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“What’s Next?”: *The West Wing*’s Contradictory Exceptionalist Narrative

A Thesis in Media and Communications

by

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Abstract

Airing from 1999-2006, *The West Wing* is a highly praised political drama known for its idealized vision of American politics and ways of life. Thought of as a considerably progressive series, this thesis argues that the series' beliefs in American exceptionalism and White supremacy prevent it from living up to that reputation. The series fails to acknowledge Whiteness, yet is sure to point out differing races whenever they appear, perpetuating the normalcy of Whites in power and othering diverse identities. Black individuals specifically are confined to their inferiority among White men and taught that there is safety in assimilating to the approved practices of White culture. They ultimately lack real agency and simply exist to serve their White counterparts. When instances of racial bias occur, they are called out but never resolved. The fictional Bartlet administration in the White House is all talk and no action, proclaiming how much it believes in progressive ideals, but clawing back and settling for more realistic compromises, particularly in domestic politics. Overseas, however, the administration throws caution to the wind and acts out out of "necessity," fulfilling the exceptionalist idea that the United States is fit to, and responsible for, defining justice and progress globally. Orientalist portrayals of terrorism and Middle Eastern conflict post-9/11 are clumsy and offer viewers the chance to see these nations negatively without proper information. At the end of the day, for *The West Wing*, the United States can do no wrong even when it blatantly breaks international law and falters in morality. Looking at the series today, with the widespread censorship modern media suffers from, one can't help but wonder what the nation would look like if writers on *The West Wing* pushed harder on the boundaries of normalcy while they still could.

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Introduction

BARTLET: We will do what is hard. We will achieve what is great.

This is a time for American heroes and we reach for the stars.

(4.2 “20 Hours in America Part II”)

Escapism is the practice of seeking temporary relief from the realities of everyday life, typically through activities involving imagination or entertainment. In times of upset and uncertainty, there can be comfort found in spaces outside ourselves. I enjoy watching television. When I’m upset, I find myself re-watching my favorite shows to feel better.

In November of 2024, I had just celebrated my 21st birthday. It was a difficult time to be celebrating. The day after my birthday, I celebrated voting in my first presidential election. The day after *that*, I stopped celebrating completely. I can’t speak for the whole United States, but I felt as though my world was crashing down before my eyes. I am unashamed to say that I was upset and fearful in the wake of Donald Trump’s election to the White House. There were things that, as a woman and a child of an immigrant, I knew would become harder in the coming months and years. I felt as though I wished I could escape.

Unfortunately, I have no Canadian relatives, so I have to stick it out for the foreseeable future. But on November 6, 2024, I started a rewatch of my all-time favorite television series: *The West Wing*. It was the perfect place to escape to. Here, on my computer, were politicians who truly cared about my future; educated ones, with common sense and morals. *The West Wing* was my fairytale version of America. It was a life I’d wished were real. Or at least, that’s how I’d remembered it.

During this rewatch, my more mature brain began to notice things. Some of the decisions my beloved politicians were making were not ones I agreed with. I noticed a lack of diverse casting and more nuanced prejudices than I previously recalled. I began to wonder: Is this really

an administration I would dream of being led by? Is this really a fairytale version of America at all? Does it deserve this lofty reputation I'd made up in my head? So I kept wondering and paying attention.

And what I decided? *The West Wing* really isn't so special at all.

The Patterns of its Creator - Background and Appealing to Public Opinion

A television show cannot exist without its originator. In the case of *The West Wing*, viewers have Aaron Sorkin to thank for its existence. Outside of this particular series, Sorkin became known for writing about fictionalized versions of real institutions. He is also the creator of *Sports Night* (1998-2000), about ESPN; *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip* (2006-07), inspired by *Saturday Night Live*; and *The Newsroom* (2012-14), which had paid consultants from MSNBC and CNN (Blake, 2013). Each of these series follows the fictional inner workings of the institution they're based on.

On June 24, 2012, Aaron Sorkin's *The Newsroom* debuted on HBO. This series was created to follow the behind-the-scenes action of a fictional news channel, Atlantic Cable News (ACN). Its pilot episode opens with a question-and-answer session involving news anchors at Northwestern University. After having been reluctant to answer other students' questions in a university forum, the not-so-personable ACN news anchor Will McAvoy is asked why America is the "greatest country in the world" ("We Just Decided To"). In the same fashion he's been answering the whole session, he tries to give a snarky response, but the moderator of the panel refuses his answer. So instead, McAvoy delivers a speech about his true thoughts on America's shortcomings as a nation.

MCAVOY: There is absolutely no evidence to support the statement that we're the greatest country in the world... We lead the world in only three categories: number

of incarcerated citizens per capita, number of adults who believe angels are real, and defense spending where we spend more than the next 26 countries combined, 25 of whom are allies.

