

The West Wing Weekly
3.17: Stirred
Guest: Eli Attie and Fmr. Deputy Labor Secretary Chris Lu

JOSH: We're back! You're listening to...[crosstalk] The West...no? Yes!

HRISHI: [crosstalk] No, no. No, no, no!

JOSH: Look, you start. It's either do what you will or you just start. Ok.

HRISHI: Continue.

JOSH: It's the vanilla version.

[theme song]

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

HRISHI: And I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Today we're talking about the episode *Stirred*. Episode 17 from Season 3.

JOSH: This episode first aired on April 3rd, 2002. The teleplay is by Aaron Sorkin and Eli Attie, big friend of the podcast. Story is by Dee Dee Myers and the episode was directed by Jeremy Kagan.

HRISHI: Joining us later will be Chris Lu, who's a former Deputy Secretary of Labor as well as former White House Cabinet Secretary. Here is a brief summary of what happens in this episode: Donna wants a proclamation in honor of her favorite teacher. A truck carrying spent uranium fuel rods crashes in Idaho. Toby, CJ, Ed, Larry, and eventually the rest of the gang consider replacing Hoynes on the ticket for the President's re-election. And Sam works with Hoynes to try and save a bill that the Vice President's championed for a long time, but the only path to victory requires Hoynes to remove himself as an author and take no credit for it. The President files Charlie's tax returns, only to discover there's a \$1100 discrepancy between what they had calculated and what comes back due to a tax rebate from the previous year. And the Vice President also reveals to the President that he's an alcoholic.

JOSH: That's a lot.

HRISHI: And I just want to read to you the synopsis from TV Guide, cause this is a good one, too. "*The Vice President makes a surprise announcement and might be in for a surprise, except that he's not surprised when he hears it. Meanwhile, a truck carrying depleted uranium fuel rods crashes in Idaho and terrorism isn't ruled out. Donna wants Josh to see about a presidential pardon for her favorite high school teacher and Bartlet helps Charlie with his tax return.*"

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: This is a different episode, where Donna's looking for a presidential pardon for her favorite teacher.

JOSH: What the hell? Oh, that's...what the hell? Is that...that's not the Warner Brothers one again, is it?

HRISHI: No, that was TV Guide.

JOSH: Ok. So there's something just generally out there that leads people astray when they're trying to write a synopsis for this show.

HRISHI: I don't know...I, you know, this episode is particularly rife with mistakes.

JOSH: You mean factual errors in the West Wing episode itself.

HRISHI: Yes, factual errors in the, in the episode.

JOSH: Ah. I'm excited to hear them because I probably didn't watch closely enough cause I wasn't, I wasn't tallying.

HRISHI: But then there were all these weird mistakes around it. Like this one, where TV Guide said that Donna's looking for a Presidential pardon.

JOSH: That's a big miss.

HRISHI: That's a big miss. But then, let's jump for a second right into the Vice Presidential ticket.

JOSH: Oh, or look at this synopsis I just found from a website, "The One Where Charlie Dies."

HRISHI: [laughter]

JOSH: That's just completely wrong. Granted, I wrote it.

HRISHI: Right. Is that this episode?

JOSH: They're all that episode for me.

HRISHI: Ok, so for example, as I mentioned, the episode features this subplot where they're looking at replacing Hoynes on the ticket. Just exploring the idea, although as we know, exploring means drilling, so I guess they're drilling Hoynes?

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: Oof.

JOSH: That's another movie altogether.

HRISHI: I was looking up other moments in history when Vice Presidents have been swapped for a re-election campaign. I came across this article from ABC News listing some of these examples—FDR, he switched his VP out...

JOSH: Was that because he was elected four times and they kept dying?

HRISHI: He originally had John Nance Garner the fourth.

JOSH: Sure. One of my top four favorite John Nance's.

HRISHI: The reason why Garner left the ticket is because he thought that FDR wasn't gonna run for a third term and now it was his time. But then Roosevelt said, "no, I'm gonna go again." He replaced him with his Secretary of Agriculture. Anyway, the one that I thought was really interesting is Abraham Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln, his original vice president was Hannibal Hamlin. Hamlin and Lincoln were running mates when Lincoln ran the first time and they had never actually even met until after the election was over. It was just a politically convenient—

JOSH: Arranged marriage.

HRISHI: Arranged marriage, yeah. But then when Lincoln ran for re-election, he ended up running with Andrew Johnson.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: And that switch, of course, was hugely consequential because Lincoln gets assassinated and Andrew Johnson became President. The one paragraph on the ABC News website is so insane about this one moment in history, I mean, it's insane. Let me just read you what they have written.

JOSH: Please do.

HRISHI: Here's what it says, "However, by the time Lincoln was running for re-election in 1964..."

JOSH: Wait a minute. I've already spotted a problem.

HRISHI: Yeah. "Hamlin was less politically useful. Lincoln joined forces with the War Democrats and selected a member of their party, Andrew Jackson, of Tennessee..."

JOSH: Wow

HRISHI: "to replace Hamlin on the ticket. This move by Lincoln had a profound effect on the course of American history. Hamlin's term ended in March 1865, less than two months before Lincoln was assassinated."

JOSH: Fake news! Sad!

HRISHI: What is happening?

JOSH: What on God's green earth...I don't understand. That's from the ABC News? Can we actually link to that piece of oddness?

HRISHI: Oh, yeah. We definitely can. It's from November 2013 and it has not been corrected.

JOSH: Is that someone playing a joke, do you think? I mean, who could—how could somebody have created [crosstalk] that piece of prose.

HRISHI: [crosstalk] I don't even know

JOSH: That's insane.

HRISHI: Another Vice President who was dropped from the ticket, actually gets name checked in this episode,

[West Wing Episode 3.17 excerpt]

JOSH: You do this, you'd be the craziest Vice President since Aaron Burr. And Burr shot a guy.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: This line, of course, famously inspiring Lin Manuel Miranda--

JOSH: to write his entire piece.

HRISHI: Specifically, that line from the song where Aaron Burr says, "I'm looking for a guy to shoot, shoot."

JOSH: Ah hah, there it is. I knew you were going somewhere.

HRISHI: Yeah. Not anywhere good. Just in keeping with the spirit of things, Josh, let's agree to make a whole bunch of mistakes on our episode [crosstalk] of the podcast.

JOSH: [crosstalk] If one thing can be counted upon, it is that.

HRISHI: Yup. We're gonna get some things wrong. But not, you know, Abraham Lincoln got killed in 1985 wrong.

JOSH: No. That's glaring.

HRISHI: Mmhmm. Ok, let's go back to the cold open.

JOSH: Yes. There's a direct steal from the brain of Josh Malina in the cold open.

[West Wing Episode 3.17 excerpt]

SAM: You know what I'd do if I owned a hockey team? I'd hire a sumo wrestler. I'd give him a uniform, transportation, \$500 a week to sit in the goal, eat a ham sandwich, and enjoy the game. My team would never get scored on.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Yeah?

JOSH: During my *Sports Night* days, I shared two sports theories with Aaron, granting that I was no sports maven, but I wanted to get his take on why professional teams don't do the following things. One, in hockey, I'm not sure I, I don't think that I specifically posited sumo wrestlers, but I said to him, are you telling me there's no human being who's bigger than a hockey goal? Why would you not put that guy on the team and have simply sit in front of the goal?

HRISHI: There it is.

JOSH: Making it literally impossible for the other team to score. So he stole that, yes.

HRISHI: Can I do the other one without looking?

JOSH: Oh, yeah.

HRISHI: I want to try it like Sam trying to guess [crosstalk] the solution to the China...

