

The West Wing Weekly  
7.12: "Duck and Cover"  
Guest: Eli Attie

[Intro Music]

JOSH: Hello and welcome back, you are listening to The West Wing Weekly. I am Joshua Malina.

HRISHI: That's right, you are listening to the dulcet tones of Joshua Malina.

JOSH: Was that particularly dulcet or was it just because we haven't talked in a while?

HRISHI: Well it's a reference to the episode we are about to discuss, Josh ...

[West Wing Episode 7.12 excerpt]

*WILL: The dulcet tones of Will Bailey, get your souvenir programs in the lobby.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Oh, very clever. Yeah, I guess that I forgot that I speak about myself in the third person.

HRISHI: Dulcet-ly even!

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: And I am Hrishikesh Hirway. Today we are talking about episode 12 from season seven, it's called "Duck and Cover."

JOSH: It was written by Eli Attie, it was directed by Christopher Misiano and it first aired on January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2006.

HRISHI: In this episode, there is a crisis at a nuclear power plant in California sending the Bartlet administration into action, forced to make difficult choices. It sends the Santos campaign into the difficult choice of inaction as they wait for the political fallout from potential nuclear fallout. And Senator Vinick is caught somewhere in between, as his present and past choices box him in further and further.

JOSH: That sounds good.

HRISHI: Do you know what else sounds good? Our special guest today.

JOSH: Tell me. I can't take the suspense.

HRISHI: Suspense is the order of the day, and we are joined by our suspense creator, writer Eli Attie.

JOSH: Ah, that is why I see him on Skype.

ELI: I don't know if my tones are dulcet, but I know how to type the word apparently.

JOSH: This is a terrific episode. I feel like this is the best of what *The West Wing* can do. I like when ... although I also love when there are C, D and E plots, I also like when an episode is a little bit more concentrated around a singular, really strong A plot. There is arguably a B plot going on in this episode as well. But it is really taken up largely with everybody focused on the same event and it also does what *The West Wing* does so well is that real life high stakes events, also played out against, political calculations.

HRISHI: Yeah, one of the things that I think is a great, classic *West Wing* trope that is executed really well here, is that there is this crisis and yet we never see it. And despite that we still feel the tension and there have been other plots throughout the series where sometimes ... you know, that is the set up and when it is really successful we feel it and when it hasn't been as successful we think 'ok it feels a little bit diluted you know, just having this all exist somewhere on another continent or just off camera' but I think you did an incredible job, Eli, here.

ELI: Thank you so much. I took a few moments and combed through my little archive of notes and files on this episode and I found a couple of pages of notes from the writers' room before I even started conceiving of this. One of the things it said at the top is 'can only see disaster on TV', you know, within the show. Some TV shows have budgets for lavish location scenes. I think this show, as you guys know, had pretty lavish sets on lavish sound stages and was expensive enough just staying mostly where it was, and that is the trick of it, fuelling the emotion just on our characters. And I think that works because you had Josh Malina, and Martin Sheen and Allison Janney and such incredible actors, and I really mean this, you see the weight of these life and death things on their faces. They are not cavalier about it, and they are deep actors, it is just true.

HRISHI: Well speaking of the cast, can we start with one actor who joins us for this episode who isn't part of the normal cast but who I think does a terrific job, J.K. Simmons.

ELI: Yes, he did such a terrific job. I was on set for this episode as I tended to be when I had written the episode. We basically had two cabinet level people coming in and briefing Bartlet for those scenes and it was J.K. as I believe, the head of the nuclear regulatory commission...

[West Wing Episode 7.12 excerpt]

*HARRY RAVITCH [J.K. SIMMONS]: The longer we wait, the more chance of an explosion and God knows how much radiation shooting into the atmosphere.*

[end excerpt]

ELI: And at the time I guess he had been on a bunch of other TV shows but we barely knew who he was and of course, now he is you know, an Oscar winning toast of Hollywood.

HRISHI: That is so interesting because at that point he had already played, J. Jonah Jameson in *Spiderman* which I thought was just a piece of fantastic casting when that came out. Do you remember that?

ELI: No, I was just going to say, I guess I don't really see those kinds of movies too often, superhero movies. So it may be that casting felt very lucky to get him and I was just unaware of who he was. That was probably the actor's...

JOSH: Oh I see, you and Scorsese don't think [Eli laughs] ... those aren't cinema to Eli and Marty. I think J.K. had also played Vernon Schillinger already on Oz.

HRISHI: Yes, he had already done Oz.

ELI: Although Oz was a terrific show with a terrific cast, but I think very few people really saw ... it was kind of right before *Sopranos* and *Sex and the City* made HBO this kind of must have thing. At least in my mind.

JOSH: And although I get frequently razzed for bringing up the New York production of *A Few Good Men*, in which I appeared, it should be noted that J.K., or Kim Simmons, as I knew him then, understudied Ron Perlman in of course the key role of Colonel Jessup, went on many times as Colonel Jessup, was unbelievably fantastic. He ultimately left the show when Ron Perlman left the show and they didn't give the role to J.K. which I think we were all shocked by. He left and went on to greater fame and fortune, but he was pretty amazing in that role as you can imagine, if you know that show.

HRISHI: That is so interesting. So you knew him as Kim?

JOSH: Yeah, J.K. or Kim Simmons.

HRISHI: Oh I thought his name was Just Kidding Simmons.

ELI: [laughs]

JOSH: He has a sister named LOL ... [laughing]

HRISHI: J.K. and his sister LOL actually, together, they are the ones that created the Harry Potter series, under their pseudonym J.K. Lolling.

JOSH: Boom! [laughs] It's good. While we are on J.K., there is one incredibly great moment, I think, that he has, which is not, I am guessing, scripted, or perhaps it was but it is a non-dialogue moment when they are talking about having vented the steam and checking the millirems, there is 569 millirems above the stack and we know that the acceptable level is 500 and it is just a quick little facial tic that registers on J.K.'s face that is kind of fantastic, it is one of those intangibles that on another actor might not work, but he just has this great organic reaction to the bad news.