MCAVOY (cont.): We sure used to be (the greatest country in the world). We stood up for what was right. We fought for moral reasons... We sacrificed. We cared about our neighbors. We put our money where our mouths were, and we never beat our chest... explored the universe, cured diseases, and we cultivated the world's greatest artists and the world's greatest economy. We reached for the stars, acted like men.

The same year this series premiered, a poll by The Chicago Council for Global Affairs asked Americans if the United States was the greatest country in the world, or if it was no greater than any other nation. 70% of participants chose the response amplifying its greatness (Bowman, 2025). Prior to McAvoy's speech in *The Newsroom*, a spectator holds up a piece of paper that reads "IT'S NOT... BUT IT CAN BE" ("We Just Decided To"). This, along with his yearning for the past in his speech, suggests that the United States may not be great in the present, but it started off that way and could be again in the future. The series still believes that America is, overall, the greatest nation; the nation itself just somehow forgot that. While acknowledging its flaws, Sorkin appeals to a cynical audience and simultaneously reinforces the beliefs of the majority of Americans. This is not his first attempt at boosting the status of the nation.

Over a decade earlier, on September 22, 1999, Sorkin's *The West Wing* debuted on NBC. The White House drama that unfolded over seven seasons follows the fictitious Democratic President Bartlet and his senior staff, including Chief of Staff Leo McGarry, Deputy Chief of Staff Josh Lyman, and White House Communications Director Toby Ziegler, through everyday policymaking and personal affairs. They are dedicated civil servants. To the characters within this White House, America truly is the greatest country in the world. There are seldom any storylines in which the main ensemble critically questions their nation's actions or principles, in

a comparison that might set themselves as inferior to other nations. The series has an unwavering optimism for what the United States stands for and what it can be. Where *The West Wing* and *The Newsroom* differ is in their portrayal of in-text doubts, or lack thereof, about the belief in this greatness. Similar, though, is Sorkin's ability to side with the public majority through his narratives at the time of their creation. A year prior to the airing of *The West Wing*, a survey of American parents for Public Agenda found that "84% believed the United States was "a unique country that stands for something special in the world,"" (Bowman, 2025). The American public felt they belonged to the greatest nation in the world, so Sorkin created a parallel nation that believed the same.

An Overview of *The West Wing*

The focus of this thesis, *The West Wing* (1999 - 2006), is known for depicting an idealized vision of America. It believes in the nation and its supremacy. Described as "America's best image of itself" by Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor in *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama*, this opinion is cited or agreed with by many scholars, such as Janet McCabe, Kristina Riegert, Patrick Webster, and others. Philip Cass considers the series a direct descendant of Frank Capra's films in his article "The never-ending story: Palestine, Israel and The West Wing" (2007), following Capra's theme of "the perfectibility of the American political system by the goodwill and understanding of decent men and women" (Cass 32). The series luxuriates itself in this ideal for its entire duration, making governmental affairs seem romantic and noble at every turn. Sorkin himself declared the show a "valentine to public service" in a *New York Times* interview (Carter, 2006). The characters he writes are rich with

likable traits; having the ability to empathize with these individuals and watch them try their best surely makes it more difficult to be steadfast in any criticisms towards them.

Members of President Bartlet's staff on *The West Wing* are from all backgrounds, hold liberal beliefs, and genuinely intend to make things better; as intimated above, they believe these traits will make that possible. These dedicated individuals include Vietnam veteran and chief of staff Leo McGarry (John Spencer); deputy chief of staff, Josh Lyman (Bradley Whitford); Josh's skilled assistant, Donnatella "Donna" Moss (Janel Moloney); communications director and moral compass of the series, Toby Ziegler (Richard Schiff); deputy communications director, Sam Seaborn (Rob Lowe), replaced in Season Four by Will Bailey (Josh Malina); press secretary, Claudia Jean "C. J." Cregg (Allison Janney); and personal aide to the president, as well as the only major character who isn't White, Charlie Young (Dulé Hill).

President Josiah "Jed" Bartlet (Martin Sheen) himself was originally meant to be a peripheral character in the series (McCabe 2). However, the liberal Democrat with a lineage tying back to the Declaration of Independence and a Nobel Prize in economics was so well-received that he became a series regular. Other recurring characters include First Lady Dr. Abigail "Abbey" Bartlet (Stockard Channing), youngest daughter Zoey Bartlet (Elisabeth Moss), and Vice President John Hoynes (Tim Matheson). Each of these characters, principal or not, contributes greatly to the plots of the 155 episodes in the show's run. This thesis focuses on the first four seasons, or the "Sorkin years," as I refer to them. Aaron Sorkin left the series before the fifth season.

