

The West Wing Weekly  
5.12: "Slow News Day"  
Guests: Eli Attie and Nancy Altman

JOSH: Hey there, Josh here, before we start, just a warning. We had some technical issues with the audio file from my side of this conversation, so the recording will sound a bit low-fi. Enjoy.

[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 episode twelve from season five. It's called "Slow News Day."

JOSH: It was written by Eli Attie. It was directed by Julie Hébert. And it first aired on February, 4th in the year 2004.

HRISHI: I'm going to read the Warner Bros. official synopsis for this episode, "Toby convinces Bartlet to secretly sanction his solo attempt to make history by reforming Social Security, but Toby's efforts to recruit a Republican Senator and a Democratic cohort are publicly divulged, forcing the administration to back down, while Josh and Leo are left clueless and furious. Meanwhile, an equally unaware C.J. parries with a reporter who's ready to print all the backstage details. Also, the female staffers complain to Josh about a new employee, a mysterious, seductively-dressed woman assigned to Toby."

JOSH: There's a split infinitive in there, but otherwise it's a fairly comprehensive synopsis.

HRISHI: Although I don't know about any female staffers actually complaining to Josh.

JOSH: Nor do I remember that. Maybe our special guest can enlighten us.

HRISHI: Yeah. Joining us for this episode is one of our favorite guests, which is why we ask him back all the time, Eli Attie.

JOSH: Wooooohooooo!

ELI: A great pleasure, to be here.

HRISHI: Thanks, Eli. Let's just start right here – do you know something about why this little bit about Rina, the female staffers complaining to Josh, is in this Warner Bros. official synopsis?

ELI: Yeah, I do. So this episode of *The West Wing*, when the very first director's cut was delivered to the producers of the show, including myself, it was something like 14 minutes long, and maybe that speaks to the complexity and possible insanity of trying to squeeze reforming Social Security into an hour of prime-time television, but it's funny watching the episode -

HRISHI: Oh, you mean it was 14 minutes *too* long.

ELI: 14 minutes too long –

HRISHI: 14 minutes *over*

ELI: So sorry. Like 14 minutes over, exactly right.

HRISHI: Got it.

ELI: So, watching it, there were few things that probably only I noticed that were half-sentence references to scenes that were not in the show. One of them is Josh actually saying to, I think to C.J.:

[West Wing Episode 5.12 excerpt]

*JOSH: What am I, the White House complaint center?*

[end excerpt]

ELI: And that's because there was a scene where he comes in in the morning, and I can talk about the Rina character, at least my memory of what that was where that came from and the whole idea of it, but he comes in in the morning and several of the female assistants on the show – Ginger, some of the other ones – were camped out in Josh's office and they were all, kind of in a frenzy about this woman, Rina, and the way she dressed and how she looked so different than everybody. So that scene, I guess NBC must have seen the nine-hour director's cut [laugh] and they put it in the recap.

JOSH: That's interesting. That also explains to me, something that seemed a little abrupt, which is that Josh sends Donna to spy on what Toby's up to and he tells her "Go tell Rina she's got to dress differently." And with the absence of what you've now described –

ELI: Yes.

JOSH: - it struck me as kind of harsh and a little bit abrupt, like THAT'S what she's gonna go –

ELI: [crosstalk] that's right, that's right.

JOSH: [crosstalk] – and bring up.

ELI: And in fact, in the original script and in the cut, the sort of, you know, the 47-hour cut – it will get longer each time I mention it [laughter from all] – Donna was also complaining to Josh about her, and so it wasn't, it wasn't as harsh and groundless as it seems, I think, in the actual finished version.

HRISHI: I'm glad that we didn't end up actually seeing Donna as one of the people specifically complaining about her, so when we do have that scene between the two of them it feels more like, well maybe, maybe some of Rina's fears were founded, but then it lets Donna stay in a softer light, which I appreciate.

JOSH: I was going to say, also, there are two great reversals in that scene between Donna and Rina –

HRISHI: Yeah, there are.

JOSH: - one being that she comes saying, “We need to talk about, uh, clothes and makeup”

HRISHI: [crosstalk] [laugh] makeup

JOSH: and Rina says -

[West Wing Episode 5.12 excerpt]

*RINA: Sure. If you ever want me to teach you how to put on makeup I'd be happy to.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: - which I thought was very funny. It's a great little turn.

HRISHI: It reminded me of *Princess Bride* when, he's just -

[*The Princess Bride* excerpt ]

*PRINCE HUMPERDINCK: SURRENDER!*

*WESTLEY: You mean you wish to surrender to me? Very well, I accept.*

[end excerpt]

ELI: Well, interestingly, I [laughs] that's fantastic, I can tell you what that was based on in my mind, which was an article I had read about Virginia Kelley, Bill Clinton's mother, who I think passed away in the middle of Bill Clinton's presidency. But she was this kind of race-track-going, Elvis-loving, you know Arkansas, you know fiery Arkansas woman, who I think wore makeup about an inch and a half thick. And I remember reading an article about how when Hillary Clinton was first getting to know her and first dating Bill Clinton, and she probably wore what we would all consider a sort of a moderate amount of makeup, that Clinton's mom sat her down one day and basically said, “Do you want me to teach you how to put on makeup?” [laughter from Josh and Hrish] Sort of assuming that if you didn't take it off with a chisel every night that that was not a choice.

JOSH: Right, right [laughter] so funny.

ELI: So that stuck with me for some reason.

HRISHI: I, I love that.

JOSH: And the reverse on that scene is just Donna's decision to abandon the mission barely after it started, realizing that it's just not right what's she's doing, and that really the best advice

that she could give to Rina is “don’t let anybody ever see what it is you’re working on” and I loved that.

HRISHI: Yeah.

ELI: Yeah, yeah, that was the idea.

HRISHI: Yeah, she tries to play the deception in the spirit of collegiality, and then decides to actually tack towards collegiality and be like, “Here’s what I would actually tell you as someone who’s in your position. This, you know, you should keep doing what you’re doing.”

ELI: It’s a funny thing, I’m glad, looking back I took a glance at the script this morning to sort of see those scenes that were cut, and I’m actually really on another level glad that that scene was cut because it seems so ancient now the idea of a group of young women having a sort of an aversion to another young woman sort of based on her appearance. And, to some degree, that was the conception of this Rina character, which was something that came out of the writers’ room in this period on the show. I can’t remember, was this her first episode on the show?

JOSH: No, I think her third maybe.

ELI: ‘Cause I know that the idea, which was something that was a bit of a recurring idea in Season 5 that we sort of abandoned by Season 6, was can we introduce into this show characters from a different class background, characters who will not be one of the group? And sort of provoke the group, and I think in Rina’s case also be an expositional device; she doesn’t know all about government, things can be explained to her. You know, my view sort of over time was that you know that *The West Wing* tended to reject those characters like they were foreign organisms –

HRISHI: Mmm-hmmm

ELI: - you know, like an organ transplant that didn’t take, which is no dishonor to the actors who played them. But it was you know the idea was this is going to be this sort of more working-class background woman who just doesn’t dress like a sophisticated Ivy League person. I’m not even really sure her outfit completely sold that idea [laughs], but

HRISHI: That’s really interesting. We talked about when she first appeared during the government shutdown that maybe she was a ghost who had been inhabiting the White House [Eli laughs], but nobody had seen her before. And that she only makes herself visible by force of will here and there, and I thought, “Oh in this episode we realize she doesn’t actually realize that she’s a ghost.”

[West Wing Episode 5.12 excerpt]

*RINA: Nobody here talks to me.*

[end excerpt]

ELI: [laughter]

HRISHI: And she thinks “It’s because they don’t like me,” but it’s actually because most of the time people don’t see her.

ELI: That’s hilarious. [Josh laughs] I mean, I, where I thought you were going and I’m glad you didn’t go with that, was you thought she was an intern appearing during the government shutdown, and we all know that that happened once in real life and it didn’t work out very well.

HRISHI: A lot of *West Wing* fans think that she’s supposed to allude to Monica Lewinsky.

ELI: Yeah, well, yeah, that absolutely wasn’t the case. But it is true that when I was working in the Clinton White House there was a Deputy Chief of Staff whose name was Evelyn Lieberman who used to pull young women aside if she thought they were dressed a little too provocatively. And actually she turned out to be one of the people in that White House who was trying to keep Monica Lewinsky away from, sort of, the Oval Office area; you know the whole suite of offices that included that. So that may have been a little bit of her thinking, it’s hard to say, but at the time when I was working there, I just saw it as a kind of there’s a sense of propriety here. And I had a dear friend working in the White House at that time, a young woman who was just a bit of a New York hipster and wore almost black lipstick and things like that, and she would often get pulled into a side room and told, “Uh-uhn, you know, get rid of that.” Not ‘cause it was too sexy, but because it just didn’t fit the tone of the place.