ELI: Wait, I'm sorry Josh, I have a question, what is a non-dialogue moment?

JOSH: [laughs]

ELI: Just kidding. Just kidding. No, that wasn't scripted at all. He is incredible.

JOSH: He is a great actor. Maybe this isn't the right time but I feel like at a certain point we are clearly going to talk about the HBO series *Chernobyl* with its apparently near limitless budgets, and of course, I thought often of that series, which I thought was wonderful, and contrasting it with this episode and I thought one of the really successful things about this episode of *The West Wing* was how suspenseful and intense it was even with situations that would have been shown and were, on a mini series like *Chernobyl*, that just couldn't be done on *The West Wing* and I think much of that is due to your writing.

HRISHI: And yet, neither show apparently has enough of a budget to afford Dulé Hill ever appearing on screen. [Josh laughs] Where is Charlie?

JOSH: [laughs] That is the classic musical, you won't be familiar with it, Hrishi, but it is a musical based on the Brandon Thomas play *Charlie's Aunt*. It's quite good.

ELI: I will say this, I love *Chernobyl* the mini-series, I thought it was a masterpiece and you know, it felt like a documentary, and it was so tense and dark and beautifully written and acted. Even in *Chernobyl* with their much bigger budgets I noticed, as I was watching it that yes, you would see the men go in to drain the water from whatever it was and to do some of these things, but those were generally not the people we were following. In very rare instances. So it was as if we had simply cut to a scene of these two guys going in and trying to vent the steam, or whatever it was. That said, if we had had the budget to do that, we would have. I was amazed when I watched *Chernobyl*, having only a dim memory of the science of this episode and how many little pieces of the science actually were the same. And just right before coming on with you guys, as I was looking through the pages I had on my computer of notes from this episode, I actually had a big memo from our researcher at the time, there was also a memo from Lauren Schmidt who was on the writing staff ... but helped enormously on this episode, breaking apart the science ... and it was all about Chernobyl and it was the history of that incident and things we could borrow from that and this was pieced together from a number of different nuclear mishaps. So you know, I guess, happily there are just limited ways these things can blow up.

HRISHI: I just wanted to note one other thing I was impressed by about this episode which is given the density about how much science and information does get spoken by characters at various points and that we don't see the actual power plant at any point, I never felt lost. In terms of what was happening or what the general danger and stakes were. Even with all the jargon that was being thrown around. And that, I think, is noteworthy.

ELI: That is a kind of ... I think that is something that Aaron Sorkin, you know, sort of set the great template for with this show. Which is if the thrust of the scene is strong enough. That Bartlet is going to need to send somebody possibly to their death or he is going to decide whether to tell the public what is going on and create mass panic or withhold that information then you can bury people in acronyms, and it is a good idea to do that sometimes because it just makes it feel more grounded and real, but if you always know the scene comes down to one crystal decision or moment, it is hard to get lost because that is what you are looking for. You are looking in Martin Sheen's eyes and you are looking to see the weight on his brow.

HRISHI: Actually one of the things that I love about this episode, one of the toughest moments I think does connect back to something that Aaron Sorkin did really well, and what you were saying about Chernobyl and these engineers who had to actually go in, the moment when the president had to send in these two characters, who we never actually meet, James Cook and Mark LaRoche, it so painful, because he knows that he is basically giving them a death sentence, or at least a life of illness and complications and misery and he has to do it.

[West Wing Episode 7.12 excerpt]

*HARRY: It has already been 17 minutes, I didn't want them in more than 15.*

*HAYES: If they shut the other valve, we are out of the woods.*

*HARRY: It'll take too long. This is an extremely toxic environment.*

*C.J.: If more gas pours out of that structure so is most of Southern California.*

*HAYES: Plus they are already in there, you want to expose another team?*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: So then you have to balance this decision between do you just make things worse for people who have already been exposed or do you ... there is just no good choice there. And then of course ultimately James Cook dies of radiation poisoning. And to me, everything about this felt like an echo of the scene at the end of the State Dinner, way back in season one when the president is on the phone with Harold Lewis on the USS Hickory and he knows that this man is about to die in the path of this hurricane. It felt familiar in that way without at all feeling like a repetition or anything like that. And without seeing those characters or ever having any direct experience, they have a huge impact on the episode and on our characters.

ELI: I think it is fair to say that in a sense, this episode wouldn't exist without that episode and so many of those early Aaron episodes where the Bartlet character is cemented as who he is. Because ... it is kind of amazing, certainly in light of today's politics and look at the three central characters here, Vinick, Bartlet and Santos, who all are taking responsibility in different ways. Santos doesn't have much to take, I suppose, but certainly Vinick and Bartlet are not about to pass this ball. And for an episode called "Duck and Cover", none of them do that. Bartlet basically says 'I am the czar, I am the point person on this' and then he owns it and he has to make these horrible choices and he does unflinchingly and Vinick never really tries to sort of pass the buck And I guess it is really a story about responsibility.

[West Wing Episode 7.12 excerpt]

*VINICK: We can't control the politics of this, not even close! I'll talk to the president about his speech, but I am the Senator from California and I am going to make a statement before we get on that plane.*

[end excerpt]

ELI: These are the characters that already existed and certainly Bartlet and his team, but him above them, he was just not going to ... he was not going to withhold any information, he was going to, you know, be as straight and he could and make those hard decisions. And it makes you hunger for that now even just looking at this episode again, to me its ... it was probably rare then, it feels rarer now.

JOSH: By the way, at the risk of second guessing Bartlet's decisions and maybe suggesting that I am wiser than he, I wrote down as I watched it 'yeah, expose another team'.

ELI: Yeah sure.

JOSH: I lean towards, let those guys get out ...