The idealistic, golden light around the nobility of government work takes center stage for the first two seasons of *The West Wing*. Bartlet's administration tackles Senate votes, a Supreme Court nomination, two State of the Union addresses, and multiple cover-up scandals. Most

conflict demonstrations are internal, boasting what a hardworking and optimistic team could accomplish, such as supporting a congressional filibuster to approve funding for autism research (“The Stackhouse Filibuster”). As President Bartlet says at the end of Season One, “Decisions are made by those who show up” (“What Kind of Day Has it Been”). International relations are the lesser focus and often have neat conclusions. As we move into the third season of the series, the narrative takes a turn when events in the real world unavoidably seep into the fictional world of Bartlet’s White House. Just weeks before the third season was set to air, the United States was forever altered by the acts of terrorism on September 11, 2001. Sorkin and his team worked quickly to create a special episode in response to the tragedy, titled “Isaac and Ishmael,” that was released as the season’s first episode. The episode itself, discussed further in Chapter 3, was meant to exist outside the show’s canonical storyline; its contents were never to be mentioned again. However, the true outcome of this special is an administration and television show constantly bogged down by foreign conflict.

Once the scope of *The West Wing* widens outside of Washington, D.C., it never quite tightens back up again. Season Three introduces the fictional nation of Qumar, a Western Asian country with conflicting ideals and a leader suspected of being a terrorist mastermind. This leader acts as a stand-in for Osama bin Laden, the leader of al Qaeda, the terrorist organization responsible for the September 11 attacks. Qumar becomes an active player in the show’s narrative over multiple seasons, taking the place of real nations and providing a view into how this fictional America handles international affairs. The series could no longer rely on minute domestic challenges and good-hearted, patriotic speeches. Its audience was living in a world where terrorism was no longer a far-off possibility, and Islamophobia was on the rise. When the focus of the real Americans became fixated on external affairs, so did that of the televised ones.

This shift in content substance post-9/11 is an important indicator of the series' overall ideologies. While self-identified as liberal, and otherwise praised for its idealized notions, the fairytale administration becomes increasingly hawkish in the years after the attacks. Whereas in domestic conflicts there are plenty of unsatisfactory compromises or losses, in foreign affairs, the Bartlet administration doesn't seem to take "no" for an answer. As I discuss later, Bartlet's America works outside of international law and often sees itself as the world's more effective governing body. The show has reached something larger than simply good deeds and noble service. Instead of believing in the uniqueness of governmental work, *The West Wing* believes in the uniqueness of America itself— in other words, a belief in American exceptionalism.

Throughout this thesis, I argue that not only does *The West Wing* believe in the idea of American exceptionalism, but that that belief prevents it from living up to its idealized reputation. Illustrated by oversimplified representations of race, religion, and terrorism, the series has a lackluster manifestation of its progressive ideals. In fact, the series seldom manifests its progressive ideals at all. It consistently claws back its progressive domestic beliefs to settle for "realistic" compromises, while acting out of "necessity" when it comes to foreign policy, portraying the country as simultaneously above international law and perpetuating White supremacy. If it truly were an idealized, romantic version of the real world, it could have gone beyond the norms it sought to replicate; with millions of eyes on the series nationwide, a radical, systemic policy change in fiction might have had a social impact in reality. By trying to prove that the United States is a superior country, *The West Wing* only succeeds at maintaining the status quo above all else.

Literature Review

In preparation for this thesis, I have researched the existing scholarly conversations regarding race, terrorism, and foreign conflict as they pertain to the NBC drama. More specifically, the literature I engaged with examines how the depictions of these topics ultimately contribute to *The West Wing*'s sense of American exceptionalism and how the show's narrative construction contradicts its progressive ideals. When considering sources for this research, the majority of selected texts directly relate to the primary source, *The West Wing*, rather than to indirect scholarship on theoretical frameworks. This decision was made due to the vast body of scholarship already available on *The West Wing*; the work for this thesis builds upon these established findings. Minor in comparative quantity, there are also sources that serve strictly as frameworks for media analysis, used to bridge gaps in scholarship on Blackness in *The West Wing*. All sources are organized here based on theme. They additionally provide a variety of perspectives on each topic, so as to allow for the most holistic analysis possible. Other literature is in reference to American exceptionalism specifically, and will be used to impart a stronger understanding of the idea, as well as a new lens through which *The West Wing*'s representation can be analyzed.