JOSH: One of the vestiges of that excised plot is that we do come upon Rina in the, I guess, kind of like the bullpen outside Toby’s office, and she’s clearly distressed, and in fact she’s crying. And so we get a great moment of Toby walking right by her after clocking the fact that she’s super distressed. [Hrishi laughs] Then turning back and we think, “Ok, he can’t help himself.” But it, then we find out that he’s realized that her distress is of value, and the fact that she’s alienated from everyone else makes her the perfect person to help him for this top-secret project. I thought that was a fantastic illumination of Toby’s character.

HRISHI: Yeah.

ELI: Yeah, yes.

HRISHI: Ghosts are good spies.

ELI: Yeah, and I always and still love Toby and love his curmudgeonliness, and this was def- I when I think, when I look back on this episode, this was probably when I really first became good friends with Richard. You know, we spent a lot of time together and this definitely is a deep dive into Toby’s darker and lighter nature, in some ways.

HRISHI: I promise this will be now the last that I will say about Rina the ghost –

ELI: [crosstalk] You can keep, I mean why –

HRISHI: [crosstalk] forever in the series

ELI: [crosstalk] Don’t limit yourself!

HRISHI: [laughs] but I did want to, I realized after I was watching this episode and thinking about Rina and her predicament, that people don't know she's a ghost. I couldn't believe that I hadn't thought about this earlier, but I wanted to give a shout-out to our editor Margaret Miller, who wrote a delightful children's book in 2012 called *My First Ghost*, all about what it's like to have a ghost in your house, and, you know, the joys of taking care of a ghost [laugh]. It's really a fantastic book and they actually released a trailer for it, a video that goes along with the book when it came out, and I just want to play it. Because I think if you hear it, this is a pretty great theme song for Rina.

[*My First Ghost* trailer, song excerpt]

*BOTH CHARACTERS: The ghost friend is a close friend*

*MALE CHARACTER: an invisible friend*

*FEMALE CHARACTER: a very missable friend*

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Invisible friend!

*BOTH CHARACTERS: The ghost friend is a close friend*

*MALE CHARACTER: an irresistible friend*

*FEMALE CHARACTER: an unkissable friend*

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Unkissable friend, a walking lawsuit

*MALE CHARACTER: So tell your folks a ghost is all you ever wanted*

*BOTH CHARACTERS: So buy the book with the ghost inside and your house will be officially haunted!*

[music]

[end excerpt]

JOSH: We just need to add a little line about ghosts being able during to work during a government shutdown.

HRISHI: [laughs] Exactly.

ELI: I mean, I think this is the music, you know, during the title sequence of the Rina spinoff while she's applying foundation with a paint roller to her face. [Josh and Hrishi laugh] I think that's, I think that would be a delightful sequence. In front of her armoire.

HRISHI: And as she puts on more makeup she becomes invisible.

JOSH: Visible. That's true.

ELI: Oh, it could be visible!

HRISHI: Ohhhh, I like that, okay.

ELI: We see nothing; we see a paint roller sort of go through the frame and then, slowly, like the Invisible Man.

[Josh laughing]

HRISHI: Eli, you mentioned the expository possibilities by having Rina, and I realized that this is also, that we've been talking a lot about the evolution of Donna and now she's been in the White House for so long. And we spoke to Janel in the last episode about how realistically, at this point, Donna would have probably been promoted to some other position, but in any case she knows so much that it's impossible to do, sort of what was -

ELI: [crosstalk] Right

HRISH: [crosstalk] - the move in the first season, the Telladonna. You know where Josh would explain some function of government or some issue to her and so now we have a Tellarina.

ELI: That's right.

JOSH: A tellarina.

ELI: You know, another thing about this episode, looking through the 57,000 page original script [Josh and Hrish laugh], is that Ryan, the character Ryan the intern, played by Jesse Bradford, he's in the script. I assume, I can't quite remember now, I think we must have shot a bunch of scenes with him and he was playing that role, too, and this is a funny challenge, I think, of long-running TV shows, always, which is that you've got people, you want to keep them frozen in place to some degree, because you've got this delightful dynamic in Josh, you know, and Donna, sort of this student-teacher relationship, that's also many other things. But, yeah, that was a challenge. And I think in the John Wells era of the show, and particularly this season, there was a lot of conversation about, can we take a step back? Are there some things we can do that may change things up a bit? Advance things in some way? Play a little more into the reality, you know? And absolutely that was the purpose here. It's funny, because I think those storylines, things like census sampling in, I guess, the first season of the show, and, you know, the superconducting supercollider, and some of the wonkier, you know, more expository heavy storylines, probably were the spiritual godfathers of this whole episode.

HRISHI: Hmmm.

ELI: You know, can we tackle something?

JOSH: When you mentioned that the mammoth original script and the episode coming in at 14 minutes too long, the last note I took while watching this episode was, "Too bad this wasn't a multi-episode arc." So, why wasn't it?

ELI: Well, it's an interesting question. It probably, in retrospect, it should have been, and certainly could have been, and the script wasn't *that* long, It wasn't really any longer page-wise than a typical episode. Part of the reason the cut came in so long was there were so many

scenes where, it's kind of Richard wallowing in some moment, and great stuff you didn't want to cut. But, you know, *The West Wing*, I think was always, up to this point, trying to be a closed-end, satisfying hour. There were so few times in the Aaron years when things would really be multi-arc stories with cliffhangers, and the idea was a satisfying little play every week. And the genesis of this idea- there was a joke that went back to Aaron's days on the show where, just because of the nature of the sorts of the stories we were telling on the show, we used to joke in the writers' room, you know, often with Aaron there, Bartlet has no accomplishments. Nobody could really name things he did as President because you're not really seeing him pass bills, or sign bills; you're not really seeing him issue a lot of executive orders. It's much more behind the scenes and sort of character-focused stories. So there'd be times when we'd need to list accomplishments in a speech of Bartlet's, or something where we'd be kind of scrambling to make things up, so we were always wanting to do something even before this season, an episode where we do something significant. And we talked a lot in season five about *The West Wing*, what was the core of this show that we were sort of inheriting from its creator? And one of the big aspects of it was wish fulfillment, so this became a conversation about can we do something on the show that hasn't been done in real life? And what would that look like? And I don't know who suggested Social Security reform, it was definitely not my idea, it might have been Lawrence's idea.

JOSH: One of the older writers. Yeah.

HRISHI: [laugh]

ELI: Exactly, exactly right. Somebody for whom it was really going to hit home that year.

JOSH: [laughs]

ELI: No. Just kidding. We love Lawrence. But it became more, I think, in the wake of the show that did a storyline on primetime television about census sampling, I think the dryness and sort of the undramatic nature of Social Security reform was what I think what attracted us to it, and me to it - could you actually wring drama out of something so, sort of, that would put even accountant to sleep? And any accountants who watched the episode can tell us whether it was successful; it's probably not for me to say.

HRISHI: Yeah, I thought that maybe one of the reasons why it wasn't a multi-episode arc was because we'd had a few of those already. I mean, really the first two episodes of the season are, are really a two-parter. And it's a really long arc even after that as the aftermath of Zoey's kidnapping was explored, and then we also really recently had kind of a two-parter with the shutdown arc.

ELI: That's true. That's very true.

HRISHI: So I thought maybe that's why you couldn't do it again so soon.

JOSH: Interestingly to me, part of the desire to in cracking this episode you wanted to create some sort of legacy and achievement for Bartlet. You did it ironically, in a way where he couldn't



point to it, but you could as producers of this show. Here's something he did but you robbed him of being able to point to his legacy.

ELI: Right. That's true.

HRISHI: Yeah, you didn't actually solve your problem of when he gets to-

ELI: [crosstalk] that's a very good point.

HRISHI: - list all of his accomplishments in a speech. It's not like you get to scramble any less because he still can't mention this one in a speech.

JOSH: You can point to that, and he can't.

HRISHI: OK, let's go back to the beginning of the episode and start from the top. Actually, let's start before the episode starts. Eli, this is a question that I can't believe we haven't tried to answer previously on *The West Wing Weekly*. Who decides what scenes are played in the "previously on *The West Wing*"?

ELI: Oh. That's a very good question. I can tell you that, you know, it was probably John Wells, because I don't remember having any conversation about that. I don't know. I don't remember having any personal involvement with that. But what I can tell you is that all you're seeing in the previously on from this episode is a little bit of a scene, I believe it's just a little bit of a scene from my previous episode, "Constituency of One" and it's a scene – am I right about that? – it's a scene between Toby and Leo –

HRISHI: Yeah.

ELI: - that in my mind was the genesis of this idea in another way, which is where there's this scene where Toby who's being asked to kind of handle this message calendar, and that's the thing that kind of gets Will to leave and go work for the Vice President, which of course also features in this episode, but it was Toby's frustration that we weren't doing grand historic things. And I know that when we were talking about doing an episode that was this kind of impossible thing that hadn't been done in the real world, and I guess we settled on Social Security reform, I just kind of went off and then did an outline, and it was pretty much just my choice to make it Toby. And it felt like based on that previous scene, this was what was on his mind, and he'd be the guy to swing for this ridiculously high fence. So I can't recall who made that decision, but I can say that that's the exact right scene to tee up this episode.