JOSH: [crosstalk] Yes, yes. What's written on the paper

HRISHI: Yeah. Does the other one have to do with soccer? Removing the goalies and making the nets smaller?

JOSH: No.

HRISHI: That was in an episode of *Sports Night* .

JOSH: Oh, is that right?

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Oh, that's funny. No, the other one, to my knowledge, he has not stolen. But my other, I think, brilliant stratagem was in American football, why not when you need a goal line offense, and you're just, it's, whatever, third and inches, why not have a little person on your team, to whom you can hand the football and then you can toss him into the end zone?

HRISHI: Oh my...

JOSH: I mean, if you—with a high enough arc, you wouldn't be able to defend against that. You'd score every time.

HRISHI: Oh my god.

JOSH: And I've yet to, even in this episode, I mean, Aaron, Aaron modified it. A sumo wrestler wouldn't literally, necessarily, be bigger than the goal. So, he thinks, I think, the lack of dexterity—although they are pretty agile. Josh says, they'd score all the time. In my theory, it's impossible, cause the entire net is blocked. And in the football thing, I think it's unassailable.

HRISHI: And I'm back. For anyone listening, I left for the last 6 minutes and just let Josh talk.

JOSH: You do that a lot, don't you?

HRISHI: Also in the cold open...

JOSH: Sure

HRISHI: We start with the AA meeting that Leo has been invited to in seasons prior. Ok, so one thing about this meeting is we get a little clue from the previously on as to who the attendees are, or a little reminder, I guess.

[West Wing Episode 3.17 excerpt]

HOYNES: There are nine of us. Three senators, two cabinet secretaries, one federal judge, and two agency directors.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: So, when we come in on the cold open, the guy who's chairing it is one of the Senators and I love that, this little moment where he's reading the opening statement.

[West Wing Episode 3.17 excerpt]

AA SENATOR: We sought, through prayer and meditation, to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood him. As we understood him.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And then he glares at the guy next to Leo and says, "As we understood him." JOSH: Oh, I thought he took that to Leo. That's to the guy next to Leo?

HRISHI: I think it's to the guy next to Leo. And there's some unsaid subtext between these guys, that there was some—who knows what they other guy had done or said that this guy needs to remind him.

JOSH: I took it as, I thought he was talking to Leo and that Leo was an atheist and was like, dude, just work with me here.

HRISHI: That's funny. I took it to mean there was some kind of interpretation, like somebody made a leap or something, and he's like, our contact with God, as we understood him! You know, emphasizing that there's an interpretational quality

JOSH: I see, yeah.

HRISHI: Or something. Whatever it was, I just, I loved that we dropped that in and that these guys have their own story, their own history, their own dynamic and we just get to have a little glimpse of it.

JOSH: Yeah. That's just, that's great writing. Bravo, Eli and Aaron.

HRISHI: Yeah. They're not there simply to prop up the stories of our own characters. They have the stories

JOSH: Right

HRISHI: they're all the heroes in their own

JOSH: I'm glad you pointed it out, just a little subtle detail like that because that stuff is missing in so much TV writing and the end results is whether you're noticing the omission of that kind of moment or not. It's the two dimensional versus three dimensional feel you have of a created world. And it's those little things that suggest that life took place before the episode began and it's going to continue afterwards that make a big difference.

HRISHI: Yeah. I think for me, the richest moment of this episode, the richest scene is the one between Leo and the President, when they're discussing his pager.

[West Wing Episode 3.17 excerpt]

BARTLET: If only technology could invent some way to get in touch with you in an emergency. Some sort of telephonic device, with a personalized number we could call to let you know that we needed you. Perhaps it would look something like this, Mr. Moto.

LEO: You should have called...

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yes. There's also something, just overall, maybe, to tee this up—Bartlet, despite some of the things that are happening during this episode, is in like an almost had-an-extra-cup-of-coffee, great, cheery, perky, playful mood. Like—

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: You never quite find out why, but it's kind of delightful. As he's doing Charlie's taxes, as he's teasing and poking Leo and throwing his beeper around, he seems to be enjoying his day and it's not always the case, sometimes the weight of the office is heavy on his shoulders. So it's nice to see him at least enjoying a day at work, for whatever reason.

HRISHI: Yeah. Or a night at work as it may be

JOSH: True

HRISHI: you'd think that, like, at the end of the day he would be even more tired. But yeah, he really seems energized. And you mentioned the thing that I love the most, which is when he throws the beeper.

JOSH: Fantastic.

HRISHI: He tosses it over his shoulder without looking and John Spencer has to, like, do a little jump to catch it.

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: But the dynamic between those two characters fills up the screen...

JOSH: Yeah, you're right, it can be great writing or it can be great acting and in this case it is both. And that's one of the things that always strikes me on this re-watch that I've been enjoying with you, is that I joined the show midstream and they already knew each other well and they had been through, you know, three seasons and change of getting to know each other and 16 hour days, and seeing each other more than they saw their families, so that richness was there. But on re-watch, it was also there in the pilot. Like these are just damn good actors who are able to create that sense of history from the get-go.

HRISHI: I love this exchange about comfortable clothes, when the President says—

[West Wing Episode 3.17 excerpt]

BARTLET: You know, I've noticed that other people keep a set of comfortable clothes in their office when they have to work late, I like that. You should do that, too.

LEO: I do do that

BARTLET: Oh? You should change.

LEO: Do you see me wearing a necktie?

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Right. Do you see me wearing a tie? These are my comfortable clothes!

HRISHI: It's great.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: Can I ask you something about this, though? When the President says, "perhaps it would look something like this, Mr. Moto!" I don't get the reference, or I don't get why that reference is being employed here. I admit, I don't really know much about Mr. Moto, except that he's like a racist, yellow-face, detective character. That's all I know about Mr. Moto, but I don't know what he has to do with [crosstalk] beepers.

JOSH: I think he's a Japanese secret agent, hence gadgetry might be part of his scene.

HRISHI: Aaaaah.

JOSH: That's how I took it. Like, he might have said Inspector Gadget if Aaron knew who Inspector Gadget was.

HRISHI: I got it.

JOSH: I did note, in my little research, that Mr. Moto was played in eight motion pictures by Peter Lorie, an actor whose work I enjoy and to whose appearance my own has been likened.

HRISHI: Ah! Well, as long as you don't do yellow face, I'm fine with that comparison.

JOSH: No, I don't. I shan't.

HRISHI: Good.

JOSH: Get back to me when I'm offered a job, but I don't plan to. Well, was it—clearly this is not an Asian actor playing an Asian—did he perform it in yellow face? Was it, like, that kind of thing?

HRISHI: Yeah, he's got, like, the teeth

JOSH: is it like Mickey Rooney in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* kind of

HRISHI: Pretty much, yeah, exactly. Yeah, he's got an accent.

JOSH: That is unfortunate.

HRISHI: I thought maybe, maybe that it was somehow a double reference. That he was calling him Mr. Moto in reference to the detective but also because his pager was a Motorola pager?

JOSH: Oh.

HRISHI: Which is pretty dumb.

JOSH: You are a deep diver and that will sometimes lead you astray.

HRISHI: Yeah

JOSH: But do keep diving.

HRISHI: I've thought that in the past. Ok, so back to the AA meeting, and really, the sort of Vice President's story of his own alcoholism. What did you make of that?

JOSH: Well, first I was discovering some things. As you led me to believe in a past discussion, I remember I had once opined that the President had offered Hoynes a beer, possibly, in a piece of gamesmanship. I can't remember [crosstalk] whether we just

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Yes, that's right

JOSH: didn't include it in the podcast because you didn't want to spoil anything. I've been kind of looking forward to this moment ever since you told me, when I wasn't sure whether the president knew or not, that we would later discover that he had not prior to this episode. Well, Bartlet had the reaction I absolutely anticipated. But also, given President Bartlet's own medical history and what he chose not to share with certain people, and given the fact that he has a very open and accepting attitude towards Leo's battles with addiction, he had the kind of response I anticipated. One question I did have—I wasn't entirely sure, I couldn't remember whether we were there for the moment when Leo found out Hoynes was an alcoholic. The fact is, at the start of the series, Leo knew, correct?