Overall, most scholars agree that *The West Wing* gives viewers an oversimplified understanding of the complex issues surrounding race, religion, and terrorism. Webster (2020) points out inconsistencies in religious vernacular and foreign relations, while Cass (2007) defines portrayals of other nations as well-intentioned but clumsy. Some, such as Georgi-Findlay (2020), praise the fact that there are any attempts to present this complexity at all. Instead of taking a strong stance, many critique that the series perpetuates a narrative of America being the best that it can be, having superiority over other nations, and being free from blame in most conflicts.

Others express concern in the accuracy of representation post-9/11– whether that be too realistic, or not enough (McCabe 2012, Riegert 2007).

In forming this review, it is the aspiration to connect similarities and point out gaps in scholarly conversation that can be brought to light through the rest of this work. I feel that there is much left to be said for the ways that marginalized groups are represented within *The West Wing*. Furthermore, there has been much left ignored about Black representation on the program, and I plan to add significant analyses on this topic as well as tying all representation back to the show's sense of American exceptionalism.

The West Wing's cast of characters is primarily White. While scholars such as Janet McCabe (2012) and Patrick Webster (2020) acknowledge a lack of Black identities in the series, they don't do so with enough depth to properly support an argument of American exceptionalism on their own. Trevor and Shawn J. Parry-Giles, on the other hand, devote an entire chapter to racialized nationalism in *The Prime-Time Presidency: The West Wing and U.S. Nationalism* (2006). From the main recurring Black characters, to the ones seen in a singular episode, to conversations that don't involve the minority being spoken of, the authors analyze each scene to demonstrate how *The West Wing* accentuates presidential whiteness and maintains a feigned ambivalence towards race in America. Richard Dyer in *White Privilege: Essential Readings a the Other Side of Racism* (2005) aptly adds to this conversation by explaining what it means to not acknowledge Whiteness, something I believe *The West Wing* continuously does. The characters of the series never acknowledge themselves as part of the White race, ultimately acting as though they are the norm. McCabe (2012) and Parry-Giles (2006) are able to point out specific instances of legislation that are thought of but never followed through. For example, in Season Two episode three, "The Midterms," Communications Director Toby Ziegler wants to tighten

legislation against extremist groups after Charlie Young is the victim of an attempted lynching a few episodes prior; the idea is found unconstitutional, and the staff moves on. Webster (2020) and Parry-Giles (2006) expose the implied racism that exists in President Bartlet's backstory. The president is biologically linked to the country's founders, those who didn't consider Black individuals to be "free men." Therefore, Bartlet's character is able to emphasize the idea of a privileged bloodline and "biologically rooted notions of white superiority on matters of political governance" in their eyes (Parry-Giles 99). In addition, William Spivey (2023) explicitly contends that Black representation within the series was oversimplified and limited, while appreciating the societal progress in it existing at all. Each of these scholars agree that the series does not take sufficient action to acknowledge, or propose alternatives to race relations in the United States. There is not enough representation, nor lasting political change.

Beyond these scholars, there is a large gap in conversation regarding Black identities on *The West Wing*. There are no other scholarly texts that I could find in which Blackness was a major component. That being said, I am joining this scholarly conversation with my own analyses of the series using foundational race representation frameworks, and applying them to representations on *The West Wing*.

To begin, Stuart Hall (2021) lays the foundation for understanding race representation in media by defining some of the "grammar of race" (Hall 21). Terms such as *overt* and *inferential* racism allow for a more scrutinized look at how the series deals with the topic. Along with Hall's insistence on the complexity of mediated ideology, these terms can be applied to much of the representation of Black characters on *The West Wing*. For example, the series displays overt racism from extremist groups targeting Charlie Young, while having most other characters of color be guest appearances in which their purpose is to present some kind of special issue,

reinforcing inferential racism, and Whiteness as the baseline of political competence and authority.

Adding to this, Andre Seawood (2014) and Ed Guerrero (1993) separately assist in an understanding of the *why* behind these lackluster portrayals. Seawood's writing on the Racial Empathy Gap— the idea that White viewers' brains don't process the pain of other races and therefore have trouble enjoying Black films— explains much of the characters' ability on *The West Wing* to maintain such proximity to unobjected power and an intimate closeness with White viewers. According to Guerrero, Black characters remain isolated from an African American community in order to appeal to the dominant audience of White viewers and retain a crossover audience of Black viewers. This marginalization of Black agency would fall under what Matthew Hughey (2009) considers the "Magical Negro" stereotype. When Black characters are a part of the main cast, but ultimately serve to redeem or assist relatively disheveled White characters, these representations perpetuate White normativity; ultimately tying into the idea that America is an exceptional place in which people of all races can work in uncontested harmony as long as Whites remain in the highest station of power.