HRISHI: Yeah, for sure. I wasn't sure if it was something like the synopsis, where, you know, you deliver your episode and someone in a marketing department in a studio is the person who tacks that on. Or if it's something that gets delivered along with the edit, you know, with the final cut of the show. Because there are times, very rarely there are actually times, where the previously on has a sort of creative function, you know, even tying in to the very beginning to the frontl of the episode.

ELI: Yeah, it's definitely not something done by marketing, because they don't have all the footage you know, handy, the way that you would, sort of, in your edit room.

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Right.

JOSH: [crosstalk] Right.

ELI: So it's always something done by the show, I just can't remember how it worked. But, yeah, you know, I do really think of that scene as the kernel of this whole idea, which is here's a guy, Toby, who's incredibly frustrated that because of Zoey's kidnapping, because of just the way Washington works, here we are, it's the second term, time is running out, you know, when are we going to swing for the fences? Can we swing for the fences? And this was absolutely the way a lot of people felt when I worked in the White House in Clinton's second term, which was this feeling of sometimes ham-handedly trying to grab for legacy. It was something people thought about a lot because for the President, and he has some allusions to it also in this episode, that's his last campaign, you know. And I remember all these meetings that were held you know without Bill Clinton, and probably some with Bill Clinton, that were really about legacy, without using that word, you know, sort of pretending there was some other pretext for a meeting, but it was really like, is there a side of Mt. Rushmore and can we climb up there and get his face on there, you know? It all became about that.

HRISHI: Yeah, I like that the idea of legacy is something that's been kind of permeating the last two episodes. In "The Stormy Present" the death of President Lassiter, the president's getting ready for his presidential portrait -

ELI: [crosstalk] Right, right.

HRISHI: - legacy has kind of been in the background of a lot of these episodes. And then it comes out more in the foreground here, so that's really cool. The episode starts, here we get a, it starts off with rain, and Toby is not sleeping at 2:47 in the morning and just sighs and apparently just completely gives up on the effort to sleep, and gets up and goes to work, which I related to very much.

ELI: Yeah, and I think the intention there, which it can simply be that, that works fine, but it was that, I don't know if this played or if you felt this, but the idea is that he was lying in bed stewing about something -

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Yeah

ELI: - and he went to work to address that thing.

HRISHI: I just figured he was always stewing about something and, uh...

ELI: I think that's right. I think that's right, and that works. But watching it, you're right; I don't see the glimmer of Social Security reform in his open eyes. [Hrishi and Josh laugh]

JOSH: He also expects no less from anyone else. He has no hesitation in waking up Charlie and Josh. [Hrishi and Eli laugh]

ELI: That's true, that's true.

JOSH: He wakes up Charlie to steal the opportunity to wake up the president from him –

HRISHI: He tells him to sleep in, he's like –

JOSH: Yeah

HRISHI: -I woke you up to tell you not to [laughter]

JOSH: Yeah

ELI: That was well performed by Richard. [Hrishi laughs]

JOSH: The cold open is very visual. I like how you wrote it. There are a lot of great visual moments. There's the fantastic just crossing of screen, two crosses that Toby does in front of a completely stoic security guard. [unintelligible] Toby first crosses the screen one way, then the other, to get documents.

HRISHI: I was thinking about people who can sleep with their eyes open, and I figured that security guard must be one of them [Josh and Eli laugh]. Because he does not move! [laughs]

JOSH: I remember as a kid I was at my cousin's house, and my oldest cousin Rachel had just gotten home from some sort of trip. And my aunt and uncle came down and said, "My God she's sleeping standing up with her eyes open!" and my other cousin and I raced upstairs to see her, because we thought she actually was. [Hrishi and Eli laugh]

ELI: That's hilarious!

HRISHI: And then she became a security guard in the White House lobby.

JOSH: Yes, but she's invisible. [Hrishi laughs]

HRISHI: I love that when Toby calls up Josh, though he's barely coherent, he still definitely knows Gaines' cash-on-hand number off the top of his head.

ELI: Yeah. I mean, you know –

HRISHI: That's the kind of superpower that, like, we've come to expect and love in this show.

ELI: Well, I think that's realistic, you know. If you look at, you know, Josh, even though in title he's Deputy Chief of Staff I think we've also played him in the show generally as the political director and the guy who tracks these things, and especially money in politics. That's- I'm sure had you woken up Rahm Emanuel in the middle of the night he would have, it would have been down to the penny.

HRISHI: Really? You'd just pick a senator and he'd know it?

ELI: Yeah, exactly, exactly. So, you know, some of it is the superpower but some of it is –

JOSH: [crosstalk] that's remarkable.

ELI: - this is, this is the currency of their realm.

JOSH: [crosstalk unintelligible]

ELI: There is a lot of tea-leaf reading of that kind, you know, so if you're Josh you're probably studying those numbers.

JOSH: I liked, also, the final moment of the cold open gave me just a throb of love for *The West Wing* altogether. We call it the "bombswell", the final line or moment that leads into the opening credits, and the idea that you could have a television show where that bombswell moment is a character saying, "I think I know how we can save Social Security," [laughter] and it works! It works in this context. And it just gave me a surge of love for the whole endeavor that is *The West Wing*.

ELI: I'm so glad to hear that. You know, it's funny because for me looking back on this episode, it's hard for me to say even just re-watching it, it's hard for me to say if it works. It's so odd. There definitely has never been another TV show that's aired an episode in prime time about Social Security reform. It was taken on as a kind of a bizarrely audacious, you know, can we top census sampling as a storyline? And [Hrishi laughs] that was the exercise and, you know I find myself looking at it thinking, like, is this television?

HRISHI: And here's how Toby puts it, the problem, when he finally does speak to the president:

[West Wing Episode 5.12 excerpt]

*TOBY: Mr. President, life expectancy is rising. The biggest generation ever is retiring and we don't have the money. Every year we wait means we have to cut deeper, take away more, 'til Social Security is not enough to live on, 'til retirement's a one-way ticket to a flop house!*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: What I love, love about this episode is it made me basically have to put myself through a mini crash-course in Social Security just to keep up with what was happening. I spoke to a woman named Nancy Altman who heads the nonprofit Social Security Works. She was appointed by Nancy Pelosi to be part of the seven-member Social Security Advisory Board.

JOSH: Oh, wow.

HRISHI: And we had a great conversation and I want to play a little bit of it here. Would you mind introducing yourself?

NANCY: My name is Nancy Altman. I'm president of Social Security Works and I chair a very broad-based diverse coalition on Social Security.

HRISHI: Awesome. So, let's just get right into it – what did you think of this episode?

NANCY: I thought it was a great period piece.

HRISHI: Hmm.

NANCY: I mean, it really shows how the Democratic Party has shifted.

HRISHI: Oh, that's interesting. How would you characterize the Democratic Party's position on Social Security before that time, before the 90s and early 2000s?

NANCY: Well, of course Social Security was the creation of the New Deal. It was Franklin Roosevelt's program, Democratic Congress. Democrats were always very strong supporters of the program, you know, through the 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s, and then there started to be a change. When Ronald Reagan talked about "government is not the solution, it's the problem," it really shifted a lot of framing. And starting really with Bill Clinton, and sort of the New Dems, there was an attempt to say "the era of big government is over."

HRISHI: Right.

NANCY: The interesting thing about the episode is that the plan that, you know, the sort of, they came to at the end, where they just gave a sentence or two about it, was a plan that Clinton and Gingrich were working on in 1998. Very similar, almost the same plan, and you know what caused that to fall apart? Monica Lewinsky.

HRISHI: Right.

NANCY: Because they started that, and so those of us who were consistently saying, "no, we can't cut this program. We should be expanding this program," really sort of secretly say, you know, "Hooray for Lewinsky" because she helped save Social Security.

HRISHI: Huh! That's interesting. [Nancy laughs] I had always heard about that episode as sort of this tragic moment, you know, for bipartisanship. Because Newt Gingrich, felt now he couldn't stand side-by-side with President Clinton, because he was toxic because of this affair, and so the whole thing crumbled. But for you it was, actually, this was a positive outcome.

NANCY: Oh, definitely! I mean compromise is fine, but it's also very important to have values and principles. And the thing that makes Social Security such an interesting issue is that the American people, as polarized as they are on lots of issues, are completely united on Social Security. You find with poll after poll after poll, shows Tea Partiers agree with union members, Republicans, Democrats, Independents. The elites don't. And the elites in Washington used to be Democratic and Republican elites, and now it's more just the Republican elites that were saying "no, no, we've got to save the program. We need to have a bipartisan solution. We've got to cut back." The American people overwhelmingly do not want to cut this program, and so, and this is another piece that goes into the storyline of the show, one of the things that really made me laugh as I watched it, I did not see Toby as a hero in this. But what made me laugh when I watched it again in preparation for our discussion, was that Toby got the last word on several scenes, but I actually think the character that was arguing with him had the better argument. And in fact one of the, there was a scene where Toby is talking to the *Wall Street Journal* reporter who's, you know, hot on the trail of this –

HRISHI: Yeah

NANCY: - and, you know, discovers what's going on, and Toby's trying to have him kill the story.