HRISHI: No, so this is one of the mistakes [crosstalk] in the episode.

JOSH: [crosstalk] Oh! So it's a discrepancy, ok, cause I bumped on that.

HRISHI: Right. Because we are there when Leo--

JOSH: I thought I remembered that.

HRISHI: And we see it in the previously on. Leo says, "what meeting could I go to?" and the Vice President says, "mine."

JOSH: Well, but is it definitive that Leo didn't know Hoynes was an alcoholic in that moment? Or is it unclear that he knew he ran an AA meeting in the basement? Is there wiggle room there?

HRISHI: Uh, there is wiggle room, I think. You're right. You know what, I take it back. So in episode 4 of season 1, Hoynes asks Leo, "when was the last time you went to a meeting?" Leo says, "what meeting could I possibly go to?" Hoynes says, "mine" and Leo says, "John, tell me you are not showing your face." He doesn't express shock that the Vice President is an alcoholic or have any, even, really kind of registers surprise. He's more surprised that he has a meeting. So—

JOSH: Ok. So let's accept that in the West Wing universe, all is right. Leo knew prior to the pilot? And he did not make an issue of it, even behind the scenes, the first go-around. During

Bartlet's first campaign. Why is it necessary now that Hoynes have this moment with the President?

HRISHI: Oh, I see where you're going with this. Yeah, like, why is he suddenly now not comfortable with keeping it a secret.

JOSH: I thought maybe it has to do with Leo's own secret, which was a secret during the first campaign.

HRISHI: I wonder if maybe it has something to do with Leo's inclusion in the meeting, suddenly coming under a bit of pressure from the other members. I mean, even though the Vice President is the one who defends him and says, "it's my meeting, he stays." I don't know.

JOSH: Well, but you know what? Now as you're speaking, I'm getting, like I'm getting somewhere. I think Leo knew exactly how President Bartlet would respond and so what he's doing is giving Hoynes a gift, in a sense. He's giving him that moment where the President can say to him, this is not an issue for me. So if you feel the crushing weight of having to keep the secret...Although, Hoynes' first response is, "he doesn't know?"

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: So, I don't know. It's actually, I guess it's a puzzlement.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: I'm not sure.

HRISHI: I like the detail that the President never had a drink before he was 25.

JOSH: Yeah, I can totally believe that. And I also like that, prior to this scene, did we know that Hoynes hadn't had a drink in decades?

HRISHI: No.

JOSH: Which I think is a wonderful thing that Aaron, and Eli, have done in this episode, which is to present alcoholism in real terms. That it can be decades and decades and Hoynes still knows he's an alcoholic. You know? When the President does respond—

[West Wing Episode 3.17 excerpt]

HOYNES: Yes, sir.

BARTLET: You haven't had a drink since you were 22?

HOYNES: That's right.

PRESIDENT BARTLET: I didn't start drinking until I was 25! What the hell do you guys [crosstalk] count as...

HOYNES: [crosstalk] I know...

[end excerpt]

JOSH: But somebody who has struggles with it knows that the struggle continues and you still have to go to meetings and that's one way, you know, I don't want to say have to, but you have to figure out some way to continually stay sober if it's a struggle for you. Even if 30 years pass.

HRISHI: Right, he describes himself as a recovering alcoholic. And that idea that recovery isn't a transient moment.

JOSH: Right, there's no finish line, it's a continuous process.

HRISHI: Yeah. Ok, onto one that's more definitive

JOSH: Yes

HRISHI: just to redeem myself a little bit. When the President finally speaks to Molly Morello, Donna's teacher, to pardon her, he says

[West Wing Episode 3.17 excerpt]

PRESIDENT BARTLET: When you taught Beowulf, did you make the kids read it in the original Middle English or did you use the translation?

[excerpt]

HRISHI: And *Beowulf* is not in Middle English, it's in Old English text.

JOSH: Nice. Catch. I want to say that I bumped on that too, but that one sailed over my head. Wouldn't it have been great if she'd corrected him? That would have been a great moment!

HRISHI: That would have been great! He's a weird thing in this episode, and I don't really know how to reconcile it in terms of is this an error or what? I can't really imagine, especially with Eli on the teleplay, it's hard to imagine, but when Josh is first talking to Sam about the bill

[West Wing Episode 3.17 excerpt]

JOSH: Health, Education, and Welfare is marking up the internet education act tomorrow.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Health, Education, and Welfare, that used to be a cabinet department. It's no longer a cabinet department, but you know, at one point it was. They split them up and made a Department of Education and then they made a Department of Health and Human Services. So,

JOSH: Huh

HRISHI: I thought for a second, unless I'm totally wrong, and I might very well be—Josh is referring to the US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

JOSH: Mmhmm

HRISHI: And I'm like, I was fine to accept it as that. But then later, in this very episode, we have both HUD Secretary and Education Secretary. The HUD Secretary actually makes an appearance and the Education Secretary is mentioned. So, then I didn't know what was happening.

JOSH: See, this is where we should have, I think I've pitched it before, a special phone that we pick up and it just rings on Eli's end and we talk on the hotline briefly.

HRISHI: Yeah. Should we do that? Should we call him right now and see if we can get him?

JOSH: Call him.

[phone ringing]

JOSH: This is exciting.

ELI ATTIE: Well, hello. I'm answering my special *West Wing Weekly* podcast hotline.

JOSH: It works!

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Success!

ELI: [crosstalk] Shaped like a gavel or a bald eagle depending on the refraction of the light.

JOSH: That is a very special phone, indeed.

HRISHI: Eli, thanks so much for joining us.

ELI: Oh, it's a pleasure.

HRISHI: We've called you on the special Eli Bat Signal because we just want to know, what's the deal with this episode? You're credited with the teleplay, with half the teleplay, it's Aaron Sorkin and Eli Attie. Which, as you've noted, is a rare occurrence that Aaron shares teleplay credit. So, what do you remember about this episode? You have any juicy juice for us?

ELI: Yes, I do, and I have very, very fond memories. The episode was filmed and edited and I don't really know exactly why, I don't remember exactly why, but when we—the episode was completely edited it was something like 7 minutes short, which never happens in episodic TV.

JOSH: Not good.

ELI: When you work on a TV show, you typically want an episode to be 3, 4, 5 minutes over so that you can cut the air out of it, you can cut moments that don't work, lines that don't land. Aaron was sometimes writing, like, 70 page scripts. And the dialogue was so fast sometimes it would be on time, sometimes it would be, as with this episode, a little under time, and sometimes it would be catastrophically over time and you'd have to lift out a whole story line. So this one came in incredibly short and Aaron was home with a really bad cold and rarely, in my memory, was sick or was out of the office, but he was home for days and the episode was gonna air fairly soon. I mean, they really need to deliver it. And so I sort of came up with this storyline that's in the episode where, basically, Toby is smacking down a kind of an errant HUD Secretary. We faxed the pages to Aaron and he called me and he just dictated to me a few changes. It's not things I do now, as a writer. You know, you stumble onto the story by accident, that was a real Aaron thing. You know, where you're just in some other random piece of mundane business and a little grain of information comes out of it. The audience doesn't really know what that piece of information is for another scene or two. It really hides the ball. So this is just me pretending to be Aaron Sorkin and he was lovely about it. He was home, you know, with a horrible cold or I'm sure he would've given me more notes on the pages, but the one thing I really remember is that I'd written this exchange—and I have the original scenes here—I'd written where Toby says to Bonnie, "Page the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, I want to see him in my office." And then she says, "when?" and he says, "two days ago really, but I'll settle for as fast as he can hustle a town car down Pennsylvania Avenue." I actually can't even get that out, trying to speak that line. But Bonnie, in the version Aaron dictated to me said, she says—

[West Wing Episode 3.17 excerpt]

GINGER: When?

