Yeah, right, so there was a little excitement about that show for me, but it was almost improvisational because on the fly we were making the dialogue work. Some of which we weren't that familiar with.*

[end audio]

[West Wing Weekly music plays]

JOSH: They did a remarkable job, especially given that they had just a couple of weeks to work with it and the volume of material that they had to prepare. It really is an impressive feat.

LAWRENCE: Well, it's the longest, you know *West Wing* script in history and it's nothing but speech right, so you can imagine what those pages looked like. They were just these black columns of dialogue going all the way down the page. Each of them had multiple runs of dialogue that covered more than one page and so they had two weeks of rehearsal basically and this was very difficult because we are an up and running series. We need them in all of these episodes so time had to be carved out of the episodes that were being shot. Jimmy's scenes had to be loaded up so that we could get him days off. Alan's scenes had to be loaded up so we could get him days off. Where they could just rehearse, spend the entire day together and John Wells knew right away this had to be off campus. This is a special project. I can't have them rehearsing, you know in another building in the *Warner Brothers* lot because it will get interrupted it won't be considered sacred and he wanted to send that message. So, he got a space off campus in Burbank rehearsal hall that we began at. And then eventually we moved downtown because we used this studio in downtown LA which was then a relatively new studio for the actual debate and when we got downtown for the first time we saw what was about 80% finished construction of the debate stage and it's one of those moments in the preparation process that changes everyone because you see it and you realize this is really real, we're doing this and you could see it changed the actors. They knew this requires in every sense, a Presidential level of performance out of them that no other episode of TV is ever going to ask of them. They're always going to be able to do it again. In any other episode, you know, not here. No asking for another take it's all 100% on the line. Just the way it is in a Presidential debate.

JOSH: Did you enjoy watching it filmed or were you [expletive deleted] a brick?

LAWRENCE: I wished that I could have the audience experience and not be stuck in the truck. Because for me what it was and what Alan thought it was, as he said to me afterwards, this is just a wonderful play that we just did and I wanted to be in that theatre audience and so for the first one I was in the truck pretty much the whole time. For the second one I decided to cheat my way out into that audience to try to experience that and so I got a version of the audience experience but it's certainly the way that people felt who were in the room. They really felt like they were in a very special place. And by the way there was a huge amount of pressure on tickets in L.A. of bigwigs who wanted to be, it was just like a real Presidential debate. Where all these, you know, power-types want to be in the room for the Presidential Debate and so that room was packed and the audience had its own energy and you know one thing we didn't do, was we didn't rehearse the audience.

HRISHI: That was what I was wondering. Because they have specific cues.

LAWRENCE: Yeah, I know it seems like they have cues and they don't.

HRISHI: They don't?

LAWRENCE: They don't.

JOSH: I wondered the same thing.

LAWRENCE: And the weird thing is, Forrest Sawyers job is to tell the audience to not respond. And yet, Alex Graves and I want the audience to respond ok. We want that dynamic in the show and so we left it, we kind of left it to the audience and it's all organic what happens there.

JOSH: Very clever I love it.

LAWRENCE: Well I think it, actually, if I had to do it over again, I wouldn't leave it to the audience. I would say this is, well, I mean for a bunch of reasons. Including I want to make sure if we're going to have applause, I want to make sure the Republican gets applause, and the Democrat gets applause, you know. And in the edited version, actually, the Republican ends up getting less applause than the Democrat.

JOSH: It felt real though to me. It felt to me like the audience was responding to what they were hearing.

LAWRENCE: Yes, it was. It really was.

HRISHI: But you know, there's the moment where Vinick says. '*Head Start doesn't work*', the whole audience goes "oooohhhh."

LAWRENCE: Yes, yes, they really did.

HRISHI: They really did that.

LAWRENCE: They thought the devil just spoke. I loved that reaction because it was so from the gut. It was like, it was what did I just hear. It wasn't a boo, it wasn't applause, it was just groaning with a kind of revulsion in a way of what they just heard. And then, you know, Vinick goes on to tell you the truth about Head Start.

[West Wing Episode 7.07 excerpt]

*VINICK: By grade four and five Head Start graduates do no better academically than their equally poor classmates who didn't attend Head Start.*

[end excerpt]

LAWRENCE: And that's something that you never hear and Democrats never discuss, but Jimmy had an answer to that.

[West Wing Episode 7.07 excerpt]

*SANTOS: But Head start does raise scores in the early years and the we let them slip*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: That part especially felt like the chessboard to me.