[West Wing Episode 5.12 excerpt]

*GREY POLK: How about the arrogance of trying to reform a \$400 billion program by manhandling senators behind closed doors with no public debate?*

[end excerpt]

NANCY: I mean, I think that's the right thing, and if you do what the American people want, which I think is where the Democrats are now, which is expanding these benefits and getting the wealthy to pay their fair share. We won't see action yet, because, obviously, the Democrats have to have the White House and so forth, but we're going to see movement next January on open hearings about what do we do about Social Security.

HRISHI: Hmm. So, when Toby says, "I'm going to save Social Security" to you, you didn't hear it as saving Social Security.

NANCY: No. I heard it in the way you talk about fixing Social Security, you know, the way you fix a dog or something. The line we use, but I think it's the accurate line, is that Social Security is the solution. That it's, it doesn't need saving, it's a response to a looming retirement income crisis we're facing. It's a response to, really, immoral levels of income and wealth inequality. My attitude is what we should be doing today is expand Social Security, fight for 15, increase the minimum wage, and strengthen workers' ability to collectively bargain. So, no, the mindset, the mainstream thinking in the 1990s, which is still the rhetoric of the Republicans, is we've got to fix the program, we've got to save the program, it's this terrible problem, and what I think Democrats have realized is that Social Security doesn't need to be saved, it's a solution.

HRISHI: And so it needs to be expanded.

NANCY: It's wise policy, and winning politics, to expand it. It's a very interesting exercise to look at the 2012 Democratic and Republican presidential planks on Social Security, their platform, and the 2016. Because the 2012 sounds just like your episode and it's not that different; they both talk about bipartisan solutions, they talk about the need for "saving" those, exactly what your episode was talking about.

HRISHI: Compromise.

NANCY: Compromise, bipartisan -

HRISHI: Yeah.

NANCY: - you know, let's come together. And the 2016 was expand Social Security, we've got to open field offices, you know, we have to give more money for the administration. And the Republican one continued to be "we've got to save this program." So the parties have now diverged, and I think the Democrats, not only have they returned to their roots, which was as I

say the 1930s, 40s, 50s, 60s, but they've also, the American people agree with the Democrats. So it's an issue where the rank-and-file Republicans do not agree with their elected leaders.

HRISHI: Hmm. And how do you convince them, then, if not to follow the will of their constituents, how do you convince them that your position is right? Because I think the nature of my understanding of the political process is that the only way things move forward is through compromise.

NANCY: Well, it depends what the issue is. When the American people are sharply divided, you have to have compromise. But if 60, 70, 80 percent of the American people agree with one position, which I think the polling all shows, then you do what the Democrats are planning to do next January - you hold hearings; if you have the House, you force votes. Republicans will then have to either say "We're going to vote against what's extremely popular" or "We're going to go along" or "We're going to have an alternative" and you make it an election issue. If you do it behind closed doors, you have to compromise. But if you do it out in the open and the American people are paying attention, and in fact, another scene I loved and I actually laughed about, and this actually involved Will –

HRISHI: Yeah.

NANCY: Where he and Josh are talking about you know going to Gaines' district and putting out a cup and saying-

HRISHI: Right.

NANCY: Because he couldn't raise any money.

HRISHI: Right.

NANCY: Because running on privatizing Social Security, the Koch brothers love it. There was another billionaire that passed away recently, but at that time he was literally putting in a billion dollars of his own money. Pete Peterson was doing it. If you want to run, I mean, I thought what would have been a better sort of image was having 90-year-olds waiting tables on the fundraisers. It's sort of this idea of work 'til you die. I mean the idea of putting out a cup for privatizing Social Security...Wall Street loves privatizing Social Security because there's a lot of money to be made there.

HRISHI: So the polling supports that the majority of Americans, regardless of party, support expanding Social Security and the expansion of Social Security, as I understand it is mainly going to be funded through, or at least the proposal is, by removing the salary cap that is currently on Social Security, right?

NANCY: Money that is deducted from your paycheck is a Social Security contribution. That covers 75-80 percent of Social Security's revenue.

HRISHI: Ok.

NANCY: Now the way that that's structured is that 6.2 percent of your wages on your first dollar, starting with your minimum wage worker it's 6.2 percent of every dollar you earn - if you're 16-years-old, earning a summer job – it's 6.2 percent up to a maximum, which is, goes up every year, but it's \$128,400. That covers 94 percent of the American people make under that amount, so they get withholding all year long. They don't even know that there's a maximum. But, you know, Bill Gates, we joke that he stops contributing to Social Security probably by his coffee break on January 1. Because once he earns \$128,400, he doesn't pay anything more into Social Security. He's done for the year.

HRISHI: Right.

NANCY: You know, Congress, it's probably like March or something. So one of the proposals is to eliminate that and say, "OK, Bill Gates, pay all year long the way everybody else does." So that's in every expansion bill, is to eliminate or modify what's called "The Cap."

HRISHI: Right! I mean, it's really structured, I didn't realize that, it's structured as a regressive tax.

NANCY: Exactly! And in fact, the proposals to eliminate the cap, or change it, there are a variety of proposals that have been put forward.

HRISHI: If it ended up being that the cap was removed, so it was just a proportional tax for everyone, but it didn't go to the level of being a progressive tax or having additional income from estate tax or something like that, would that feel like a compromise even though it was still the expansion of-

NANCY: [crosstalk] No, no.

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Social Security?

NANCY: That would be great. I mean, the thing that was interesting, and again this, I laugh about the episode, because the great compromise they came up with at the end of the episode, and it was the compromise, as they say it was quite close to what Clinton and Gingrich were talking about was raising the retirement age – in fact, that was another episode where Toby is talking to the Senator, ummm Brainerd, and she's saying "No, no, no, don't raise the retirement age" and he's saying, "No, everything has to be on the table," and she says:

[*The West Wing* Episode 5.12 excerpt]

*SENATOR SARAH BRAINERD: Tell that to the sheet metal worker whose tendons are shot by 55.*

[end excerpt]

NANCY: And I thought, "Yeah, she's right" even though he got the last word.

HRISHI: Yeah.



NANCY: But, no, I think benefits are too low, so I absolutely would not compromise on reducing benefits by a penny. But in terms of how it's funded, to me that's a political question, how do people think is the fairest way to spread the cost?

HRISHI: Nancy, thank you so much for talking to us about how the show correctly depicted Toby's now outdated-stance on what a Democrat might do when it comes to trying to save Social Security. You have a new book out this month called *The Truth about Social Security* and we'll put a link to it up on the website so that people can read more about it, for themselves.

NANCY: Oh, that would be fantastic. And if I can, this is sort of a personal thing before we leave. I was thinking about it, not to bring in a sad note, but I actually have an interesting kind of personal connection to *The West Wing*.

HRISHI: Oh really?

NANCY: And that is my sister, who unfortunately in 2006 passed away from cancer, was a HUGE fan of *The West Wing*. Her daughter then lived, and still lives in Los Angeles, and knew one of the producers.

HRISHI: Oh really?!

NANCY: And in your very last episode, which is you know May of 2006 –

HRISHI: Right.

NANCY: The writers wrote in her name as a character just as kind of a tribute. Her name was Janet Spragens. Nobody else would know, but all of us were just, you know, because it was only a few months after she passed away. I'm tearing up thinking about it. So we *love The West Wing*, and I'm so glad you guys are doing this podcast. It is just fantastic.

HRISHI: Thank you so much. That is awesome. I'm excited to listen for her name in the episode.

NANCY: Excellent!

HRISHI: Thank you.

NANCY: Bye now.

HRISHI: Now we're going to take a quick break.

[Ad break]

ELI: Not only is this a very Clintonian plan for compromise, but the actual Social Security plan presented in this episode, to the degree that we lay it out, was spoon-fed to me by Gene Sperling, who was a consultant to the show. I know he's been a guest on the podcast already, and really did work on this probably 130 hours a week under Bill Clinton, really, right before he came to the show. So this is absolutely the thinking of the Clinton White House on Social Security reform. And it's a funny thing, because there was some debate in the writers' room

over what the plan should be. And I'm embarrassed to say that I'm just not steeped enough in the details, but there was a single line, I guess, when they're hammering out the compromise at the end where some senator says:

[West Wing Episode 5.12 excerpt]

*SENATOR STEVE GAINES: If I can tell them you'll settle for small optional private accounts on top of Social Security and raise the...*

[end excerpt]

ELI: I remember that Lawrence O'Donnell, who I love and just had dinner with, he didn't think the savings account should be on top of, he thought they should be replacing a portion of. And it got, it was all very collegial, it got so heated at one point, that just by random chance we hadn't cast that part yet, and he read that senator's role at the read through, and he changed the dialogue [Josh, Hrishi laugh] to reflect the plan that he thought it should be.

JOSH: [crosstalk – unintelligible]

ELI: I mean, yeah, I say this as a great thing about him and the show, is that not only were we a writers' room and a show where you could do a storyline like this, but we were fighting tooth and nail to the last shot of the episode over the details of the plan within the show.