ELI: Yeah, it might not have been the wrong call. Maybe if they had been in there under 15 minutes ... I think it is ... it was designed to be ... and I am sure it was Lauren Hissrick who designed it, helping me on this episode, but it was designed to be a scenario in which there just wasn't a good answer. Cause you know, he would have picked the good answer if there was a good answer.

JOSH: Yeah, that is the whole episode in a greater sense, is all built around that theme and around that question. One thing, also, I did respect out of Bartlet in the opening scene is unlike the Soviet leadership his decision, 15 minutes after being briefed himself, he was going to have something to say to the country.

ELI: Yeah, and the show had certainly dealt with this before. I think there was a storyline several seasons earlier about mad cow disease, where they were getting into the debate about 'do we tell people, will there be a panic, what is the right thing, what is the responsible

thing?’ But you know, one thing that I wanted to mention that may be only of interest to me, but I guess four seasons earlier, season three, my first season on the show, I think I actually went on the podcast episode about the episode “Stirred,” which was this episode where ... the episode was written and filmed and came back really short and Aaron was in bed with a really bad cold. And it was the first time I actually wrote scenes directly that were just shot, more or less as I wrote them. And one of the things I did was I wrote the “Duck and Cover” monologue that is in this episode for Martin Sheen for that episode. And it was to talk about, I think there was a rig that was carrying uranium, that went through some tunnel in maybe Idaho or something and there was some ... I don’t even really remember the storyline but ... that was always something my mother talked about to me. Just the duck and cover drills she did as a little kid. It just seemed to symbolize to me the absolutely worst thinking on nuclear power, because it is not going to help you. It is all just kind of a diversion to make people think there is a way to be safe. It is the opposite of what everyone does in this episode. And it ended up not going in that episode because we didn’t need all that extra time and I always had it in my mind, so word for word it was just put into this episode.

HRISHI: That is so interesting. Yeah, you can see the limb of the tree where those lines might have been grafted on. There is an exchange between the president and Leo in “Stirred” where they are talking about trying to respond to the tunnel ...

[West Wing Episode 3.17 excerpt]

*LEO: FEMA’s indicated they are going to make it the Governor’s call and the Governor has indicated he is going to want you to step in.*

*PRESIDENT BARTLET: I should set a ransom. I’ll tell you what the radiation levels are but first I want your electoral votes. Or is that a bad strategy?*

[end excerpt]

ELI: Yeah, I think that is the scene, actually.

HRISHI: Well you held this one in your pocket for a pretty long time then.

ELI: There just needed to be an opportunity. We hadn’t really done a storyline ... I would have just given it to some other writer, if they had wanted it, if something had come up. But ... it’s an interesting issue that we hadn’t really gotten too deeply into until this.

JOSH: Have you ever cross pollinated? Have you taken something you had left over from *The West Wing* and stuck it in another show?

ELI: You know, there is a line in a *West Wing* episode that I wrote, “Constituency of One”, which was really the first script I wrote post Aaron ...

[West Wing Episode 5.05 excerpt]

*AMY: So this guy calls his mother, he says ‘Mom, how are you?’, she says ‘I am terrible, I haven’t eaten in 38 days.’ ‘Why haven’t you eaten in 38 days?’ ‘I didn’t want my mouth to be full in case you should call.’*

[end excerpt]

ELI: It ended up in a *Studio 60* episode that I had my name on ...

[excerpt from *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*]

WOMAN: A Jewish guy calls his mother, okay, with his mouth full ...

MAN: The Jewish guy doesn't have his mouth full ...

WOMAN: The mother has her mouth full ...

WOMAN 2: Nobody has their mouth full.

WOMAN: Damn!

[end excerpt]

ELI: I think I had just completely forgotten it had been in that *West Wing* script and stuck it in there.

HRISHI: I have a big picture question for you but before I get to that part, I want to go back to something you said in terms of a more microscopic question. You said, 'I am sure that it was Lauren Hissrick's idea to design this in a way where there was no good outcome.' She is not explicitly credited as a co-writer or anything like that. What makes you sure that it might have been something that she designed?

ELI: Lauren is so fantastic and she is running her own show on Netflix right now, *Witcher*, which premieres I think very soon. She had really just graduated from researcher to staff writer, not long before this, and was so good and so smart that she kind of played the role of researcher on this episode. And I don't remember if there was any ... John Wells had said to her 'will you help Eli on this' or how that went down, she had certainly graduated beyond that stage but ... she was doing incredible research on the science and on what would happen inside the reactor, so that I could just focus on the story and the scenes while I was outlining it and writing it. So my heavy guess, I can't remember all the details of the particular moments, is that I would probably would have said to her ... 'I need some life or death thing where he needs to send people in and it needs to be really risky,' and she just came back and said 'here is the thing and it can only be for this many minutes and here is what they are trying to do'. And she would have been involved in brainstorming about all of it. A lot of those lines that you didn't get lost when you... were fed to me by her. And she deserves a big shout out.

JOSH: Do you think people who watch her new show will be called *Witcher Watchers*? Do you think I can sell her on calling the fandom that?

ELI: I just want to see if she uses the Nichols and May joke. That would be a show for me.

JOSH: That would be like a cool goal, to see if there is a bit like that that you could stick in everything you ever work in.

ELI: The funny thing, I was just thinking ... I have various things I have written that have not gone forward, let's say ... and then I am working on some other script and I think to myself, 'wow I really like that scene that I did in that now dead project, why don't I just import that' and you always feel so happy when you do that cut and paste. And it never survives. Everything makes its own rules and has its own DNA so I am always fantasizing about plagiarizing myself and it never works.

JOSH: Well if you are going to steal, steal from the best. Why not?

ELI: I steal from the worst, I steal from the person closest, which is maybe my problem.