TOBY: Look at my face.

GINGER: Now?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: In the filmed version, actually, it switches from Bonnie, it's Ginger in the episode.

ELI: Oh, that's interesting. Ok. I didn't even have time to re-watch the episode. Well, I was trying to help Bonnie out here and the role went to Ginger.

JOSH: That may have been an availability issue.

ELI: What I really remember is that line, “look at my face.” And I’m sure there were other changes that he made that were instructive and illuminating. So, you know, it was really thrilling for me because this was my first year in the entertainment business in any way, shape, or form and it was an accident. So it was just, like, having the greatest screenwriting course you could ever have and then suddenly you get to write some scenes. They were shot I think that week and then aired within another couple weeks. And Aaron’s view was, well you wrote part of the teleplay, so I’m gonna credit...I think I tried to resist the credit because it seemed unusual and you know, it was like a day’s work.

JOSH: And you were clearly new if you were saying no.

ELI: I was clearly new, exactly right.

JOSH: Oh, no, I don’t want credit. Let me ask you, so it must have been a high pressure situation altogether, but was there an additional pressure to create a precisely 7-minute chunk of story? Did you have to write so close to that time?

ELI: No, not in the sense that we got to do with this storyline what you would do with the normal episode of TV, which is then you edit it. We made sure it was plenty. You know, lots of people were gonna look at these scenes and if it didn’t work out maybe they would just go give Aaron some cold medicine, you know, like, there were lots of—you know, I always used to joke when I started working in television on *The West Wing* that, you know, if you completely screwed up your job and none of the 50 people, you know who would be looking at what you did caught it and it managed to make it on the air, the worst possible outcome would be someone would sell less liquid Tide that week. So, it never really felt [crosstalk] that pressured.

JOSH: [crosstalk] That’s a good attitude.

ELI: It never really felt that pressured.

JOSH: I didn’t think about it, actually, you’re right. I mean, coming from the environment you were used to in terms of the turnover or the lag time between writing something and it going out live, this is luxury.

ELI: Yeah, *The West Wing* had a reputation as being a pretty intense show and Aaron’s a pretty intense guy and works really hard, but I felt like every day was kind of a half day. And it was also fun. I mean, when I look at these scenes, this was a day’s work. It was just banter, it was just having fun. And also by the way, if you’re interested you know, getting to express a little something about my time in politics and this story really for me, this is a big issue in executive political offices. You know, President’s offices, Governor’s offices, Mayor’s offices and I started right after college. My first job was working in City Hall when David Dinkins was the Mayor. I really think the grain of this story came from a lovely guy, actually, who I always liked named Mark Green, who was David Dinkins Commissioner of Consumer Affairs. David Dinkins was, is a lovely man who had a kind of a politically challenged administration in a lot of ways and we had a lot of things go wrong all the time. I was just kind of a kid speechwriter, but Mark Green

would always announce interesting, cool things and we'd be sitting around the Mayor's office thinking, like why didn't we get a crack at that? And it happened all the time in the Clinton White House too. So that was the grain of this and I loved that, you know the idea of Toby smacking a guy down and this wasn't even something the President would've bothered to announce, it was just on principle. And I'm pretty sure that after this episode aired, if I remembered correctly one of the producers of the show, it might've been Lou Wells, John Wells brother ended up on an airplane, somebody did, with Andrew Cuomo and he thought this was about him. And I got asked by a New York Times reporter if it was about Andrew Cuomo and it wasn't and I begged the New York Times reporter not to print it and he didn't.

HRISHI: But you did mention that it would happen in the Clinton White House. So, it wasn't NOT about him.

ELI: I would say that's very well phrased.

HRISHI: Alright.

JOSH: I like how in *The West Wing*, and I suspect in the real world, there's a certain relish taken in, of course on a television show you want to do it face-to-face so you get a better scene, but is this the kind of thing where you send for someone and you make them sit in your office and then you come in and you smack them down with the eye contact?

ELI: You know, everyone I worked for in politics, certainly David Dinkins, Dick Gephardt on Capitol Hill, Clinton, and Gore, those were really my four bosses in politics; they didn't really do the Lyndon Johnson threatening, you know taking away people's, you know parking spots and, you know kicking people to the street. And there was all this lore about it and I always felt like all the politicians I worked for got kicked around a lot, even by people in their own party and they never really did stuff like this. And you'd always hear about it and sometimes people would make a lot of noise about it; oh, we're gonna call so-and-so in and we're going to strip them of their, you know, committee membership or we're gonna... And that never happened and so I kind of felt, it'd be nice if it did because, you know you gotta use sticks sometimes, though it's not going well for our current President, but that's a different matter.

HRISHI: Did you overlap with Rahm Emanuel?

ELI: Oh yeah, oh yeah. I worked a lot with Rahm, actually.

HRISHI: I always had the sense [crosstalk] that he

JOSH: [crosstalk] He carried a big stick.

HRISHI: Yeah, that that was his way of operating.

ELI: That's absolutely right. In fact, Rahm, who I love and really admire, he I think would wield the stick on people who didn't necessarily deserve the stick. He was Clinton's fundraiser in

1992, his chief fundraiser and he was famous for getting checks from donors so you would assume that was a nice thing that somebody does, they write you a check. And he would call up the donor and he would say “your check’s too small, I’m ripping it up and sending it back.” And he would hang up the phone. And people were terrified and they would [crosstalk] write a bigger check.

JOSH: [crosstalk] That’s ballsy.

ELI: Yeah. Yeah, and you know, he did this thing that, you know was also famous, which I used in an episode in the fifth season where he sent some political adversary a dead fish wrapped in newspaper. You know and he, he was all stick, he was actually all stick. But he was actually, Ron was a very nice guy behind your back. If he could do something nice for you without you knowing. [crosstalk] It’s really true.

JOSH: [crosstalk] That’s a great line

ELI: It’s really true.

HRISHI: Ok, one more piece of trivia that we’d like to get from you before we let you go. Tell us about Mrs. Morello.

ELI: Mrs. Morello was my tenth grade social studies teacher at Hunter College High School in Manhattan on the Upper East Side. It should be famous for the fact that Elena Kagan went there and Lin Manuel Miranda went there. She was just a great teacher who was inspiring and probably one of the people who stoked my interest in, you know politics after my parents. So, I don’t even really remember exactly how it happened, probably ‘cause I’d written some memo to Aaron about education policy or about something, but in the initial scene where Josh and Donna are talking about their favorite teachers, Josh is; the one he names is one of Aaron’s favorite teachers from his high school years and then Mrs. Morello was mine.

JOSH: Did your Mrs. Morello live to see this episode?

ELI: She did. She’s passed away since, sadly. And I had not had any contact with her of any kind since high school, but I got an e-mail from her out of the blue actually, after that episode aired just saying she heard somewhere that it was based on her or guessed that it was and she was very tickled and she was very nice about it and, the power of television.

JOSH: Yeah. How lovely. That’s great.