HRISHI: Ahhh, that's great.

JOSH: That's a terrific anecdote. It's that kind of passion behind and in front of the cameras that make this show what it is. I love that.

ELI: Yeah, it's really, it's funny because there's a lot of nerdiness inherent in this, and we tried to keep it as sort of breezy as we could. And there's no question that the full, original script, which I have here, which I could share with your listeners if you want, I think there's a good deal more of these Rina scenes and of these Ryan scenes trying to explain, you know, some of the nuances. You know, obviously some of that had to be trimmed, and some of it should have been trimmed because maybe it was too much, but there was an element of "Let's do, let's try to teach people a few things," potentially.

HRISHI: There's one thing I wanted to highlight was that President Clinton and Newt Gingrich actually did have a secret compromise that they had crafted on Social Security and a number of other things – I'll put a link to this on the, on our website – but there's an excerpt of a book, the book is called *The Pact: Bill Clinton, Newt Gingrich, and the Rivalry that Defined a Generation* by Steven Gillon.

ELI: Interesting

HRISHI: And, uh, there's an excerpt of it that's printed in *U.S. News & World Report*, and it tells the story of how the two of them, behind closed doors, had this bipartisan compromise on where they could cut things down in Social Security to try and make it palatable for both the Democrats and the Republicans, and they actually got there. They were going to do it. They met in October,

and it was supposed to be announced in January. But then the Monica Lewinsky stuff came out, and suddenly the president was so toxic and everything got ripped apart, that Newt Gingrich had to go on the attack with the rest of the Republicans. And this plan that they had made was the casualty of that.

ELI: Well, you know, it's a funny thing, because when I was watching this episode a couple days ago, I thought to myself, you know, not even as a critique of the episode, I was watching some of the conversation between Bartlet and Leo, and Bartlet and Toby, about legacy and thinking, well, is it unseemly when you see a president, when you see Bartlet - who we love and who's our hero in this show, among other heroes - when you see him kind of wondering about his role in history, is that vanity? Is that narcissism? And what was great about the Clinton/Gingrich era, and people think of Gingrich of a demonic figure, and in some ways he is, in some ways he's the founding father of the polarization that we see today. But he also was obsessed with his role in history. And he also, the minute he got elected the House Speaker he saw himself as a grand historical figure. Which was nuts, but it worked, because he thought beyond his, the Republican conference in the House. He actually thought, "I should be making deals with the president to do grand things." And ultimately his speakership ended because too many of the hard-liners, under the leadership of the ultimate hard-liner, originally, thought that he was too much of a deal-maker. But sort of a vanity with an eye toward history is actually the father of compromise a lot of the time.

HRISHI: Huh.

JOSH: Well said. One of the things that intrigues me about the episode is the fragility and the high-stakes nature of being seen publicly as even contemplating compromise.

HRISHI: One of the things that Nancy Altman said to me was that if that deal had gone through with President Clinton and Newt Gingrich at the time, there would have been a heavy political toll to pay.

ELI: Yeah.

HRISHI: Polk in this episode says:

[West Wing Episode 5.12 excerpt]

*GREY POLK: How about the arrogance of trying to reform a \$400 billion program by manhandling senators behind closed doors with no public debate? Without organized labor? Without the AARP?*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And she wrote to me in an email something that I thought was great. Because she saw this compromise as being a failure on everyone's part because cutting Social Security, the thing that Toby is suggesting, that they have to cut deeper, she said that cutting at all is really kind of a failure of this very efficient government program.

ELI: Right.

HRISHI: I love this thing that she wrote to me in an email and I'm going to read it. She wrote: "Valuing compromise and bipartisanship for themselves, improperly, I believe, elevates process over substance. It seems to me that there are times for compromise, and there are times to stand firm. If a fire is raging and one person want to throw water on it, and the other oil, they should not compromise and throw half water and half oil."

ELI: That's a brilliant quote. I love that quote. It's an interesting thing, because I worked on Capitol Hill for a couple of years before I worked in the Clinton White House. I worked for Dick Gephardt, who was the leader of the House Democrats at the time. And who you would have seen as hard left on entitlements, meaning he basically saw somebody like Clinton as being completely irresponsible with something that is a lifeline to like the working class and the middle class, right? And in his view, it's probably quite similar to Nancy Altman's. His view was that, you know, editorial pages love writing that we need some pain here, we have to tighten our belts, we have to cut, raise the retirement age, but if you're caring as Kate Burton's character says in the episode, if you're one of these people whose body is going to wear out by the time you're 65 years old from a life of hard labor, then what looks good on a spreadsheet to a bunch of bean-counters in Washington is total nonsense. You know, Clinton was obviously more of a moderate on that issue and looking to make compromises. But I totally, I probably realistically come down myself closer to the Gephardt view of it. And there's also a view that with Social Security it's always been kind of pay-as-you-go. People use to say in really apocalyptic terms that the trust fund, that the Social Security Trust Fund will go broke by whatever the year was. But Gephardt always used to point out that there's no time in its history that it was solvent for the next hundred years. You're always having to fix it and fund it and adjust it based on demographics, so I do see both sides there.

HRISHI: I wanted to mention one of my favorite lines, early in the episode, one of my favorite lines in this episode that you wrote, the president says:

[West Wing Episode 5.12 excerpt]

*PRESIDENT BARTLET: Social Security is the third rail of American politics; touch it and you die.*

*TOBY: That's 'cause the third rail is where all the power is.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: That's so good!

ELI: Thank you. It's, it has the virtue of being true.

HRISHI: [laughs] And then soon after that, another one of my favorite lines in the episode comes from C.J. When they're talking about the fact that it's a slow news day, she says:

[West Wing Episode 5.12 excerpt]

*C.J.: No news is very, very bad news. If we're not running offense, we're running defense. And if we're playing defense then...there's some clever sports analogy that explains what happens then.*

*JOSH: We're screwed.*

*C.J.: That'll do.*

[end excerpt]

ELI: [laughs] Well, you know, written by somebody – myself – who actually knows no sports analogies. [Hrishi laughs] So, it was, very probably there is the intention to find one, that just never happened.

HRISHI: I think it's so much better!

JOSH: If we're going to play the favorite lines game, then I will, too.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: First of all, I like the just very clever framework altogether that as a result of this close-hold approach between the president and Toby, there is a situation where our heroes are simultaneously on one hand reaching out to Gaines and trying to work with him, and Josh and Will are attacking him.

ELI: Yeah.

JOSH: And it leads to a great moment where Gaines says:

[West Wing Episode 5.12 excerpt]

*SENATOR GAINES: Either you're lying or the left hand doesn't know what the far-left hand is doing.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: [laughs]

ELI: Yeah. That's, that's a stolen line. That was actually a line that Reagan used to, or no, I think Reagan made it as a joke about, I think about the Republican party, but somebody, I believe it was Reagan, had some line about the right hand doesn't know what the far-right hand is doing. So I can't take complete credit there, I just repurposed it.

HRISHI: Hey, great writers steal outright.

ELI: Well, it's true. And another line that I love, that I stole, but I believe I asked permission to steal, from the columnist Michael Kinsley, who I barely knew, but he was such a funny, interesting writer on policy issues. A few times I used bits of things he had written on *The West Wing* and I would email him and say, "May I steal this line?" and he wrote me back once, "Yes, if

you send me VHS tapes of the show, because my wife is a fan but she misses it a lot.” So, so I did do that.

JOSH: Is he still around?

ELI: Kinsley’s still around. Absolutely.

JOSH: I forgot about him.

ELI: Yeah, I think he wrote a book not long ago. But he was in his kind of heyday as a columnist around this time, and I’m pretty sure it was his line about this more, this very widely-cited statistic, that more people under the age of 25 or something think they’ll see a UFO than a Social Security check. And he, I believe, was the one who wrote, but you know, the fact that we ought to be concern about is how many of them think they’ll see a UFO. I thought that was great, and promptly made it my own.

JOSH: [laughs]

HRISHI: Michael Kinsley, by the way, has Parkinson’s and I think that might be part of why we haven’t seen that much of him.

ELI: Yeah. But I saw him, I saw him on Charlie Rose, something that I won’t be saying very often in the future...

JOSH: I wonder whatever happened to that guy...

ELI: Yeah!

HRISHI: [laughs] When you were in the White House, did you ever find that there were these kinds of internal divisions where people were actually working against each other on different sides of an issue, you know, because of a lack of communication they were actually at odds with the other’s goals?

ELI: Yes, all the time. But even beyond that, and it’s not because people weren’t collegial as ultimately Josh and Toby are in the episode. It may come off as a little brittle in the earlier scenes, but this was *the* debate all the time when I worked on Capitol Hill and in the White House, which is basically like: do you want a deal on an issue, or do you want to use the issue to run on? And there were many times, and you know it’s funny because one of the first things I contributed to *The West Wing* when I joined the show in Season 3, was a little lecture that Bruno gives –

HRISH: [crosstalk] Bruno gives, yeah.