In this same vein of power, to explore *The West Wing's* sense of American exceptionalism, it is necessary to fully understand the term and what its definition may look like in context. Scholars have explored the concept and its meaning in a variety of different ways; some define American exceptionalism as quantifiable differences in the United States' history and practices (Lipset 1996), while others have understood it to mean an innate superiority of the United States above all other nations (O'Connor et al 2024, Maass 2024). Whereas quantifiable differences imply that the U.S. works towards its superiority, having it innately means the nation has and always will reign supreme, regardless of its actions. Seymour Martin Lipset (1996)

traces the use of the term “exceptional” in relation to the United States to Alexis de Tocqueville in 1840, when he states that, “The position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one” (Tocqueville 36). However, other scholars, such as O’Connor et al (2022), note that Tocqueville was actually quite ambivalent about the United States. As opposed to being a special world power, the rest of his writing suggests he believed that the democratic nation had advantageous circumstances *for its time*; he does not find it to be particularly special in any general sense.

In contrast, Lipset has a different interpretation of this scholarship. Mainly focusing on the previously quoted statement, he agrees with the idea that America is *exceptional* but not necessarily *superior*. The argument that follows this claim is largely based on comparative quantitative and historical analyses that hope to prove America’s exceptionalism through its differences from others. Lipset goes out of his way to point out cultural character flaws, such as high crime rates, so as to emphasize his disbelief in one prevailing nation; even despite its shortcomings, the United States can be evidently unique instead of ideologically.

Where Lipset falls short, according to O’Connor et al, is that his attempt to avoid ideological reasoning is unable to be separated from his patriotism. For example, he cites that America has higher rates of divorce, single-parent families, and teenage pregnancies (Lipset 50). Instead of taking these ranks negatively, Lipset uses them to substantiate the importance of individualism in the nation’s value system. In an attempt to remain unbiased, he instead provides his audience with an ideological interpretation. More positive rankings include increased lawyers per capita and commitment to Christendom (Lipset 280). These statistics are not convincing enough to an audience that does not innately care. Unless looking for a nation with lots of lawyers and Christians, why would this matter to someone? Christianity is not the only major

world religion; having lots of lawyers means nothing without proof of their skills. Lipset seems to be grasping for anything that makes America unique so that he can prove it is still great. O'Connor et al. argue that there is no way for exceptionalism to be studied in a neutral way because it is inherently connected to American nationalism (O'Connor et al 644). Therefore, when the term "American exceptionalism" is used in contemporary discussion, it is understood with a connotation of superiority. This is the understanding with which I will compare the term to *The West Wing's* belief in the term through its race representations.

In addition to this belief of superiority, there comes a belief that the United States is meant to better humanity as a whole; that the country was destined to lead at large. This originates from an early interpretation of the American Revolution by U.S. leaders in which there was created "a new liberal nation capable of rejecting the Old World's domestic monarchism and an international balance of power" (Maass 3). By being able to accomplish what no other nation had before, leaders of the United States set the nation on a moral high ground. They consistently appeal to this ideological notion despite any pitfalls of their own. This belief contends that the United States should be allowed unique privileges and leadership roles in order to advance the rest of society. Maass in particular points out the whitewashing of history in the U.S., creating an innocence bias in which it is depicted as a benign actor in global affairs. This can cause policy makers to overlook the racialized implications of their initiatives, as can be seen in *The West Wing's* treatment of people of color. In turn, American exceptionalism not only exacerbates domestic patriotism, but influences foreign policy.

According to Richard W. Maass, leaders of a country must define their country's role in the world by deciding where others live in its constructed social environment. Maass describes this as subject-positioning: if America is a subject, its leaders can project *fellow subject* or *object*

identities onto the relevant others in its environment. A fellow subject would be a nation that is considered to have legitimate agency, status, and a quality of peerness where the U.S. can still actively substantiate its superiority. An object, on the other hand, would be a nation whose agency is not recognized, and one that is considered an obstacle or a resource to exploit. Objects are additionally seen as incapable of self-regulation in social politics, and are therefore bound by the laws of nature. Their inferiority does not need to be regularly justified. In placing these subject-positions, a majority of fellow subjects are European or White-presenting nations, resulting in a whitewashed relationship with foreign policy where non-White nations, or objects, are considered blank canvases that need painting. This continues to fulfill the exceptionalist destiny of being a world leader. Instead of violence, exceptionalist accounts of U.S. foreign policy are able to frame imperial object interaction in moral purity and good intentions. America is continuously justified in its actions because it is a unique and special place.