ELI: It’s kind of an amazing thing. And yeah, that was a lovely thing and, you know we got to do that a lot on the show, actually. Aaron certainly name-checked lots of friends and heroes of his at different times. I actually remember and Josh, you may know this guy; Aaron has a close friend from high school who’s a lawyer who, at the time was working at a law firm, I guess Debevoise and Plimpton? As an homage to that guy I think in the fourth season he had Matt Perry’s character, he had worked at Debevoise and Plimpton and Aaron wasn’t there when they

filmed the scene and Matt mispronounced Debevoise and it was so important to Aaron to do this for his friend that he, they had Matt Perry come back in and loop the word so that it would be pronounced correctly. Nobody in the country would know, but Aaron's friend would know.

JOSH: That's a fantastic anecdote.

HRISHI: That's a wonderful thing that you did for your teacher. It's really a television writer's version of a Presidential Proclamation, so.

JOSH: Indeed.

HRISHI: Good on you.

ELI: You know, it's funny because, I did this on The West Wing too, another thing that's great to do is to name characters after close friends of yours and then get, have them insulted a lot in the episode.

JOSH: I was wondering about that, whether you ever villainized anyone on purpose.

ELI: Many times. [crosstalk] many times.

JOSH: [crosstalk] Sure

ELI: And, in fact, two of my best friends in the world, one is named David McKenna another's named David Siegel, both journalists, and there have been on The West Wing and on other things I've done, numerous characters named Siegel and McKenna and they, they never come off well.

JOSH: And they probably love it.

ELI: You know, I can't speak for them.

HRISHI: Well, thanks Eli, thanks so much.

ELI: A great pleasure. The gavel/eagle phone will never be far from my side.

JOSH: Ok. We will need you again.

[Short Outro Music]

JOSH: Do you have a Mrs. Morello in your past?

HRISHI: I have several, I think.

JOSH: I do, too.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: This subplot moved me very much. Near tears at the end because I have a great regret about not thanking a teacher who was very important to me in my life. There's a guy named Barry Seabell, may he rest in peace, who was head of the theater department in my high school and by high school I already knew I wanted to be an actor and I was way into it, but he saw something in me and cast me in a lot of productions and we became very close and his teaching and his encouragement meant a great deal to me. In 9th grade he called me at home and having auditioned for *Dirty Work at the Crosswords; Or Tempted, Tried, and True: A Melodrama in Three Acts* and asked me would I feel comfortable playing a female role and I said I'd be delighted to play the old lady in the show. And then towards the end of my high school he and I had like a little, over silliness, a little parting of ways. And then soon after, I was on Broadway thanks to Aaron Sorkin in *A Few Good Men*, and, you know, this was in New York, I went to high school in the Bronx, I never invited, I don't know how I didn't invite this guy who was so important to me, I think eventually becoming an actor, to see me on Broadway. And then when I moved to LA and I continued to work as an actor and I thought, you know, I've got to get in touch with Barry Seabell and tell him what he meant to me and by the time I tracked him down, I discovered that he had passed away at a very early age, tragically. And it's one of the great undone things in my life and so seeing Donna have this moment putting her special teacher on the phone with the President of the United States was, I thought very very touching.

HRISHI: Well, I know it doesn't make up for it but you honor him a little bit here.

JOSH: Well, thanks for saying that. But go people, go hug your teachers, call your teachers and thank them. Your Mrs, not all of them, there are terrible teachers, too, but thank you Mrs. Morellos.

HRISHI: There's a lot of alliteration from Donna in this episode.

[West Wing Episode 3.17 excerpt]

DONNA: Josh, wrote you a memo on Molly Morello.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: There's a lot of, actually language stuff that I noticed in this particular episode.

HRISHI: What else?

JOSH: I believe it's Sam's use of the word "inviabile" I picked up on. To the point where I had to double check because I don't think that's a word I ever use, I think I would say unviable. Both seem to be acceptable. Inviabile, to me sounds a lot more elegant and I plan to use it as soon as appropriate in my casual conversation. I also noticed that, remember at one point, I think Josh is looking for a folder or some information, he [crosstalk] misplaced.

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Yeah

[West Wing Episode 3.17 excerpt]

JOSH: I also need the Cabinet Affairs Amplification Report and if you can get the AP farm guy back online, I'm almost sure Toby gave me a punchier quote on Ag-reorganization.

DONNA: I shall do those things.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: I love that little moment because I happen to be reading a book about lexicography called *Word by Word* by Kory Stamper.

HRISHI: Oh! Kory Stamper of MiriamWebster.com.

JOSH: Very good. How do you know that?

HRISHI: Kory Stamper? She's big on my Twitter.

JOSH: Oh! Maybe we can have her on some time.

HRISHI: Yeah, we definitely could.

JOSH: Cause the book is wonderfully written, it's very witty and funny and it's a delightful read and fascinating if you are interested in words. She refers to a short introduction to English grammar with critical notes by the Right Reverend Robert Lowth, L-O-W-T-H, I hope I'm pronouncing that correctly and she quotes him on the use of shall vs will. "Will, in the first person singular and plural promises or threatens and in the second and third persons only foretells. Shall, on the contrary, in the first person simply foretells, in the second and third persons promises, commands, or threatens." A slight, but interesting distinction because those two words. I also noted, interestingly, I'm sorry to take the Closed Captioning person or people to task once again, did you notice?

HRISHI: I noticed something as well, I wanted to bring it up with you.

JOSH: Tell me what you saw.

HRISHI: It's not a mistake, but at one point they just rephrase a line in order to save space and time I think, because Toby says it really quickly. What's the line that you were gonna mention?

JOSH: Well, mine is, I think, correcting and shortening, but also making a mistake. Sam says

[West Wing Episode 3.17 excerpt]

SAM: I can think of a lot of people who are better suited to this than I am.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: But the Closed Captioning person writes, "I think there are others who are better suited than me." Not even than I, so she's

HRISHI: Right

JOSH: she or he has shortened it and I think, made it incorrect. Or less to be desired, in any event.

HRISHI: Yeah, the one that I noticed was a shortening and rephrasing which happens, I guess a fair amount. It struck me how much this person's job is not simply, like, a transcriber. They're really acting as a translator.

JOSH: Right, but all this makes me think that were we to bring this to Aaron's attention, he would bang his head against the wall seeing that they had rewritten him.

HRISHI: Exactly. That was what I thought, too. Considering the precision with which every character needs, you know, "no, no, no no no no no no no no no no no."

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: You have to get the correct number of no's in there.

JOSH: Indeed.

HRISHI: That, yeah, these are liberties that Aaron would not want them to take. Along similar lines, I wonder how Aaron feels when he hears a line like Martin Sheen's

[West Wing Episode 3.17 excerpt]

BARTLET: Tell Josh that General Pulaski was a Polish Brigadier General who vanquished the Russian and Prussian military, then came to the colonies and commanded our calvary [sic] during the American Revolution.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Oh! Somebody gave me a heads up on this one, are you ever going to discuss the fact that President Bartlet says "calvary."

HRISHI: Right, which means something else entirely.

JOSH: Wait, what dos calvary mean?

HRISHI: It's a Bible thing, I thought you would know.

JOSH: I've heard of Calvary Baptist Church, but I guess I don't know what it means.

HRISHI: I'm gonna look it up on Kory Stamper's site here, MerriamWebster.com. Definition of Calvary; an open-air representation of the Crucifixion of Jesus or, an experience of usually intense mental suffering.

JOSH: Is that where the term Calvinists comes from?

HRISHI: No. But! It is where the title of the film *Calvary* comes from, which is a fantastic movie that everyone should see. Brendan Gleeson stars in it, Chris O'Dowd.

JOSH: Blendon Greeson, I think is how Martin Sheen says it.

HRISHI: What's happening?