HRISHI: Do you know that story about... from Malcolm Gladwell about having a competition? About trying to reuse the phrase 'It's perverse and often baffling,' do you know that story? He ... he was trying to get the phrase 'perverse and often baffling' into as many pieces that he wrote as possible. [Laughs]

ELI: That is fantastic.

HRISHI: It is really great. Ok, so then here is my big picture question. By the end of this episode, things have really shifted in terms of the forecast in the larger election between Santos and Vinick. Was there some directive that 'ok here we are, we are at 12 episodes in, we are halfway through the season, we need to find some way to make this election more competitive.' Because this whole time Santos has been trailing.

ELI: That's right. That was completely deliberate. That was a group decision. That was a mandate I sort of took away from the writers' room when I went off to sort of outline this episode. I remember before, working on the first couple of Santos scripts that I wrote in season six, John Wells saying to me 'look we are going to take John Lyman out of the White House, we are going to bring in this nobody, basically, a house member, and take them from the freezing cold snows of Iowa, New Hampshire, arguing behind a coffee shop where nobody wants to shake this guy's hand, to the pinnacle of ... I think at that point he said 'to the Oval Office' because the initial idea was that this would be the successor to Bartlet and this would be the person who will win the election. And Vinick by design was the kind of Republican that would be really formidable from the start, and even appearing to Democrats. So you automatically by design have one guy who was supposed to be small time and out of nowhere and rise from nothing and another guy who was supposed to be formidable and established from the beginning. And so at a certain point there had to be a big gap to be closed. And interestingly at the beginning of season seven, you may have talked about this already, John gathered the writers and said, even though the notion was for Jimmy Smits to be the winner 'let's just open it up and let's just see where the story leads us.' So even though in season six we were kind of operating from the assumption that this was the story of the inheritor rising from nothing, suddenly it was a real horse race. And I should add on top of that that the writers' room was very divided on who we/they, wanted to win. And maybe this is just my own memory of it but I was definitely a fierce Santos partisan always in the writers' room. And Lawrence who I love, and who is my friend, and who I saw very recently, he was a fierce Vinick partisan from the beginning. Just in terms of this storyline and I always felt, stepping back from it, and maybe I am exaggerating this, that if I wrote an episode that had Vinick in it he tended to have some egg on his face by the end of it. And if Lawrence wrote an episode, Santos tended to screw up by the end of it. And we argued in the writers' room too, to everybody and to John, who should win and who should be up, who should be down. But it was really the mandate from everybody and from John, that this was the episode where it became too close to call. There needed to be something, and this is the thing about presidential elections, you always go into a presidential year, and especially people who are political professionals, thinking it is going to have the contours of a previous presidential year. And there are no two presidential years that are ever alike in any way. And this episode is why. Because history happens. Because natural disasters happen. Because people die. Things happen that reshape the landscape out of nowhere and you can't be sure. We just had ... Bernie Sanders just had a heart attack, you know. Thank God he is ok. But that may reshape this race overnight. And all of his support goes to Elizabeth Warren potentially and this field is very different than it was three days ago. You can't plan for these things and so this was picked as an event that was totally external to kind of have history and circumstance decide what was going to happen.

JOSH: I was sort of hoping that Warren was going to say that she had heard about Sanders' heart attack while she was playing tennis.



ELI: [laughs]

JOSH: I was hoping we'd get a subtle *West Wing* reference. Didn't happen.

[Ad break]

HRISHI: The thing that I really appreciated about this episode, and again, this is something that hasn't always been successful on *The West Wing* is the idea that disaster strikes, or good fortune arrives, and it feels like a plot device. Here it doesn't feel like the opposite of deus ex machina for the Santos campaign and I think that is because there is a situation but there is plenty of room for people to react to it and make choices. And we see Vinick and his team sort of struggling to make the right choice. And ultimately he makes a few wrong choices that lead us to the too close to call result. And you could have seen it going other way. Look, if you were God in this scenario you are still allowing them to have free will as opposed to just putting your thumb on the scale ... I mean obviously you are making their decisions, for them, but what I mean is we as viewers get to see a very human kind of debate happening, within their camp saying ...

[*West Wing* Episode 7.12 excerpt]

*VINICK: Bob wants me to make a statement from the Capitol in the morning, before I get on Airforce One.*

*BRUNO: Senator ... I urge you not to ...*

*VINICK: You want me to get the President to say accidents happen. That is fine. But Bob is right, I can't wait another seven hours to show my face in public.*

*BRUNO: You want to show your face and say what? You have been wrong your whole career? Nuclear is peachy keen while a million people are on the run?*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And Bruno trying to play this chess against a remote opponent, saying 'this is what Josh is going to do and we just need to wait to react' and all of that feels very real and very believable. It is not just 'well nuclear disaster, now the board has been reset.'

ELI: One thing that occurred to me, sort of looking over this earlier today, I had written this episode in season six called "Freedonia", in which Santos gives this silver bullet ad, he just speaks live to the camera and says 'anything I say about anything I am going to say myself' and then there is a scene where Mary-Louise Parker duct tapes Brad to a chair to get him against his instinct to stop ...

JOSH: Duct and cover ...

ELI: Exactly right. She ducts and covers him ...

JOSH: [laughs]

ELI: But this is a different Josh Lyman than some number of months earlier. He's matured, he is running this presidential campaign and now he doesn't need to be led to the do nothing, and let our enemies ... give them enough rope to hang themselves point. He wouldn't have been that person eight months earlier. Bruno hasn't really known him in that

intervening time, so Bruno thinks he is the guy that has to be ducked and covered to not make a certain kind of error and he is not that person anymore.