ELI: - to Bartlet, about basically why a deal on tobacco was a stupid thing:

[*The West Wing* Episode 3.02 excerpt]

*BRUNO GIANELLI: You don’t want the money. You want the issue. You should have waited until the fall, when the bell rings, and then we hammer them with it. And Kalmbach, Ross,*

*O'Rourke, Stevens, whoever gets nominated has it hanging around their necks, they're nicotine pushers. Plus, you get the money. The sooner you get I know what I'm talking about, and I'm on your side, the sooner your world gets better. Of course you got the money. I'm amazed he didn't send it to you with candy and a stripper. Pennsylvania, Michigan, Ohio. Three swing states you could've brought over with that. That's an election.*

[end excerpt]

ELI: When I was working for Dick Gephardt even, he would be, as the leader of the House Democrats, the one tasked with trying to decide, do we want a big compromise on this issue? Do we want to make a deal, or do we need this issue? You had the Gene Sperlings in the Clinton White House, and the Bruce Reeds, who are policy people and live to achieve things and to, you know, sort of –

HRISHI: Solve problems.

ELI: Yeah, to solve problems. And then you have the Rahm Emanuels and the George Stephanopouloses – and, by the way, all of those guys are very close friends to this day. But whose job, they probably would all say they think about all these things, but who are oriented more toward “Let’s win seats. Let’s rack up the president’s popularity rating so he can do even bigger things.” And when do you fight, and when do you deal? And it’s a constant tension. That’s what’s so interesting about it to me, and that definitely informs this whole episode. We often saw our White House, you know, in the first four seasons, wonderfully so, as a very warm family, and I think part of the attempt here in this episode is to sort of dramatize that, like, there’s two very legitimate points of view. And in fact there’s three, you know, because Polk is sort of representing, as you say Hrishi, the arrogance of doing this, of a great leader doing something behind closed doors and thinking he knows what’s good for the country, right? When the country doesn’t get a say, though if the country got a say all the interest groups would go crazy and you’d never get anything done. And then there’s the tension simply between the Josh point of view, that, like, “we need to win. And only in winning do we sustain our power to do things.” And then Toby’s frustration that, like, “when do we get to the doing?”

HRISHI: Although Josh and Toby do get together and finally work towards the ultimate solution in the end of the episode, throughout the episode, really, before that, he’s pretty much a dick in this episode.

ELI: Josh?

JOSH: Josh?

HRISHI: Josh is, yeah. Even outside of the stuff, even in his first meeting with Will he’s so miserly with his praise, you know? He says, “Hey, the Vice President’s speech to the Detroit Economic Club wasn’t half bad.” It’s like, “Woah, thanks so much.”

JOSH: [laughs]

HRISHI: Like the best he gives him is, you know, like he's like, oh this wonderful classic line, which I was hearing for the first time in context, but I already knew it, that's how famous this line was. I had heard it before ever seeing this episode:

[West Wing Episode 5.12 excerpt]

*WILL: Bob Russell is so dull his Secret Service code name is Bob Russell.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Even that, which kills, Josh says, "That's not bad." [Eli laughs]

JOSH: I think you can see on my exit, too, that Will is like, "Yeah, whatever, thanks for the-" He kind of just nods to say "Okay."

ELI: Well you know I love those Josh/Will scenes, and I think these guys have a great back-and-forth. And I even remember the table read of this episode and how well those, how fun those scenes were to hear. But I think that, it's funny, you're right, I think you're right about Josh. In my mind, it may be a failing of the writing, but in my, I didn't, that wasn't how I intended it. And even in the Josh/Will scenes I think my intention, which, and again, this is not to say I wrote it properly, but my intention was these are two pros. Will is aware of Russell's flaws. They're two professionals and colleagues. And like, so it's sort of like they can both go in there like clinicians, and even a great joke they're going to recognize it the way a pro would recognize it, as opposed to a guy in the third row at, you know, the Laugh Factory. But, you know, I think the way it all plays, you're absolutely right.

JOSH: Also, to some extent, no matter how you write it, with Brad Whitford playing the role, he's going to come off like a dick. [Eli and Hrishu laugh] There's only so much you can do as a writer, Eli.

ELI: [crosstalk] Well, we love Brad. He's our buddy.

HRISHI: [crosstalk] I was thinking that, uhhhhh, this is [laughs]

JOSH: [laughs]

HRISH: Between him, and you know really there's that moment where he, where he's egging Will on and he hands him the phone and he's like "All these reporters with nothing to talk about..." He like kind of giving him the peer pressure, like he pushing him like a drug dealer to be like "Take it, everybody else is doing it." [Eli and Josh laugh] He's got that, and then he's trying to make, you know, coerce Donna into doing this thing that she's against, to spy on her colleague. And I thought, you can really see why Bradley Whitford, besides playing the beloved Josh Lyman, has also been cast as a slimy bad guy so often. [Josh laughs]

ELI: Well, it funny because Brad, who obviously is all of our close friend, and, you know, he's such a great actor, and he's so great in the role as Josh, but I became aware later on that early in his career he was kind of a jerk in all these things, you know, in [crosstalk] *Adventures in Babysitting*,



HRISHI: [crosstalk] *Revenge of the Nerds*

ELI: Happy-, *Revenge of the Nerds II*, Happy Madison- *Billy Madison*,

HRISHI: [crosstalk] *Billy Madison*

ELI: Happy Madison is, I guess, Sandler's company or something. But then he I think *The West Wing* sort of retyped him as a great guy character and he did a lot of those roles. But now with *Get Out* -

HRISHI: [crosstalk] He's back

ELI: Yeah, yeah, Bad Brad is back.

JOSH: He's back to what comes naturally.

ELI: That's – [Eli and Hrishi laugh]

HRISHI: It is gre- , but , but both in this episode and, like, in you know, *Get Out*, he seems like he's your friend – but he's really trying to do something, well, in the, certainly in the case of Donna, he's trying to get you to do something that is not so great.

ELI: Well, that's true.

HRISHI: [crosstalk] For his own, for his own purposes.

ELI: [crosstalk] In that moment, that is absolutely true.

ELI: And I think that maybe the other thing that I maybe was trying to get at here, was that Josh and Toby should have been working together from the start. I mean, maybe it wouldn't have worked out, but only when they get together, the two of them as two halves of a whole, actually are the ones who get it done.

HRISHI: Yeah. Normally in TV shows and in movies I get very annoyed by a plot device where if two characters could simply communicate, get on the same page, the problem would be solved immediately.

ELI: Right.

HRISHI: And it's only a matter of a lack of communication. But that doesn't happen here, because it is actually part of the, the close-hold is the part of the entire story. The whole plot can only happen without telling everyone else.

ELI: That's right.

HRISHI: So I thought that was really wonderfully established and avoided that entirely.

ELI: Right. And it's an order that comes down from the president and, because of this very real-world thing, which Nancy Altman was talking to you about, if you were spotted at a restaurant

and overheard trying to make a deal on Social Security, that's enough to write the ad copy right there, you know.

HRISHI: Yeah, yeah.

JOSH: This leads me to ask, and I'm going to challenge you, Eli, if Toby's marching order is to operate sub rosa, why does he approach Gaines in person, outside?

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: Why didn't he pick up the phone?

ELI: Well, that's true. Maybe he should have done that. I think I was almost imagining this is not a guy, you know, this is a big Republican senator and he hates Jed Bartlet and that's probably a phone call that doesn't get taken. But in your defense against me, that's not a point that's ever made.

JOSH: And in my defense to you, you have limited real estate.

ELI: Well, that's true, but also I had probably needed it to be something that was then seen, you know, like, it kind of gets out, so I needed to punch a hole in my own Toby logic from the start.

JOSH: One of the things that I really liked about this whole close-hold aspect of the story is that I think for the first time we've seen what previously would have been unthinkable: the idea that President Bartlet would circumvent Leo, his absolute right-hand man. And as a result, I really like the Leo that we see in this episode. It's a rare episode where we don't get a little bit of a sparkle in John Spencer's eye, and a little bit of a smile at some point. But Leo is pissed, and having none of it, and I like that.

ELI: And I think that, I hope this is clear to fans of the show, maybe it isn't, but there's a lot of love for Leo in this, in that I think Bartlet is saying to Toby: you alone can go do this, no one else is connected to it, I get to throw you overboard at the end of the day if this doesn't work. And implicit in that is if my Chief of Staff is brought in on it, then it's actually a White House dictate, you know, and then we really can be in a lot of trouble. But it's a funny thing, because I do remember that John Wells always had a lot to say about Leo, and he did in this episode in particular, because John, who, you know, has been running giant hit TV shows since he was 11 years old probably, you know, he really understands what it is to be a boss and a leader, and the burdens of that. And I always remember in these episodes, in these kind of episodes, he would always have some perspective or thought or line from Leo, like he seemed to have a real intuitive understanding of that role.

HRISHI: Huh. That's fascinating.

ELI: The other thing that I want to point out, and I'm going to still try to find it. I looked for it yesterday and couldn't find it, in case you guys were interested in sharing it, is that I wrote Toby's resignation letter.

HRISHI: Ohhhhh...