JOSH: So noted, a mispronunciation. And one wonders how that gets by. Because first of all, they have an original where they do the first take and somebody comes over and whispers to Martin, "it sounds like you're saying 'calvary,' say 'cavalry.'" And then if just nobody can bring themselves to do that, there's a change to bring him in and loop that one word, you know, there's something called ADR...

HRISHI: Right

JOSH: where if you don't get audio for some reason, or you want to change a line, or you want to change or tweak a performance, you do a little dubbing and they could have dubbed the word very easily, so

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: You also got a lot of people, I think people were up in arms about Lord John's pronunciation of the word "i-s-l-a-y"

HRISHI: Yeah

JOSH: Which I think is supposed to be "EYE-la." It's either "EYE-lay" or "EYE-la," I believe, depending on how you pronounce it. Oh dear...

HRISHI: We did get a lot of comments about it.

JOSH: Yes. I mean, we can't share every piece of feedback we ever get for the response is generally torrential, but when there's a critical mass surrounding a particular gaff, we try to give it a little air time.

HRISHI: So, yeah, "i-s-l-a-y" is not pronounced "IS-lay," it's pronounced another way, depending on how you pronounce it. You heard it here first.

JOSH: The definitive answer.

HRISHI: I'm looking it up on a whiskey magazine forum here. Someone says "is it pronounced 'E-la' or 'EYE-lay?'" And someone says, "the residents of 'EYE-la' have always said to me 'welcome to EYE-la'" And then someone says, "I know a few Glaswegians who pronounced it 'EYE-lee," but I think that's just their local accent dialect. The people I've spoken with say 'EYE-la.'"

JOSH: I think we can all agree though, that Lord John's pronunciation was incorrect.

HRISHI: Mmhmm

JOSH: And he had a lot of options to choose from. I noticed a couple, new to me, Aaron Sorkin tropes in this episode.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: One is

HRISHI: but you've already decided that they're tropes?

JOSH: Well, I believe them to be. I mean, I noticed them this episode, but I can link them to past and future episodes. I believe that Aaron likes to pull an emotional gut punch by having someone write four words on a piece of paper or a napkin. We've had "Let Bartlet be Bartlet," this episode we have

HRISHI: "Because I could die."

JOSH: And, without getting too spoiler-y, in an upcoming episode in season four called *Arctic Radar*, I will be involved in the passage of another piece of paper with four words written on it. *And every time, they're great moments. The reveal is always, like, "oooh!" It's always a very, "he gave him the knife!" moment. But it's funny, it's Aaron likes four words on a little piece of paper. Four words on a scrap of paper, that's his thing.*

HRISHI: Next time, I'm not gonna say he gave him the knife, I'm gonna write it down on a piece of paper and hand it to you.

JOSH: That would have been more powerful! Just, yeah, write it down and hold it up to your camera. And then, also in this episode and I think it happens elsewhere, somebody comes into someone else's room and before they can discuss something of great importance to them that might be a little awkward or difficult, they have to wait for the person they're visiting to calm down from a little rant. So Sam Seaborn walks into Vice President Hoynes' office and he has to wait for him to get off of this "hockey is boring to watch" rant before he can discuss the sensitive matter at hand. And then later, Leo and Vice President Hoynes enter the Oval to talk to the President and he's just going off on American trucking.

[West Wing Episode 3.17 excerpt]

BARTLET: We pack this stuff in two inches of stainless steel and four inches of lead. We rammed it with trains and dropped it from helicopters and it still isn't gonna protect us from the thing we haven't thought of.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And it's just that kind of moment, they exchange a look like, ok, let's let him just kind of get through his spiel. But it's a very Aaron thing.

HRISHI: I love that. My favorite example of it though, is from another political show

JOSH: Yes

HRISHI: The season two opener of *Parks and Recreation*, where Ron comes into Leslie's office and he says "here's the situation," and Leslie goes "my parents went away on a week's vacation" and then she goes and does the entire, like first verse I think of *Parents Just Don't Understand* based on that.

[Parks and Recreation Episode 2.01 excerpt]

LESLIE KNOPE: [sung] So to all you kids all across the land, no need to argue, parents just don't understand.

DONNA: Alright!

LESLIE KNOPE: Thank you, thank you. Just a little something I know. So what's up?

RON SWANSON: Uh, someone is on fire in Ramsett Park, they need you to get down there right away.

LESLIE KNOPE: Oh my god.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah, there you go. It's the exact same thing.

HRISHI: Yup.

JOSH: By the way, you know, earlier in the history of this podcast, I told you that I hadn't watched the show *Parks and Rec*. I had, actually maybe watched an episode or part of one, anyway since your strong recommendation, I've binged the entire thing with my family, re-watched many episodes. It is so wonderful and so great that I don't know how I didn't latch onto it from the get-go. What a great show. There's also a little, I think a little more data on job performance among the assistants in this episode. We, I think Ginger goes down a notch in my respect, because there's a moment when Toby is waiting in the mural room for Secretary Fisher

and he has to come out and say to Ginger like, “where is he?” and then Ginger explains why he’s not coming. Ginger really, I think as a decent assistant probably should have gone into the room the moment she found out he wasn’t coming.

HRISHI: Right. Right.

JOSH: This isn’t a tremendously efficient assistanting. However,

HRISHI: I just feel so bad for Ginger in the whole episode, though.

JOSH: Look, I feel bad for anyone who has to work with Richard. I mean Toby. Yeah, that said, there’s a nice little tick up in my estimation, although Margaret is clearly wonderful at what she does

[West Wing Episode 3.17 excerpt]

LEO: You can go home now.

MARGARET: I go home when you go home.

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Which is a pretty great

HRISHI: It’s so good

JOSH: little mo—throwaway moment, but it’s so of the ethos of this staff.

HRISHI: I go home when you go home as in, like always, that’s the rule. It’s so great. I wanted to go back to the Vice Presidential swap for a second because there was that book *Double Down* that came out in 2013 about the 2012 Presidential election. Do you remember that?

JOSH: Vaguely. Just the title. I haven’t read it.

HRISHI: It was called *Double Down: Game Change 2012* and then HBO made a movie of it called *Game Change*.

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: In that book, there’s a revelation that there was a very similar incident in real life, mirroring what happens in this episode. Some Obama advisers were looking at the possibility of replacing Vice President Biden with Hillary Clinton. And apparently there was a lot of effort to make sure that these discussions, just this idea, the conversation never made its way to any of the people involved. The President never heard about it, the Vice President never heard about it, the Secretary never heard about it. It was just in a room somewhere, they talked about how the electoral math might shake out if they were to do this switch.

JOSH: That's interesting. I love when things happen in the reverse order and it happened first on *The West Wing*.

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: Although I imagine this kind of conversation happens with great regularity because there has to be a balance between I guess, ideology and pragmatics and you do have to figure out whether your ticket is going to get you elected and the case presented in this episode, Bruno and Doug have decided there's literally no electoral path to victory with Hoynes on the ticket. I mean, this is a serious state of affairs. And I like that Hoynes is ahead of it.

[*West Wing* Episode 3.17 excerpt]

BARTLET: Leo, what the hell is this meeting that's going on all night across the hall?

LEO: We can talk about it later.

HOYNES: It's a meeting about having me replaced on the ticket. I know how to count to 270.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Yeah. This episode had a lot of corporate tie-ins, too. You know, Josh describes Vice President Hoynes

[*West Wing* Episode 3.17 excerpt]

JOSH: The Tostitos Vice President is gonna lead an independent movement?

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And I thought, oh, Tostitos shout-out. But then there was also an E-bay shout-out and a Google shout-out.

JOSH: There was probably money changing hands as those words are spoken.

HRISHI: I was wondering.

JOSH: Although the Tostitos President is not, the connotation isn't—and Tostitos are fantastic.