One example of a “special” trait the nation possesses is its practices of pluralism and tolerance. There is no exclusive, national religion in the way that England had at the time the colonies broke away. In *The West Wing*, President Bartlet is a self-identified, devout, Roman Catholic. Trevor and Shawn J. Parry-Giles (2006) explore this idea of Bartlet’s religion as a marker for both U.S. nationalism and superiority of the West; the belief that America is a “chosen nation” responsible for the rest of the world. Patrick Webster (2020) analyzes this representation as the series affirming that God exists and that America’s destiny will be interpreted to His will, as President Bartlet is the symbol of the nation.

Increasingly complex, are the representations of terrorism and Middle Eastern nations in *The West Wing*’s narrative. After the attacks on September 11, 2001, *The West Wing* aired a special episode in response to the tragedy that lived outside of the show’s canonical timeline and

would never be brought up again. The episode has two distinct storylines; the first, following Josh Lyman and a group of high school students, and the second, with Leo McGarry conducting the interrogation of an Arab White House staffer. With the entire White House on lockdown, Josh and a number of other senior staffers conduct an impromptu teach-in for the students who are asking about terrorists. Each member of Bartlet's staff has a different opinion, ultimately leaving the students with no clear answers. Leo, whose plot line is the reason the White House is on lockdown, is trying to decipher if this Arab employee is involved in suspected terrorist activity. He proceeds with this in an uncharacteristically xenophobic manner. Ultimately, this episode was meant to reflect the chaotic and uncertain dialogue happening in the real United States, hoping to make viewers continue talking to one another and thinking critically.

According to Patrick Webster (2020), the "Isaac and Ishmael" episode gathered more academic response than any other episode in the series. Scholarly opinion on the episode varies. Webster himself lends a critical eye to expose the inconsistencies of the narrative portrayed, and a reading of the episode that absorbs support for the subsequent response of the Bush administration. Rachel Gans-Boriskin and Russ Tissingier (2005) would agree with Webster in that the episode leaves no place for American blame in the situation, instead simplifying the motives to jealousy of American freedoms. Gans-Boriskin and Tissingier additionally note the ability of fiction media to have considerable influence on public opinion, similar to that of news media.

In conversation with the work of Philip Cass (2007), who examines the show's power to impact audience perception of the "real" world, the representations in *The West Wing* would seem to be oversimplified and misleading to audiences, as well as perpetuating hegemonic balance instead of the liberal democracy it is commonly associated with. This perceived reality is

contradictory to the series' own ideological views. Kristina Riegert (2007) argues that *The West Wing* is framed by universalism and U.S. exceptionalism in regards to foreign policy; "clawing back" their progressive domestic ideals into "realistic" compromises, while portraying the U.S. as above international law and driven by necessity when acting externally. Work done by Felix Willuweit (2020) would question *The West Wing*'s perceived altruism with ideas of "White Savior Syndrome" and people of color as the "inverted Other" to analyze these good deeds as contributing to neo-imperialism.

In contrast, Brigitte Georgi-Findlay (2020) finds the "Isaac and Ishmael" episode to be successful in its mission. She believes that *The West Wing* goes so far as to expose Islamophobic practices and "diversify the enemy," pointing out instances of home-grown terrorism and falsifying the correlation of Islamic countries and terrorism. Due to the episode's in-text dissensus of having no characters or plot lines that agree, it encourages viewers to ponder multiple perspectives as the show itself is ambivalent in its polyvocality.

Similarly, Trevor and Shawn J. Parry-Giles (2006) have their own in-text dissensus in regards to how the series represents Arab and terrorist conflict. While the authors contend that "Isaac and Ishmael" complicated the simplistic narrative that terrorists "hate freedom" and provided viewers with a nuanced discussion of the origins of terrorism, they don't find further representations of these issues to be free of harm. The authors ultimately believe that the series reinforces core American nationalist ideologies through the containment of oppositional voices and normalization of severe action in response to Arab and terrorist conflict.

Overall, Aaron Sorkin's *The West Wing* tackles a wide variety of conflicts on both foreign and domestic fronts. Scholars studying race, religion, and terrorism in regards to the series generally find that these ideas are oversimplified within the narrative, denying viewers a true

understanding of their complexities and providing affirmation of the United States being the “greatest country in the world.” Other texts are able to celebrate the efforts of *The West Wing*’s representations, considering it to be as progressive as the series perceives itself to be.

Thesis Overview

In this thesis, it is my goal to take the varying perspectives on Sorkin’s work and provide a nuanced overview of complex ideas represented within it. Through these representations and my research, I am arguing that the series preserves the notions of American exceptionalism and White superiority— which are inextricable from one another— while maintaining the status quo above all else, as opposed to representing the radical change in the United States that the characters seem to strive for. My first chapter looks at this in terms of *The West Wing*’s inability to prioritize the stories of non-White individuals. It is pointed out that White characters’ stories and feelings are kept at the forefront of the narrative, enforcing their power both within the show and in viewers’ minds. The majority of episodes referenced specifically are within the first three seasons, particularly at the end of Season One and beginning of Season Two, wherein the Bartlet administration handles an attempted lynching. Other episodes explored include: “Take Out the Trash Day” [1.13], “Mandatory Minimums” [1.20], and “The Two Bartlets” [3.12]. These examples of White normativity are used to tie into the show’s belief that America is an exceptional place where all races can get along; the only condition being that White identities hold the highest station of power.