HRISHI: And yet you still give him the room to be that person, by the end he almost blows it. Only by an element of luck you know, they try and wait and wait and wait for the reporters, to find this nugget of information that Vinick actually lobbied for the opening of this nuclear power plant, for it to be fast tracked. It's this damning piece of information that they know is out there, and they are just waiting for it to be discovered and the story keep dragging on and on, and on one side they have this and they are hoping that someone is going to discover it. On the other side they have the president, going to ... act very presidential, be responsible and visit the disaster site with the senator, which is going to be a huge boon for him, they think ... That this could be a moment that could really take them out the election, if people see the president sort of acting positively and Vinick gets to sort of shine from it. You still give him the chance to blow it by ultimately sending Donna out saying 'you know what, go ahead and leak it'. So Bruno was right. Just the timing ... his evolution wasn't so far that he has become a different person. The fuse has just gotten longer.

ELI: Yeah.

JOSH: Also the other thing I want to discuss about Josh, while I agree there is a certain maturation taking place, there is a pretty spirited conversation about his management skills that happens on our site after certain episodes. One of the things I notice, which I thought was interesting, is that he prioritizes and values, above all else, generally, his own opinion. And a couple of times in this episode he does interesting things, I think. For instance when he first makes his pitch, 'Let's do nothing, let's just sit on this and let this all play out.' He does it to Santos, he says, 'Can I speak to you for a second?' and he takes him away from the rest of the team. It's interesting, running a campaign that he doesn't want to canvas the rest of the team's views on a particular issue. He wants to get the top guy to decide and say, 'This is how we are going to do it, and this is why I think so.' And then beyond that, when he does, as HrishI was saying, when he is about to blow and he is going to go for it, he takes Donna aside and he hasn't told Santos, and he is telling her, 'Just do this.' And you can see, in her reaction, I think she is in a bit of a position ... 'oh am I supposed to do ... I guess Josh is my boss and I've got to do this thing he has said to me, but I know that the candidate himself doesn't know.' So there are, there are flaws, weaknesses to his managerial style, which is that he tends to isolate and put himself in situations where there is only one other person and he is just telling him what to do.

ELI: One of the things that was so fun to write for Josh is that he has greatness about him but very apparent flaws, right on the surface and that's the fun of it. He is not all knowing and he does make mistakes and he can get in his own way and I think that management style, maybe a little bit from my experience in politics is a hallmark of people who really are used to managing up and then need to manage down. When you are ... when you spend your day ... I guess as deputy chief of staff, only worried about 'what is the chief of staff and the president thinking and how do I serve them?', you are a little less mindful of team building and listening and all those kinds of things, cause it is so uni directional. So he is learning and growing and had there been a season eight I think it all would have come together for him. I also think that pulling Donna aside, you try in these roles I think, to not have the candidate know everything. Let's say she did essentially give that dirt to a reporter. At a certain point, aides need to be thrown overboard. You know? At a certain point they need to be isolated from the candidate. So that is another thing.

JOSH: And Santos has plausible deniability because he didn't know. That is another question I had. One thing that kept ping-ponging in the back of my mind during this episode and then was finally addressed very quickly, but then dropped...

HRISHI: ... like a Geiger counter ...

JOSH: ... very nice ... was why doesn't Josh put the press corps anonymously? At one point he finally says, about there quarters through the episode, 'why don't we just give this, do this through a third party' and I did wonder, why not do it in a way where there are no fingerprints, like ... email somebody 'Hey, look over there'?

ELI: That is a very good question and that certainly would have been, any modern campaign would do that. I think it just was this notion, it was almost a theological idea that he has, that we can be clean, we don't need to do anything. It is such a unique and radical position and then there is no chance anyone will ever learn of any connection of anything, because they are going to find this ... why wouldn't they be looking for it? So I think it is just getting wrapped up in almost the theory of it. But yes, of course you could do that. And I am sure that would have happened if Donna had simply said 'I can't do this.'

JOSH: Also the modern press corps is so over everything ...

ELI: Right!

JOSH: ... from the get-go, that they probably would have found it sooner.

ELI: I think it is hard to remember now, but whatever year this was, 2006, or something like that, there was Google and people spent lots of time on their computers at that point but everything wasn't yet online. I think that was still just happening. Where everyone's record and statement on everything was still, newspapers were still digitizing their past decades ...

JOSH: These reporters were Asking Jeeves probably.

HRISHI: [laughs] It wasn't *that* long ago!

ELI: No, that is true. But I do remember in the third season of *The West Wing*, my first season, that we used Google as a verb on the show, I think I have mentioned that before, and we got a big box of t-shirts and swag from Google because it was so new of a thing. And that is 2001.

JOSH: I have a question too Eli, you mentioned 'had there been an eighth season', do you have any sense at this point in production whether it was clear that we were are the end of the road?

ELI: No, I think NBC hadn't really made a decision yet. In the end I think NBC's position, as I recall it, which came later in the season, was 'We are willing to do an eighth season, there would need to be a somewhat reduced budget', because the ratings were declining a bit, and that would have been a new administration anyway so ... the thinking was, probably the cast would have been shaken up a little bit more, maybe some other changes would have been made. But it was still on the table and I think John was thinking 'let's play out the story, let's see who the most appealing successor to Bartlet is' and then we'll pick up that discussion later in the season. And then sadly what happened was John Spencer passed away and I think John felt very strongly and led us all to agree very quickly that there is no show without John Spencer and maybe this is the right time. And I think to some degree ... I think he also felt, I shouldn't put words in his mouth but I think there was a feeling that with John gone also we really would not have wanted the Republican to win, that that would have been two blows to the fans of the show. That was some of the thinking. So none of that had quite come up yet.

HRISHI: There is a line, that kept running through my head as this episode was going, another line from the West Wing, in terms of the wait and see strategy that both sides were supposed to employ, at least some people were suggesting they employ, from Will Bailey, way back ... Will says to Elsie ...