HRISHI: [crosstalk] I guess that's true.

JOSH: [crosstalk] it's more like, this guy is bought and sold.

HRISHI: I love the moment when the President and Charlie are talking about James Bond and the President says

[*West Wing* Episode 3.17 excerpt]

BARTLET: Can I tell you what's messed up about James Bond?

CHARLIE: Nothing

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah, don't go there. I love that the President also is excited to do Charlie's taxes. It's funny.

HRISHI: It's pretty cute.

JOSH: It is.

HRISHI: I once did my friends taxes for a burrito.

JOSH: Ha. It's an intimate thing, is the other thought I had.

HRISHI: That's true.

JOSH: You know, finding out exactly how much money one makes, how philanthropic one is. It's a peek into someone's soul, on a certain level. Which makes it surprising that Donald Trump has tax returns at all.

HRISHI: So we think.

JOSH: Fair.

HRISHI: Maybe there's a reason why we haven't seen them.

JOSH: Indeed.

HRISHI: And then he gave him the DVD player.

JOSH: He gave him the DVD player! It's not as good as the knives thing, cause it's more...

HRISHI: It's not as good. He didn't spring for the Paul Revere-crafted DVD player. If he'd really cared, he would've given him the DVD player that had belonged to his father's father's father.

JOSH: Yeah, it would have been artisan made.

HRISHI: It is cute to hear Charlie getting so excited about what is clearly standard definition technology.

JOSH: Right. We should have Kory Stamper on to discuss standard definition technology.

HRISHI: Oh! Boom. The tiniest boom.

JOSH: Splat.

HRISHI: I have these little speakers that I was given, they're little wireless Bluetooth speakers, and I think of you every time I look at them because they're called "miniboom."

JOSH: [crosstalk] That's fantastic

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Which is often all your jokes deserve.

JOSH: Boom.

HRISHI: Oh! I didn't get to talk about my favorite part!

JOSH: Oh, yay!

HRISHI: Josh,

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: My favorite part in this episode is when Leo, following on the heels of the President telling Charlie that he doesn't even need a stamp to give him the money, the President's like, just hand it over. Leo then, it almost seems like Leo tries to be a more consoling presence and he's like, well, this is what happened. Leo explains what the ramifications were, why this happened, you know Charlie gets to tell him his objections. And then at the end of the exchange, Leo says

[West Wing Episode 3.17 excerpt]

LEO: We would have preferred if you ate in a restaurant or traveled.

CHARLIE: Me too.

LEO: Well, in any event...

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: He just has his hand down low on the bottom of the screen and then he wiggles his fingers.

JOSH: Oh yes, it's a great touch.

HRISHI: It's my favorite thing. I think I've said six things are my favorite thing in this episode, but this is number 1 of those six. He's like, "in any case," he puts his hand out and Charlie goes, "what?" And then he just wiggles his fingers.

JOSH: Yeah, it's pretty good.

HRISHI: And that finger wiggling is fantastic. But this, for anyone who might not remember or is too young to remember, the tax rebate; this is a kind of a funny thing, because you, it's hard to imagine that the Bartlet administration would actually give out a tax rebate in order to stimulate the economy. One because the economy is doing great, according to the show and every moment he talks about all the continuous growth. But also, you know this is a discussion modeled after the tax relief that the Bush administration passed in 2001 where the same thing happened. You know, you got the rebate check and it was supposed to stimulate the economy.

JOSH: Right. People squirreled it away.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Ok, we're gonna take a little break, and when we come back Hrishu will talk with Chris Lu, the former Deputy Labor Secretary and White House Cabinet Secretary under President Obama.

[Ad Break]

HRISHI: So, in this episode, Donna's trying to get a Presidential proclamation. Joining us now is Chris Lu. Chris Lu was one of the longest serving staffers to Barack Obama. They met at Harvard Law School and in the first term of the Obama administration Chris served as the White House Cabinet Secretary, which meant he was in charge of managing the Cabinet, which comes up a lot in this episode. During the second term, Chris was the Deputy Secretary of Labor. But for this particular episode, I was hoping to talk to you about this Presidential proclamation that Donna wants to get from President Bartlet. How realistic is it that she could ever get a proclamation for her teacher?

CHRIS: Well, it's not realistic that she could get a proclamation for her teacher. There are other ways that the White House could have honored her. If there were an event, for instance a retirement party, the White House can send out a message that would be read. There could be a letter that is sent to her, a congratulatory letter. But proclamations are generally reserved for occasions of more national importance.

HRISHI: When you were White House Cabinet Secretary, is this something that you would deal with?

CHRIS: Absolutely. The White House does well over a hundred proclamations like this every year and it's everything from National Farm Safety and Health Week to Labor Day, Memorial Day, African American History Month to proclamations honoring victims of a tragedy, it could be Sandy Hook, Fort Hood. There were kind of a slate of proclamations that were done every single year, but White Houses had the ability to add or subtract and there have been some noticeable changes between what was done during the Obama administration and what's been done during the Trump administration.

HRISHI: Ok so when you watch this episode, what is your reaction to it? When you see it, do you just think about all the ways in which it's inaccurate or did it strike you as being pretty accurate?

CHRIS: Well, Donna is my favorite character in *The West Wing* and one of the reasons why is that I love her passion and her idealism and, of course of anyone in the White House to think that they could get a proclamation, it would be Donna. And so that, you know sort of rang true and you sort of thought within the White House that you always had the ability to kind of pull some strings to help someone out. And, appropriately, both Josh and President Bartlet in this episode say, you know, we just can't do these favors for ourselves, you know we set precedents which becomes a problem. But, the idea of doing research on proclamations, which we had to do all the time, vetting the person or the cause, is just something that happens.

[West Wing Episode 3.17 excerpt]

BARTLET: It says here in a briefing paper hastily written by Deputy Josh Lyman, that in the 60s when the Madison Superintendent of schools banned Twelfth Night for reasons passing understanding, a Mrs. Molly Morello had students over to her home on Saturdays to read it.

[end excerpt]

CHRIS: Whether it's a proclamation or a reference in a speech or a guest in the First Lady's box at the State of the Union, you're always trying to vet these people to make sure that there's nothing in their background that would cause embarrassment to the President.

HRISHI: What was the diciest, weirdest proclamation that you ever had to shepherd through?

CHRIS: You know, I can't actually remember one and I think part of it is because these are fairly routine. As I said, there is a list of weeks and months that get proclaimed by every single President and you start from that. The greater challenge is more how do you make a Labor Day proclamation sound interesting after it's been done for the last 75 years. That's sometimes the bigger challenge and I give great credit to the folks not only in the agencies who draft the proclamations, but also in the White House Correspondents Office, which takes the lead, that they can come up with creative ways to say the same thing every single year.

HRISHI: What about this move where the President calls Mrs. Morello on the phone, you know as a consolation prize. No proclamation, but I'll give you a personalized phone call from the Oval Office.

CHRIS: That's pretty extraordinary and while I can't remember a specific instance where President Obama called someone to congratulate them, at least somebody that was close to me. I think all of us that served in the Obama White House can think of multiple instances where the President demonstrated kindness to our family members who they met, to a sick child, to a wounded warrior. One of the great traditions that we had in the White House was that when you left the White House you got to take a departure photo with the President and you could bring

not only your spouse or family members, and the President would spend a little bit of time and take a photo and the President always gravitated to the little children, the babies, your grandmother, and those are the memories that kind of stick out in all of us, the kindness that he showed our family members and really thanking all of them for supporting us and for the sacrifices that we had made along the way.

HRISHI: So one of the things that happens in this episode is that Toby drags in Secretary Fisher, the HUD Secretary, because he's jumped the line of succession in Toby's eyes to try and make this announcement.