Regarding other races, my second chapter sets its gaze on the representation of Black identities in the series. I analyze the quantity and quality of fully-fleshed Black identities throughout its duration, most notably focusing on aide to the president, Charlie Young. Black

characters are few in number, either existing to serve their White counterparts, or to be assimilated into the structure of an otherwise White world. I focus on episodes that demonstrate a denial to these characters of their authenticity, such as “A Proportional Response” [1.3], “In the Shadow of Two Gunmen” [2.1], and “Election Night” [4.7]. These episodes all live within the first four seasons, except for the addition of “The Benign Prerogative” in Season Five for an anecdote about Charlie’s romantic life.

In stride with these portrayals, the third chapter of this thesis regards *The West Wing*’s foreign affairs and depictions of terrorism as one of the clearest indications that the series is contradictory to its reputation. One of the most scholarly explored episodes of the entire series, “Isaac and Ishmael” [3.0] is studied in depth here. I maintain that while this episode had harmless intentions, the ideologies shone through it leave no room for American fault in foreign conflicts. This continues throughout the rest of the series post-9/11, most commonly in storylines revolving around fictional nation state Qumar (“The Women of Qumar” [3.09], “We Killed Yamamoto” [3.21], “Posse Comitatus” [3.22], “Commencement” [4.22], “Twenty-Five” [4.23]). These storylines are framed by U.S. exceptionalism as they portray the nation as above international law and driven by necessity when acting externally. In contrast, Bartlet’s government does not act so radically in domestic politics. Once again, these examples are pulled from the first four seasons, with the exception of “7A WF 83429” [5.1] and “The Dogs of War” [5.2], which conclude the Qumar storyline. In concluding my thesis, I believe that future television programs can combine the influence of *The West Wing*’s iconic stature with thorough research and analyses of the series’ narrative, to work better to align their own narratives with the ideals they claim to promote.

Chapter One - A Very White House, Indeed

BARTLET: You have a strategy for all this?

LEO: I have the beginnings of one.

BARTLET: What is it?

LEO: I'm gonna try that out for a little while.

*Leo puts the pad on the desk in front of the President. It reads, 'LET
BARTLET BE BARTLET.'*

(1.19 "Let Bartlet be Bartlet")

In this thesis, I demonstrate not only *The West Wing's* beliefs in American exceptionalism and White superiority, but also the interchangeability of these beliefs as they exist within the series. One does not exist without the other. To properly understand the exploration of this topic, specifically as it relates to domestic affairs, I'd like to recall Richard W. Maass' work on racial subject positioning. I previously summarize this idea as follows: "if America is a subject, its leaders can project *fellow subject* or *object* identities onto the relevant others in its environment. A fellow subject would be a nation that is considered to have legitimate agency, status, and a quality of peerness where the U.S. can still actively substantiate its superiority. An object, on the other hand, would be a nation whose agency is not recognized, and one that is considered an obstacle or a resource to exploit. Objects are additionally seen as incapable of self-regulation in social politics, and are therefore bound by the laws of nature. Their inferiority does not need to be regularly justified" (Grisafe 13). In his work, Maass generally uses subject-positioning to describe international relations between the United States and other nations as a whole. I, however, take Maass' reasoning and apply it to individuals of different races. This can additionally be applied to two individuals with different nationalities, but I reference it here in terms of White Americans and their attitudes towards Americans with other ethnicities. It is crucial to acknowledge this subsection of the American exceptionalism definition, as much of *The West Wing's* exceptionalist narrative is rooted in its representation of race and object

relations. Even domestically, the series reinforces the idea that being White is what keeps the nation's status. It writes people of color to be the "objects" or the "others" that are internationally inferior, thought of the same way an object nation would be while America, or White people, are the standard. This chapter first examines the series in its beginning two seasons, focusing on the foundation of these representations: a world centered on Whiteness.

The White World of the White House

As intimated in the Introduction, the first two seasons of *The West Wing* are greatly concerned with the nobility of government work. There is an idealistic, golden light surrounding the characters of the Bartlet administration as they're introduced to the audience. They are supposed to be the best of the best. Given their stature, these characters are portrayed as highly intelligent, mirroring the fast-paced, jargon-filled atmosphere of the real U.S. government. It can be a lot for an unfamiliar audience to take in.