LAWRENCE: Yes.

HRISHI: Where both of them were going at each other with everything they had and you really had to sort of disagree with yourself in a coherent, articulate way. That's one of my favorite moments in the episode.

LAWRENCE: You know, and a lot of the, some of the comebacks, you know, I would find them later. You know, a particular exchange would end with Jimmy and it would sit that way for a draft or two. Then I'd realize oh wait, Alan's got a comeback to that and I'd throw that in and then I might discover the next week, oh I just realized Jimmy has a comeback to that too. So, you, this thing would have been impossible to write, you know, just kind of in one sitting because the argument is with yourself. Because it's one section of my brain arguing with the other section of my brain. So, you have to let it sit and let the whole brain just kind of live with it for a while and then you go there's one more thing I have one more thing I can throw in here.

HRISHI: Some of my best responses to things that Josh says in the podcast are things that I've come up with three weeks after the episode came out.

LAWRENCE: Oh sure yeah.

JOSH: And we usually go back and put them in.

LAWRENCE: Well you know, I got extra time to write this which was important. John Wells carved out time for me and pulled me out of the rotation of the filmed episodes so that I could do this. I was literally playing with lines on the Sunday that we were shooting it and I had something I wanted to give to Alan that was really of that weekend's news. I ran it by him and he just went "ahhh, you know I, I don't know" and he wasn't, it wasn't that he was complaining as an actor and this is was last minute. He was looking at it and going "I think we have enough here" and he was absolutely right. I wanted to add like two lines to segment of the debate that was already exactly where it should be, where it should begin and end and he was right about that and we didn't do it.

HRISHI: because he was thinking, you know, years from now, they're going to cut it out of *iTunes* and *Netflix*.

JOSH: Exactly

LAWRENCE: Yeah, he knew, he knew.

JOSH: Why waste your time? One of my favorite bits of dialogue or sequences is the discussion of the word Liberal and whether it's a dirty word now. That's where we really see Santos sort of picking up some steam as he ticks off the achievements that Liberals have made over the years. Social Security and the civil right and voting rights acts and whatnot leading up to his saying.

[West Wing Episode 7.07 excerpt]

*SANTOS: So, when you try to hurl that word Liberal at my feet as if it was something dirty, something to run away from, something that I should be ashamed of, it won't work Senator. Because I will pick up that label and I will wear it as a badge of honor.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I love that moment. Because I felt like this probably going in was a line, he figured he'd use if the opportunity showed and it plays organically but also as the kind of thing that maybe Vinick fell into a little bit of a trap there.

LAWRENCE: Well, in the stage directions of it, and you know the stage direction of this script had more internal thoughts of the actors than anything I've ever written. And so, in the stage directions of this, it makes it very clear Jimmy doesn't have anything planned for this and in fact Jimmy's trying to get away from it. He's trying to run away, to change the subject from what Alan Alda has just thrown this liberal thing. But what Jimmy recognizes, and he does this repeatedly, is if you get me cornered, I have a choice, it's a very simple choice, I can look weak or I can look strong. And the weak move is to get away from it and that was what we saw in the Healthcare part. Where he's got me cornered and I can look weak by clinging to the wreckage of my defense of my healthcare plan or I can just say to you, Ok this is what I really think. And this for me in the script was one of those moments where 40 years of Democrats running away from the word liberal was going to end with Jimmy Smits right here and right now. He wasn't going to bring it up, but now that you've cornered him, here we go, you know, were going to have this fight. And that is the piece of the debate that has been seen by more people than any other part of this debate because that has been viral on social media. Jimmy's defense of liberalism for ten years now. It just [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] It's pretty great.

LAWRENCE: It's non-stop it's everywhere. It was inspired, it wasn't word for word, but it was inspired by what I would hear Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan say in up-state New York in Republican districts where people would throw the word Liberal at him. And he would say yes, I am a liberal just like Franklin Delano Roosevelt and he would take you through what Liberalism had done. It also gave me that exchange where, you know, Alan thinks he's won by saying a Republican President ended slavery. And Jimmy gets to say

[West Wing Episode 7.07 excerpt]

*SANTOS: A Liberal Republican. What happened to them? They got run out of your party.*

[end excerpt]

LAWRENCE: And that was kind of a cry from the heart from me because I worked with Liberal Republicans when I was in the Senate in the early 90's and they're all gone.

JOSH: Did you ever think it would reach the state we're at now?