[West Wing Episode 3.17 excerpt]

TOBY: Next time you announce new policy that isn't cleared by this office, we're announcing you're moving back to New Jersey.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Is that a scenario that sounded familiar to you at all?

CHRIS: That scenario sounds way too familiar to me. In this episode they talk about a Cabinet Affairs Report and we put a report together like that every Thursday night, that laid out what the entire federal government was doing and it was a way for us to deconflict events so that you weren't having too many policy announcements on the same day and obviously to spot problematic issues, as Toby is doing here with the HUD Secretary.

HRISHI: That's the report that Josh is referring to, right? He says, "I also need the Cabinet Affairs Amplification Report."

CHRIS: Right. It's the one both that Josh is talking about and which Toby then uses when his assistant goes through the announcements that are coming down, coming down the pipe.

HRISHI: Right

[West Wing Episode 3.17 excerpt]

TOBY: I need to know what the cabinet's doing tomorrow.

ASSISTANT: 10:30, Drug Czar on Border Control. Noon, HUD Secretary on Home Ownership Loans. Also noon, technical briefing at ONDCP.

[end excerpt]

CHRIS: Right.

HRISHI: And that's the way it's used in real life, as well, it's collected from the different various cabinet departments and then it's circulated among the White House staffers?

CHRIS: Right, and I had a staff of people who were experts in what each of the agencies were doing and would distill down those 20 to 25 pages from each agency into the relevant, the most important announcements, press events that were coming down the road.

HRISHI: What else does the Cabinet Secretary do?

CHRIS: Well, when Rahm Emanuel offered me the job after Election Day in 2008, he said, the mantra of my office was “No surprises.” Rahm never wanted to be surprised by something happening in the agencies and he never wanted the agencies to be surprised by an announcement that the White House was making. So I was really the primary conduit of information going back and forth between the White House and not only the Cabinet agencies, but really as many of the non-Cabinet agencies as possible. And also ensuring that the agencies were coordinated among themselves as well, because they would often be working on issues that the White House wasn’t involved in, but touched on another agency. I was often the first person that was called by a cabinet member who was upset about something or if the White House had to flag something for a cabinet member, I was the one who often made those phone calls.

HRISHI: So, there was supposed to be no communication breakdowns, but I guess communication breakdowns are inevitable.

CHRIS: The federal government is a very large place. It is hard to know, always, what is happening throughout the federal government and it’s even hard when you’re in the, working in the West Wing to know everything that is happening throughout the White House as well. So, communication breakdowns did happen, we certainly tried to minimize it and I’m proud that, having served in that role for the first four years of the Obama Administration, that we had an effective cabinet that was a collaborative one, we got a lot of things done and we did so without any real major incidents.

HRISHI: Do you have any insights on the discussions of the NAEP scores?

[West Wing Episode 3.17 excerpt]

SAM: NAEP figures are out today.

TOBY: Ok

SAM: They’re up

TOBY: So instead of trailing 18 third world countries in reading and math, we trail how many?

SAM: Up’s better than down. Either way it’s news, the Education Secretary ought to make a statement.

TOBY: Tomorrow’s no good, we’ve got half a dozen events on the books.

SAM: We keep saying education's our number one priority.

TOBY: And tomorrow we're trying to make news on five of our other number one priorities.

[end excerpt]

CHRIS: I don't know about the NAEP scores specifically, but it is an interesting issue in the sense that announcements are coming out of the agencies all the time. Dozens of agencies are making announcements and I think part of the challenge we have in the White House is to figure out which one of those announcements are ones that the Secretary of Education should be announcing, which ones should be announced from the podium at the White House Press Briefing Room, or which ones are sufficiently important that the President should announce them.

HRISHI: Yeah, because you're contrasting Sam's statement that the Education Secretary ought to make a statement about the NAEP scores. Meanwhile, Toby is saying that the HUD Secretary absolutely should not be making the announcement about Home Ownership Loans.

CHRIS: Exactly. Both of these announcements are good news announcements, but which ones should be announced by the agencies, which ones should be announced by the White House. And that's always a constant tension in administrations.

HRISHI: And who would be the deciding voice in those, in those moments of tension?

CHRIS: Decisions about who will make an announcement are often made by the White House Chief of Staff or by the Communications Director or the Press Secretary. A little bit of it often depends on the President's availability. It's also, another issue to consider is what is the message of the day in the White House and I think one of the important parts about my job was to know, here's what the President is focusing on today, do we want to have competing messages coming out of the agencies. Or if the message is sufficiently important coming out of the agencies and it'll be drowned out by the President's event or actions, maybe we should push the agency's action into another day to ensure that it gets a little bit more press coverage. So, I often analogize my job a little bit to being an air traffic controller and making sure that all the planes are moving around on the screen and things are taking off and landing without any accidents.

HRISHI: I know everybody's playing on the same team, but was there a sense that the Cabinet Secretaries expected you to kind of push their agenda forward and an expectation from the Chief of Staff that you were supposed to push the West Wing's agenda forward?

CHRIS: That's an interesting way of putting it. I definitely felt like I was caught between the White House Chief of Staff and the members of the cabinet, both of who thought I worked for them. In part, my job was to make sure that we were all playing on the same team all the time and it was a challenge.

HRISHI: It sounds a little bit like you're managing more than issues. In some ways, maybe the harder thing to juggle were egos.

CHRIS: Yeah, you know, people often said it was like herding cats and I would say, it's like herding cats if they had really big egos. One of the interesting things about this was the cabinet was comprised of, you know some of the most accomplished public servants in America. These were former governors and senators and military leaders, business leaders, who in their previous lives were used to being somewhat autonomous, were used to being the ones in charge. And I think the challenge is always when someone says, the White House wants you to do something. I would always say the White House is a building, the White House is not a person, so find out who the person in the White House who's giving the direction is, and often times that was my job to go back and figure out where this instruction came from and whether the person that had issued that instruction had the authority to do so. And often times you found out, no this was, you know some 25 year old you know, staff assistant saying, hey we should do this. Wait, wait, wait, that's not the way we do things, we have a process and we need to actually have a further conversation about this.

HRISHI: Excellent. Chris, I think that's all the questions that I have. Thank you so much for bring some context to this episode.

CHRIS: Absolutely. It is such a pleasure to do this. I'm a huge fan of *The West Wing* and I'm a huge fan of this podcast, so thank you for having me on.

HRISHI: Thanks a lot.

JOSH: That is it for this particular episode of *The West Wing*, but we'll be back, you know we will.

HRISHI: It's also the end of this episode of *The West Wing Weekly*.

JOSH: Oh. That's what I meant. What can I tell you? *The West Wing Weekly* is a proud member of Radiotopia, a curated selection of fine, fine podcasts. Part of PRX. You can find the aforementioned podcasts at Radiotopia.fm. Radiotopia itself is made possible by a grant from the Knight Foundation.

HRISHI: Thanks as always to Margaret Miller, our editor, and Zach McNees, our editor and mixer.

JOSH: Oh, he's good.

HRISHI: And Izzy Malina, who's been helping us out this summer as our social media intern.

JOSH: I really love that third one.

HRISHI: You can find us online at I think you know where.

JOSH: That's true. And you probably know where you can give us a five-star rating. That's iTunes! Or anywhere else people rate podcasts. We're having a live event on August 26th in San Francisco at the Castro Theater, but you cannot come if you don't currently have a ticket because we are sold out.

HRISHI: You can find our guest Chris Lu on Twitter @ChrisLu44.

JOSH: You can buy a pin by going to westwingweekly.com/pin.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOSH: Ok.

ELI ATTIE and CHRIS LU: What's next?

[Outro music]