ELI: We were filming the episode, and Richard and I were talking, and I said, "Why don't I write a real letter and you can have a real letter?" Because he's such an intense actor, you know, always deep-diving into this. And I wrote it, and I don't remember what was in it right now, but I know –

JOSH: You mean you have the actual document?

ELI: You know, I have a hard copy of it somewhere in a box, but I've been looking on computers to see if I have it. Because I remember being moved when I wrote it, you know, not like by my greatness or something, but like, "Oh my God, this is—" you know it felt like, here's this guy who loves the president and loves this job, and basically what an honor it was to serve you kind of thing. And I wrote this letter, and I gave it to Richard, and I said, "I think this is the best writing in this episode." And he read it and he said, "Yeah, you're right."

HRISHI: Aw, if you get it -

JOSH: You do, you HAVE to find it.

ELI: I wanted to.

HRISHI: You have to find it and then we have to get Richard to read it for this episode.

JOSH: I was just going to say that!

ELI: Ohhhh, that would be great.

HRISHI: Awww

ELI: Let me try to find it. I'll bet I could find it in a box in the shed of my old house, and I would go look for it, but let me see if I have just a digital copy somewhere, which I should have.

JOSH: It's going to be *The West Wing Episode of Hoarders* and just have cameras come over to your place.

HRISHI: [laughs]

ELI: Oh my God. I mean, I have, you know, I, now all those *West Wing*, I've probably got ten boxes stuffed with documents and they're all in the shed behind my old house, which I'm renting out. But, yeah, I definitely win that, whatever prize they give on that show.

HRISHI: I think we have a week.

ELI: Ok. I'll move heaven and earth to see what I can do.

HRISHI: Awesome.

JOSH: Clear your calendar, Eli.

HRISHI: So, the scene where Rina comes in and tells Toby, while he's in the conversation with Leo, that the president wants him -

ELI: Yeah.

HRISHI: - in the residence and not Leo. The thunderstruck -

ELI: [crosstalk] Yeah.

HRISHI: - look of Leo in that -

ELI: [crosstalk] Yeah.

HRISHI: - moment is so great –

JOSH: [crosstalk] It's fantastic.

HRISHI: - as he starts to, it starts to dawn on him, you know. He's like, oh Josh is spewing conspiracy theories –

ELI: [crosstalk] Right, right.

HRISHI: - but then he's realizes that they're true -

ELI: Right.

HRISHI: - and he's been out-manuevered and, that moment of realization is really wonderful.

JOSH: I wrote down, "Josh's paranoia transfers to Leo and you can see the exact moment."

HRISHI: Yeah.

ELI: Yeah.

HRISHI: Toby, like Josh Lyman said to Amy, "you went over my head and you did it behind my back."

JOSH: Heh.

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Quite the contortionist am I.

ELI: [crosstalk] So true, so true.

HRISHI: Ok, let's talk for a second about casting in this episode. First of all, I'm starting to realize that everyone who's been on *Scandal* was first on *The West Wing*.

ELI: This is very true.

JOSH: There is no question that Shonda Rhimes is a fan of *The West Wing*.

HRISHI: Yeah. But, you have Vice President Sally Langston from *Scandal* –

ELI: Yeah, and she's great in this. I remember actually, because isn't she, Josh, a kind of a great stage actor from New York?

JOSH: Yeah. She is incredible. She is one of the great, she is one of five people to have been nominated for two Tonys in the same season in different categories.

ELI: Really? Really?

JOSH: Yes, Best Actress, I guess, Tony for playing Hedda Gabler, and then in the same season was nominated as a Featured Actress in the revival of *The Elephant Man*.

ELI: Wow.

JOSH: It was in 2002.

ELI: Well, that's not long before this. What I do remember about the shooting of this episode, I don't know, Josh, if you remember this, well you, of course you would just know this, she just showed up and was like friends already with the whole *West Wing* cast. Like, she knew a lot of the cast from New York theater. So that was kind of fun to see.

JOSH: Yeah. She is a hoot. She is just a fantastic actor and just one of the great, interesting, funny, easy people to work with. She's a delight.

ELI: Yeah, my memory of her was very positive.

HRISHI: We also have Joaquim de Almeida as Carlos Carrio from the Argentinian consulate. And people may also recognize him as the bad guy in *Fast Five* and the bad guy in *Desperado* and the bad guy in *Clear and Present Danger*, but here he plays, he has a brief but memorable exchange with C.J. where he manages to completely, umm....

ELI: Disarm her?

HRISHI: Yes, he disarms her.

ELI: Arouse her?

HRISHI: [laughs] And we get this, you know where she's not paying attention, and then suddenly she looks up and she just, she sort of comes undone. And I wanted to read this quote from Norman Jewison, who was the brilliant director of *In the Heat of the Night*, and *Fiddler on the Roof*, and *Moonstruck*, and a lot of other stuff.

JOSH: *Jesus Christ, Superstar*.

HRISHI: *Jesus Christ, Superstar*.

ELI: Oh, wow.

HRISHI: He cast Joaquim de Almeida in a movie called *Only You*, a Marisa Tomei/Robert Downey, Jr. movie that he made. Here's a quote from him, "Howard Foyer, the casting director said, 'Joaquim's not that tall. He's not that handsome.' And he was supposed to be playing this sort of Italian lover character. And Norman Jewison said, 'But listen to his voice. There's a macho-ness, especially when he lowers it, whispers, leans across the table and pours you

another glass of wine. He can be extremely intimate with his voice.” And I felt like that was the case here. I mean, really, it’s, the intimacy in that scene is so much because how he plays it vocally.

ELI: Yeah, as I sort of re-watched it and thought about it after all these years, there’s a real true absurdity to the whole C.J. storyline you know-

HRISHI: [laughs]

ELI: There’s a cabbage on her desk, and people thinks she wants to adopt a child, and I mostly look at that and think, what was I thinking? But, it’s funny because that’s a very real concept in politics, the notion that you’re always trying to put out, sort of hard news coming out of the White House so that the White House press corps isn’t left to their own mischievous devices. There was a day, and I’m sure it was one of the slower news days in the Clinton White House, where somebody got a rumor from somewhere that the Clintons were thinking of adopting a child. So, it’s funny, all these writers on the show, brand new people joining the show for the first time, kept pitching to Aaron, well, you know, C.J. is, you know, she’s kind of getting into her 30s, and, you know, she’s- we see in her first scene in the pilot she’s trying to meet a guy at the gym, and you know, is she worried about her biological clock, and it is time for her to...and Aaron couldn’t have been less interested. And said somewhere, I think, just in an interview I read, that basically, like, these characters live in a world they construct. Like, they don’t want to have a baby, they don’t want to be – they want to be doing THIS. They want to be in this White House serving this president. So I thought I would write the response to those pitches as a storyline, which is through the weirdness of, there’s nothing else to write about, and this change in adoption law, somehow people think the Bartlets want to adopt a baby. And it kind of then is, she’s able to fool this reporter into thinking she wants to have a baby – all leading to her basically saying, “I’m completely happy with my life.” So anyway, that’s the genesis of that, and in the middle she’s aroused by a cabbage-bearing Argentine ambassador with a sultry voice.

JOSH: You almost have her saying, “he wanted to toss my salad,” which would have been really, really dirty.

[Hrishi and Eli laugh]

JOSH: For a second, I thought you were going there.

ELI: Yeah, it’s, I’m not sure I knew that phrase then, but it definitely crossed my mind when I re-watched the episode.

HRISHI: [laughing] she says:

[West Wing Episode 5.12 excerpt]

*C.J.: Oh, it’s just some guy at the Argentine embassy who apparently wants to make me a salad.*

*TOBY: Huh.*

[end excerpt]

ELI: Yes

HRISHI: I like that, that is a good...

JOSH: [laughing] Whooo, borderline

ELI: It was not meant, at the time that was not intended as euphemistic of anything.

JOSH: This is pre-Urban Dictionary.

ELI: Exactly right.

JOSH: I was wondering if you had a little shout out to Aaron in the Josh/Will scene, I think the first Josh/Will scene, Josh says:

[West Wing Episode 5.12 excerpt]

*JOSH: Telling people you're dull just removes all doubt.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I was wondering if that was some sort of hat-tip to Aaron, who wrote a play called, *Removing all Doubt*, which is a reference to the line: "Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt."

ELI: Oh, interesting.

JOSH: Attributed variously to Mark Twain and Abraham Lincoln.

ELI: It wasn't. I'll say on one hand, that when I worked for Al Gore, who was like Bob Russell, sometimes seen as kind of stiff and wooden and whatever, we used to always gather and write and solicit jokes to open his speeches. And one thing he always ruled out as a category of joke, you know, even though we would sometimes get pitches on this from people, were jokes about how boring the speech he was about to give was going to be. Because he, he kind of explained to me that it's going to plant that idea in their head, and then they will think it's dull. He'd done a lot of thinking about, kind of, self-deprecating humor, and what worked and what didn't.

HRISHI: The joke about Bob Russell's code name, his Secret Service code name is Bob Russell, that is a lift from Al Gore, right?