[West Wing Episode 4.06 excerpt]

*WILL: There is a moment after you cast the die but before it hits the table, breathe wrong and you'll change the way it lands.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: ... it just felt like that here. I love that there are three different groups of people who all have the same directive which is, 'Don't say anything'. The Santos campaign, they have to make sure not to say anything, the Vinick directive according to Bruno, and of course he is right in the end, 'Don't say anything,' but then also Will's team on the Communications side, and all the sub-agencies, his directive to them is, 'Don't say anything,' and I thought that was an interesting theme that goes through this whole episode. And I also liked seeing Will getting to flex in this role where he has mostly been passive so far.

ELI: It is a great thing on a long running show, and not an easy thing, to put a character in a fairly new circumstance and one of the things that was so cool about this stage of the West Wing is you got to see beloved old characters playing the storylines of other characters. We had seen quite a few Toby and C.J. and everybody really, smack down sub cabinet officials when they kind of step out of line. This probably was the first time Will did that or maybe the second. But he was great in it and it is really fun to show him stepping up and wearing the big shoes.

JOSH: Dammit, Will matured too!

ELI: It is true.

HRISHI: I want to play this clip ... from ... there was this one time I tweeted from the West Wing Weekly account and this is what Josh said ... I happened to be recording, he said ...

[West Wing Episode 7.12 excerpt]

*WILL: It doesn't matter if it is true, it doesn't matter if I have already said it. We are trying to prevent mass hysteria in a climate where even the truth can be misinterpreted, so we speak with one voice. You are lucky you still have a job.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: That is how I talk to my kids.

ELI: [laughs] There is something so great, these characters are trying to do the right thing, and even though Will is telling other people not to say anything, he is saying plenty. And he is giving out a lot more information than most White Houses would in the early minutes of a crisis, where you are worried about mass hysteria. And when you are watching these characters kind of on the side of right, on the side of justice, it is great to see them kick some ass. You really root for them and you really want those smackdowns to happen. It is very gratifying.

JOSH: By the way that is Matt Corboy as assistant secretary Bliden and he is one of those faces you see all over the place, very recognizable and good actor.

HRISHI: I love how you set up that Blieden kind of sucks from the beginning. Ultimately he is going to be the guy who gets fired, but even the first time we come across him, Will is trying to say his piece to everybody and before he can even start Blieden interrupts him and has his question.

[West Wing Episode 7.12 excerpt]

*WILL: DOE, EPA, NOAA ... ok, lets get started. I wanted all the agency spokespeople in one place so we could ... yes Blydon?*

*BLIEDEN: Have you got an update for us?*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: You know, I didn't catch that until watching it again and I was like 'oh yes, this guy, we got the seeds of this guy being annoying from the beginning'.

ELI: I think we were trained by Aaron and by John to have the vast majority of West Wing scenes, two smart people with different points of view, who were both right. And that that makes for better drama and it makes for better conflict and it is why in an episode like this, when Vinick actually gets in a room with Bartlet, on Air Force One finally, he has got some real points about nuclear power and why it is important and why it is sort of politicizing it to attack him. But there is nothing more fun than setting up a straw man and knocking him down.

JOSH: Despite the super high stakes nature of this episode there are some funny moments and some great little bits of dialogue you have. I liked the interchange very much when Santos is asked about his favorite Bob Dylan album.

ELI: Yeah, you know, that came about entirely because ... it is a great thing about being a screenwriter in general, anything that is consuming you at a given moment in your life, you can sort of just make it a run of dialogue. I had always known that Bob Dylan was great and I feel like right around this time, I think it was the time the first Scorsese documentary came out, *No Direction Home*, like a dime dropped for me and I was totally obsessed with Bob Dylan, like this whole year. But that was one of the things that was held up later as like an eerie parallel to Barack Obama allegedly, Obama was a big Dylan fan and sort of cited Dylan. But I always thought that was weird cause it was a bit like saying, 'Oh this character likes chocolate and so does this other human being.'

JOSH: I am a big Bob Dylan fan myself and I am very excited to say that very soon I will be seeing him in concert and I am going to go with my dad and my son. And my dad turned me on to Bob Dylan's music and I turned my son on to Dylan's music, so three generations of Malinas so I am very excited to go. I have been trying to prep my son, and I guess my dad because I don't think my dad has seen him live ... I am trying to prep them both for the fact that probably there won't be a single song that is recognizable as a Bob Dylan song as he takes a perverse and often baffling approach to his own music.

HRISHI: [laughing] ... very nice!

ELI: [laughing] ... well played.

HRISHI: Very nice. Josh, what is your favorite Bob Dylan album?

JOSH: You know, I am bad at this ... I am very bad at favorites of anything cause I just listen and don't really know ... I will say though, perhaps unexpectedly I am a huge fan of his Christian era, I like his gospel albums. I love *Slow Train Coming*, which I don't think many people purport as their favorite Dylan album but it is among my favorites.

HRISHI: Eli, given the scope of *The West Wing's* audience I am sure you are well aware of the weightiness of the platform. And I was wondering if despite the great scene between Vinick and the president, when they are arguing about the pros and cons of nuclear power, if you felt like you were coming out very strongly against nuclear power by having this storyline play out?

[West Wing Episode 7.12 excerpt]

*VINICK: Risk is everywhere, people get into car accidents.*

*PRESIDENT BARTLET: And when they do, they don't tell you to stop eating produce three states away.*

*VINICK: What is your answer? Solar? One fifth of one percent of all our energy at five times the cost? Wind? Another spike in OPEC prices? Nuclear is the only alternative.*

*PRESIDENT BARTLET: It is not an alternative. I know the regulation is a mess. No regulation could make it safe.*

[end excerpt]

ELI: I guess I would say I did feel that. I was comfortable doing that because I felt we aired very aggressively the strongest arguments for it. And to me this strongest argument for nuclear power is that this is why Europe is so far ahead of the United States when it comes to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and that a lot of the major environmental groups actually are pretty quiet on that issue because you really can't solve ... I mean I think, we are in a slightly different position, I keep implying it was 800 years ago that *The West Wing* aired but we are in a slightly different position now maybe, because there is some advanced technology and hybrid cars are more common and things like that. But by and large today, I think if you really want to solve the climate problem, nuclear probably needs to be a part of that conversation. So that is a very valid, strong view, but to me, the fact that a Chernobyl can happen. The fact that this fictional San Andreo plant, that this kind of thing can happen, and has happened in our lifetimes. It is not worth it. Not that we shouldn't be doing things about climate change, we should be doing much more about it, but that the potential downside risk is so great that I was ok coming down pretty strongly ... Not that there should never be nuclear power, but that it needs to be rethought, it shouldn't be near population centers, even though there are reasons for that. But it is a scary, dangerous thing.