LAWRENCE: No, no one predicted any of this, this was. Look when I was working there Mitch McConnell was a perfectly reasonable guy, that's how long ago that was.

[laughter]

HRISHI: While people are watching this episode on DVD I wanted to encourage people to also watch the little featurette about the making of this episode that's a DVD extra. One of my favorite moments in that is at the end Jimmy Smits and Alan Alda talk about how the experience had bonded them a little bit more because they hadn't had many shared scenes at that point. And then they suddenly did these two weeks of intense rehearsals. Did you feel that way with the cast, or maybe with Alex? That doing this episode and sort of having these high stakes changed your relationship to some of the other folks who were involved in the making of it.

LAWRENCE: It just intensified where we were. We were already very close and now we were in this really intense fox hole together and we all knew the stakes and we were all set up for gigantic failure and the actors were set up for the worst kind of failure because they were going to be the ones out there and if something went wrong, they were going to feel the heat of it and that's just enormous pressure. I think, you know, they probably just surrendered their fates to the live Gods and it was intense and it was a deeply personal experience for all of us and we kind of didn't want it to end because it broke the cycle of episodic television production. We were off on our own doing this little art exercise, you know, it's climbing a mountain you know, you take on this incredibly risky

climb together as a group, you do that and there's a hug that comes from that that lasts a lifetime. I mean, when I see Jimmy, when I see Alan this is very close to the top of our minds.

JOSH: I remember feeling both relieved and very left out that I wasn't in this episode.

LAWRENCE: Yeah that's, that's the way you're supposed to feel, that you got the night off. But there was that, I mean that was, I mean it broke my heart that this episode was as prominent as it was that season in *The West Wing* and it got all of this promotion and it didn't have Martin and it didn't have Allison and that part just broke my heart, that we can't have everybody in it. And so that was hard, that was really, really hard to live with. But it was just a fact of life that we had to go ahead with.

JOSH: And I'll admit to being a little bit miffed on the re-watch to notice that the title sequence included Alda, Chenoweth, Janney, McCormick, Spencer, Whitford, Smits and Sheen. How was that list decided?

LAWRENCE: I have no idea.

JOSH: I'm outraged.

LAWRENCE: If you watch carefully, you'll notice that they played with the title sequence so that they could get it out of the way so that it wasn't running over the debate. They ran it in a different way than they usually do and then the writer and director credits appeared over a black screen right before the debate really got underway and that had to be manipulated so it wouldn't get in the way of the live TV debate.

HRISHI: Josh, I think your credit in the opening just got cut for the *Netflix* version.

LAWRENCE: It could be.

JOSH: Ah, yeah that must be what it is. [laughs]

LAWRENCE: I'm telling you, anything possible.

JOSH: Also, I want to point out that there are I believe over 20 Broadway musicals that closed after opening night and you guys ran two performances so.

LAWRENCE: Yeah, there you go.

JOSH: I feel fine about it.

HRISHI: One of my favorite details is that moment of the end screen with the Executive Producer credits and everything that comes afterwards just being against a black screen. Because it's just this little reminder, normally we get the still there in the end credits, a still from the episode, but because it was live there's no chance to put a still up. I just thought that was a nice little reminder of what we'd just seen.

LAWRENCE: Yeah, it's was a one off in every way down to every detail of it and you know, all that stuff had to be re-thought. You know it's someone's job to have that photograph up there. Someone had to go oh well, so were not doing that. Nah, just go, it'll be black. Everything, you know and John Wells and I, and Alex, every one of these things would come up and you'd realize at the last-minute things like that.

JOSH: You could have used my headshot.

HRISHI: [laughs] Lawrence, thank you so much for spending more time with us and talking to us about this episode, it's a really special one in the whole series and I'm so glad we got to talk to you about it.

LAWRENCE: I could go on and on about it as I think I've demonstrated. Thank you very much.

HRISHI: So that's it for this episode. Next week we'll be back for more on the debate with our special guests debate commentators Ron Klain and Beth Myers

JOSH: Thanks, as always to Zach McNees, Margaret Miller and Nick Song. Additional thanks to Lawrence O'Donnell, Alan Alda and Julie Menty, thank you for lending us your copy of the season 7 DVD of *The West Wing*, we needed that. And thanks to Radiotopia and PRX for including us in their exclusive collection of forward-thinking podcasts about which you can find out more at Radiotopa.fm

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

LAWRENCE: What's next?

[Outro Music]