ELI: Absolutely, yes. That is a joke that Al Gore used to tell about himself, yeah.

HRISHI: And did he come up with that joke, or did you write that for him?

ELI: I didn't write that joke for him. It was a joke that pre-dated my time working for him. And I'm pretty sure that it appeared in a column written by Al Hunt, and that it was just a line he wrote, you know, Al Gore is so, you know, boring his Secret Service code name might as well be Al Gore. And before I worked for Al Gore, it just ended up in his, his own speeches. [laughter] And

there were, there was a whole, Gore used to do a whole run of what he would call “stiff jokes” and it included, you know, Al Gore is so stiff, you know, racks buy their suits off him. There were a whole bunch of them, and it would end with Gore saying, “And every time I hear another one of these stiff jokes, I, you know, I have the same reaction: very funny, Tipper.” [Josh laughs] His wife. So, anyway.

HRISHI: That’s pretty good, yeah.

ELI: You know, it’s, I will say some of them are genuinely funny, but you have a lower bar as a Constitutional Officer [Josh and Hrishu laugh]. Every comedy club should be packed with them, we’d all be rolling on the floor.

HRISHI: But I do think the distinction is interesting and important, you know, that it’s not that he strayed away from self-deprecating jokes about his stiffness, but he was keen not to have them about the speeches he was delivering.

ELI: Yes. No. No, it’s an interesting thing because- So when I started working for Gore, which was in 1997, the stiff jokes were kind of the meat-and-potatoes of how he would warm up an audience, I guess, before he would launch into his, you know, speech on, you know, tort reform or whatever it was about. He moved away from them, and actually for a number of reasons. One was that, maybe people don’t remember this, and I’m sure very few people are thinking deep thoughts about the trajectory of the Al Gore campaign for president, but when he was running for president and he was giving five speeches a day, and kind of had developed a stump speech that he could just give without a prepared text or anything, he could be great. I mean, he could be loose, he could be funny. And at a certain point, weirdly enough, I remember having a conversation at the time with Jay Leno about this. I used to be sort of the conduit between the Gore office and a lot of these late-night shows if he ever went on them, and I remember Leno saying to me, you know, that every night on *The Tonight Show* that he felt he had a focus group about politics. Because he could tell what people laughed at and what they believed, and he said that the Al Gore stiff and boring stuff had stopped working well. Because Gore was probably for a period of months, you know, perceived on the trail and in news coverage to be looser and to be more dynamic. There was a *Law Review* article at Clinton’s second inaugural, Al Gore, the Vice President is sworn in first, and then I think Jesse Norman sang “America the Beautiful” or something, and she went long and so it was later than 12:01PM when Bill Clinton was actually sworn in. So there was a legal scholar who wrote an article claiming that Al Gore had been president for five minutes, because he’d been sworn in already and Clinton hadn’t yet, and his term had expired. So Gore used to do a riff about what he called “The Five Minute Presidency,” where he would explain this concept and then say, “And may I say it was a great five minutes for me, and for America.” [Josh and Hrishu laugh] And he would do this whole thing, ending with how his presidential library is, like, a shoebox in Nashville, or something. [Josh and Hrishu laugh] So these were the riffs that he did when I started working for him, and then we slowly buried them and did other things.

HRISHI: I love this line from the president towards the end:

[West Wing Episode 5.12 excerpt]



LEO: *You can't will yourself a legacy.*

PRESIDENT BARTLET: *You think there's a room at the Smithsonian for guys who never even tried?*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: You know, even the idea of a shoebox-sized Presidential library, it's a great motivator. There isn't a ton of President Bartlet in this episode.

ELI: Yeah.

HRISHI: But every one of his scenes has, they're really dense. I think we get a lot of insight into him and it's really wonderful.

ELI: Oh, thank you for that. I worked, really, in a second-term White House. I was in the last few months of Clinton's first term, and, you know, but just getting my feet wet. And so much of what's in this was really my experience of a second term, and what you're mentioning, Hrishi, is this idea that, like, well, you're trained as a politician and you're trained to preserve power, to preserve your poll numbers, to preserve the sort of battering rams that are the bread and butter of politics. And then you enter this one moment in the twilight of your career when actually none of that is in your interest anymore. But it still may be in the interest of everybody below you, and everybody running on your party brand, and it's a real tension, but it's, politically speaking, it's mortality. It's Bartlet looking at his own mortality and realizing, like, you don't realize it until you get up there that this is ending, and what was it all for, and it's the deepest thing I think in politics.

HRISHI: Hm. Do you miss it?

ELI: Politics? Like, working in it? I do, actually. Not that I don't think episodic television is very, very important to the world, no. I loved my time in politics and I'm still immersed in it in a lot of ways. I was in Washington for seven years, and it felt like a lifetime. And, it kind of, I think, I still have a version of PTSD about it, which is to say the hours are so brutal. It was a rough, crazy life with more extraordinary experiences in one day that I probably have in a year now. And it was amazing, and I wouldn't trade it, but they really are like dog years. I don't know that I could do it again. I love it, and it will always be part of who I am. But I will say that I feel like a lot of these stories on *The West Wing* in the Aaron era, and in the post-Aaron era, were a form of therapy for me, without even realizing it, you know. Getting out some of these conflicts, and also being able to tell some of the weird things that happened to me, and change the endings to happy ones, because that isn't how it usually went down. Everybody should have a kind of an all-consuming sort of mind-blowing job, and then work on a TV show about that exact job.

JOSH: [laughs] Yeah, it's pretty interesting. I never really thought about it that way, the therapeutic nature that you walked into just the right post-government job.

ELI: Oh my God. And to be able to - little things that you read or heard or that people said to you, you know, you'd just be sitting there, I would be sitting there writing a scene for *The West*

*Wing* and just remember, “oh this person said this to me in the hallway of the West Wing.” You know, just things would come back to you, not to mention you’d be on the set. Only the Roosevelt Room and the Oval Office, but those two rooms on the set of the show looked enough like the real rooms that you’d sometimes think, “Where am I right now?” And I don’t know that we’ve ever talked about it, I think it was during season four that Al Gore came to the set to film a sketch for *Saturday Night Live* with the cast of the show. And the sketch, the premise of the sketch was Al Gore coming to visit the set of the TV show *The West Wing* and he walks into the Oval Office, and is blown away from how much it looks like the real one, and then they can’t get him to leave. [Hrishi laughs] And I brought him into the fake Oval Office, and he actually was completely blown away. It was sort of, the sketch was sort of happening, it was just, it was a weird time. In the best way.

HRISHI: This is great. This is good, um, this is good reinforcement of our idea that after we finish this podcast that we’re just going to start from the beginning again, and this time we won’t make all the mistakes that we made along the way.

JOSH: That’s right.

HRISHI: [crosstalk] We’ll do a revisionist version of *The West Wing Weekly*.

ELI: Or... [crosstalk] here’s what I think we should really do, is that I think when the podcast is over, the three of us just create a TV show about the podcast.

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: I’m in.

HRISHI: No one will watch it, but I’m down.

JOSH: Which I will, which I will read for, and not be cast in. [Hrishi laughs]

ELI: No, all parts will be played by the original.

HRISHI: [laughs]

JOSH: Nick Kroll will play my role. [Eli and Hrishi laugh]

HRISHI: Nick Kroll and Kal Penn are *The West Wing Weekly* [laughs]

ELI: Oh my God! Kal Penn!

JOSH: [laughs]

ELI: I love Kal Penn!

HRISHI: Well, until that happens, we’ll be back next week. Eli, thank you so much for joining us. It’s a pleasure as always to talk to you.

ELI: The pleasure’s all mine.

HRISHI: In real life and even on Skype like this.

JOSH: And you burned another 5,000 *West Wing Weekly* frequent flyer miles. [Hrishi laughs]  
People should follow Eli on Twitter. It's @eliattie.

ELI: That's exactly right.

JOSH: That's easy. E-L-I-A-T-T-I-E

HRISHI: On Instagram, Eli is @eli.attie. You can follow this podcast, if you don't already, on Twitter @westwingweekly and on Instagram @thewestwingweekly. And let us know what you thought of this episode. You can weigh in at thewestwingweekly.com. We'll put up some resources, we're going to get some bonus materials from Eli, we'll have a link to Nancy Altman's new book *The Truth about Social Security*. If you want to follow Social Security Works on Twitter they're @ssworks, and, you know, their mission is to fight the retirement income crisis by protecting and expanding Social Security. So if you want to learn more about that, follow her.

JOSH: Thanks, as always, to Zach McNees and Margaret Miller, without whom we could not make this podcast.

HRISHI: I will also put up a link to Margaret's wonderful audio trailer and more about her book that she co-wrote.

JOSH: *The West Wing Weekly* is a proud member of Radiotopia, a selection of fine, fine podcasts about which you can find out more at radiotopia.fm.

HRISHI: And get yourself a lapel pin. Go to thewestwingweekly.com/merch.

JOSH: That's right.

HRISHI: OK.

JOSH: OK.

ELI: What's next?

[Outro Music]