HRISHI: Did you get any pushback, either in the writers' room when this was the shape the episode was taking, or afterwards did you get negative feedback from people who didn't like the way it was portrayed?

ELI: In the writers' room I didn't. Because I know that John's position, always was and is, if you are aggressively airing the competing point of view, if you are showing that there are two sides and you are not kind of unfairly tilting it towards one side, and I don't think this did. An incident happened, these kinds of things have happened and will happen more and this is probably how it would play out. I think he was always fine with it. We got some ... we got mail and we got people calling us all the time but you know, we didn't pay too much attention to that, simply because as you know, the episode would air four months after you wrote it and sometimes you would get an urgent phone call from some advocate on the issue,

demanding that you do something additional in next week's episode to respond to it. As if these things were filmed before a studio audience or something.

JOSH: One thing that I think was interesting, and I agree with you that you did air the pro nuclear power arguments very persuasively, but Vinick makes those points very articulately in a conversation with Bruno and then falters when he goes and makes his public appearance.

[West Wing Episode 7.12 excerpt]

*VINICK: Nuclear power didn't break those valves. To blame nuclear technology itself for whatever mess happened in ... Federal regulators were the ones who fell down on the job. You can start a fire with a match too you know ...*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Which in some sense is uncharacteristic of Vinick but we have seen it before as with his church going, or lack thereof, where he is very strong and very composed talking to his staff about his positions, and then sometimes he will get caught off guard in a situation that you feel he should have been prepared for and it happens again in this episode and it is interesting to watch.

HRISHI: It actually makes me think that he is not a great presidential candidate. Like the repetition of that moment, makes me feel like he is susceptible to being baited, and that's very dangerous. I mean our present conditions being ignored the fact that someone might make a rash decision that goes against the well thought-out ideas that they had just moments before, because someone says the right thing to trigger them, is an extremely scary in a potential president.

JOSH: It's a liability.

ELI: I think there is a quality that a lot of politicians have, and that my understanding is Barack Obama had to some degree, which is when you really believe, you have done your homework and you have studied an issue and you have heard all the different sides and then you have taken a position that you think is the responsible position and in Vinick's mind that's that nuclear power is an important part of our sort of energy network, grid. And if you regulate well and monitor well, these things shouldn't happen and is not the fault of the technology and then you know it is hurting you politically and you know that it is maybe a misunderstanding or a kind of simplification of the issue is what is hurting you politically, you get very irritated. And I think that, in my mind, that is what is going through his head. 'I am right on this, and I know it is going to cost me big time.' I think he knows at that moment that this is a big, big, big, big problem for him.

HRISHI: Yes, I love it. I mean I love that flaw in the character because it is a complicated flaw.

ELI: He is great also. I mean Alan Alda was so great to work with and so great to be around, he is a legend, I mean ... it is kind of amazing to think I even got to be in the same room as him. But you know he is somebody who was really good at playing irritation, that he is trying really hard not to show. There is so many layers to him. There is what he is going through, there is the performance he is doing as a politician, he is performing a performance and it is kind of great.

HRISHI: Eli, only because you are such a great friend and gracious guest, I feel I can ask this of you but... can we talk a little bit about some of the stuff that I did not like in this episode?

ELI: Of course!

JOSH: Mmmm.

HRISHI: Well it is really just one thing. It is the continuation of the China/Kazakhstan plot. When that came back in this episode I thought 'oh my God, is this still going on?' And it felt like, even just in the few moments when it happened, it really pulled the energy out. Like Josh was saying, this episode is a little bit of an outlier, because even though there are these different rooms where different aspects of this one storyline are being discussed it has this kind of velocity. And then there is just these couple scenes here and there where it is like, oh and then there is this other thing going on, and it felt like, just for a second the energy would dip and I would just ... yeah. I was wondering, did you feel a burden from what Brad has told us about the element of 'plot pipe' that has to be incorporated in an episode? Did you feel that you were locked into including this? Would you have preferred not to have those moments in your episode?

ELI: I think I probably have to take responsibility in the sense that I guess I didn't question those things, in as much as you are part of a team and you are given a task and you try to do your best to service them. Looking back I probably tried to use those scenes the way that ... like Aaron so brilliantly would have military people deliver two lines and then walk out of the room before the scene we are actually following begins. I thought, well ok, I will just do a bunch of these scenes and then it will show that even in the midst of a total crisis, the president can't just do this one thing. I probably could have done them differently. I probably could have done them shorter. I don't have a particular memory now of why they are the way they are but just looking at this now for the first time since then, yeah, they kind of ... the air goes out of the room a little bit and the momentum is let down.

JOSH: I would say in defense of the Kazakhstan B plot, 1) Mary McCormack gets a paycheck and that is always a good thing. Good to have her around. But also as you said, the phrase 'foreign and domestic' kept going through my mind. I liked sort of being reminded that even as there is a domestic crisis the president doesn't get the day off from foreign affairs. I didn't mind the reminder about what is bubbling outside our borders.

HRISHI: Yeah, I liked that principle too. The foreign and domestic idea. I think it is just this particular plotline, to me, has never really come to life. And the combination of it not really jumping off for me and also living for a very long time. By this point in the series I am like 'maybe there is another issue that could have been brought,' I still haven't figured out, even having finished the season, the meta imperative of needing the nuclear crisis here, as an inciting incident for the race evening out ... all that makes sense to me. The greater need for this foreign diplomacy crisis, it just feels a little bit too far removed. I am still not sure what we are getting from it entirely.

ELI: I think it is somewhat effective in the nuclear storyline is that, as you mentioned earlier, even though we are not in the reactor and we are not ... we don't see or meet these characters who end up harming themselves and dying ... we have sort of personalized the decisions for Bartlet and, to some degree for Vinick, so real emotion lands on them. It is a character story about them. And what I can definitely say about those Kazakhstan scenes is that it is hard for me to say where the blood is in it. And what personal decision Bartlet has to make.



HRISHI: It is interesting though because they get the call sheet so they can speak to the families of James Cook and Mark LaRoche and meanwhile 114 people have been killed in these election protests in Kazakhstan and it does bring back to mind the idea that an American life is more important to the president. And of course it is. Here, he's the one that has to send these people in on this assignment and the other is removed. They are real people for sure but he hasn't had his own hand in it in the same way.

ELI: That is right. There is no way he can say 'if I had done something different,' short of military intervention, 'if I had done something different those people might still be alive.' And actually I don't even think in the case of James Cook and Mark LaRoche, that there is really much room for second guessing although Josh was pointing out there was a different scenario there. You know, send in a second team, but you are 100% right.

HRISHI: Well actually I had a note on here to ask you about the question, I was wondering if James Cook's name was a reference to Captain Cook in any way.

ELI: Oh, that is funny. No, it is a college classmate of mine, James Cook, who lives in Palo Alto and is a lovely guy. And you know, I found over the years that if you name characters after actual people you know, the names usually come out a little better, actually. Because somehow when you are choosing fictional names it is always like Bill Bryson ... they always sound like ... I think *Mad Men* is the only show that ... and a show I love, which got away with naming people these alliterative snappy names because you believe they just made them up themselves when they started in advertising. But I don't know. Real names just tend to land a little better.

JOSH: Which one of your friends did you kill?

ELI: Well, I have killed them all in real life. No.

JOSH: Oh, interesting!

ELI: No. I think that... wasn't James Cook the one who dies?

HRISHI: He is.

JOSH: History forgets. But Hrishi remembers.

ELI: That is how I let my friends know the ones I like more.

HRISHI: [laughs] Wait is it a sign of greater affection if they die, or less?

ELI: It probably is a sign of greater affection because it carries more impact. I mean I like those guys equally. But as a minor footnote here, there is a good friend of mine who is a pretty well-known sports writer in Washington DC whose name is Dave McKenna and there have been many references in *The West Wing*, and in some shows I have worked on since, to McKenna, more than Dave McKenna cause that is how his friends refer to him, and they are almost all derogatory and my favorite one was one that I think I gave it to Aaron in a memo that he then condensed and it was when Josh was looking at Vice Presidential candidates and Charlie comes into the room and looks at a board where he has got some names and it was just a little throwaway at the top of the scene and Dulé says:

[West Wing Episode 4.22 excerpt]

*CHARLIE: You crossed off McKenna?*

*JOSH: For health.*

[end excerpt]

[Josh and Hrishi laugh]

ELI: And that is the entire exchange and I probably gave half a page to Aaron, it shows the incredible economy of Aaron but somehow West Wing episodes always seem to trash this friend of mine.

HRISHI: [laughing]

JOSH: [laughing]

ELI: Which we have all got a kick out of.

HRISHI: I would like to give a special shout out to Charles Dickens who hasn't got enough recognition, but just when it comes to character names I think he is my favorite for character naming. In the opposite way.

JOSH: Philip Pirrip.

ELI: Oh my God amazing.

HRISHI: Barnaby Rudge, that is a great name.

JOSH: Ebenezer Scrooge.

ELI: Actually that was a college classmate of mine too.

JOSH: [laughing] I had one other line of dialogue that I loved but I wrote it down out of context so maybe you can help me place it. But I loved the Vinick line ...

[West Wing Episode 7.12 excerpt]

*VINICK: I could tell them about my psychedelic phase when I wore brown socks on the senate floor.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: [laughing] That really made me laugh.

ELI: Something I totally forgot about until I was glancing at the script this morning and I looked at that line and it made me smile a little bit. That was Vinick about to go on ... I guess they were going to do Rock the Vote ...

JOSH: Oh Rock the Vote ...

ELI: So it was Santos, a generation younger making hip Bob Dylan references.

JOSH: Exactly. That really made me laugh. I loved it.

HRISHI: I love the idea that Bob Dylan references are hip. I mean no offense to Bob Dylan but ...

JOSH: [laughing]

ELI: Well sure. I just think in the grand scheme ... I mean Clinton was the first baby boomer president but actually now that I think about it, Jimmy Carter I think quoted Bob Dylan in his inaugural address or something like that. So I don't know what I am talking about.

HRISHI: [laughs}

ELI: I had just discovered him and clearly no one else had heard of him at that point.

JOSH: 'I am going to go out there and talk to the kids about Captain Beefheart'.

ELI: I like to highlight new and undiscovered artists. That is kind of a thing for me. You know.

HRISHI: Eli, thanks so much for doing this.

ELI: Oh, great pleasure.

JOSH: Thanks everybody for listening to another episode of the West Wing Weekly.

HRISHI: Go follow Eli on Twitter or on Instagram, he is @eliattie on Twitter and @eli.attie on Instagram.

JOSH: We remain, as always, a proud member of PRX's Radiotopia, a dazzling display of definitive podcasts.

HRISHI: [laughing]

JOSH: If you want to learn more about those podcasts, you can go to radiotopia.fm.

HRISHI: Thanks also to Zach McNees and Margaret Miller as always for their help making this show.

JOSH: Love to Nick Song wherever you are out there.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

ELI: What's next?

[Outro Music]