Before analyzing its audience, I must set the stage for understanding the environment the series was created in. Janet McCabe's book, *The West Wing* (2012), dives into the history of its creation at NBC. McCabe explains that the series was originally held with unease due to politics being a turnoff for many viewers. However, NBC took the gamble of wanting to produce quality television and allowed Aaron Sorkin to move forward with his project. Sorkin was sure to include political experts as creative consultants to assist with the series' relative accuracy, and this ultimately brought in a viewership of highly affluent, educated individuals who could keep up with its sophisticated writing. This meant that NBC could obtain luxury advertisers in a competitive market if their viewer demographics matched those of intended consumers. At the time, the average wealthy household was inhabited by White citizens of America (Federal

Reserve 2021). That being said, writers for *The West Wing* were aware of its imagined audience when writing its scripts. Additionally, a search on IMDB can inform that the majority of contributing writers to the series were White. Aaron Sorkin specifically was the creator of the series credited with “31 sole writing credits and 54 co-writing credits” (Webster 32) of the 89 episodes aired in his tenure, and he is a White man. The basis for arguments in this chapter are tied to these beginnings; there is a White group of people writing with a White audience in mind, and the end product is a series that puts White individuals and nations on a pedestal without ever actually acknowledging Whiteness.

What does it mean to not acknowledge Whiteness? All but one main character on *The West Wing* is White. This is not a secret, nor does it go unnoticed at home. However, only the non-White character, Charlie Young, has his race pointed out as a plotline. In Season One episode three, “A Proportional Response,” Charlie is being interviewed for the position of President Bartlet’s personal aide, or “bodyman.” This is the first time we meet him. Though overly polite and slightly awkward, Josh Lyman finds Charlie to be a well fit candidate for the job. The only concern on his end is what this would look like to the public; a young, Black man, following the president around and carrying his bags. He brings this to Chief of Staff Leo McGarry who turns to Admiral Percy Fitzwallace, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, in the following exchange:

LEO: The President’s personal aide, they’re looking at a kid. Do you have any problem with a young black man waiting on the President?

FITZWALLACE: I’m an old black man and I wait on the President.

LEO: The kid’s gotta carry his bags...

FITZWALLACE: You gonna pay him a decent wage?

LEO: Yeah.

FITZWALLACE: You gonna treat him with respect in the workplace?

LEO: Yeah.

FITZWALLACE: Then why the hell should I care?

LEO: That's what I thought.

FITZWALLACE: I've got some real honest to God battles to fight Leo. I don't have time for the cosmetic ones.

In this conversation, there is a White man asking for permission from a Black man to put another Black man in an inferior, servant-like position. It's almost as if Leo already knows he's doing something wrong, but needs the reassurance from an already inferior standing employee that it's not so bad. Leo is dancing around the potential of depicting a scenario similar to slavery or indentured servantry. These White saviors believe they would be doing something charitable for Charlie by giving him this job. He is down on his luck, needs money for his family, and comes from one of the "blackest cities in the country" (Spivey 2023). Being so close to White power is a chance he should jump at in their eyes. This issue is discussed further in my second chapter.

After three episodes of the series, the only characters of color who hold any importance to the overall plot are marked as different within minutes of their introduction. There is no discussion of, for example, the implications of a *White* bodyman or a *White* president, as these are what society deems to be the norm. Richard Dyer in *White Privilege: Essential Readings at the Other Side of Racism* (2005) aptly adds nuance to these observations. He writes, "As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people" (Dyer 10). While this storyline in *The West Wing* is useful to parallel concerns of real society, there are so few characters of color within the series that making race a point of interest for each of them sets a belittling example. It creates an added prominence of White superiority that has already existed through America's history. This is especially the case considering J. Terry

Edmonds, the Sam Seaborn of the Clinton administration, found the real White House to be “far more racially diverse than the fictional one” (McCabe 109). If the real White House could employ individuals of all races without making a big deal of it, then surely the fictional one could be doing the same; or at least visually representing them more often as one of the hundreds of people working in the building.

In continuation, the previously quoted dialogue can be used as a marker for *The West Wing*'s beliefs as an institution. Fitzwallace's response to Leo quickly dismisses concerns of racial hiring in the fictional White House. He emphasizes that there are more important issues to be concerned with such as fair wages and respect. So too, can this emphasis be translated to casting decisions. While subtle, this conversation implies that just as concerns of Charlie's race are simply cosmetic, the same is true for concerns about a majority of actors in the series being White. As is discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis, *The West Wing* faces controversy over such lack of diversity. This conversation is an attempt to sweep the issue of race under the rug without having to truly make any change in storytelling. The show's writers would prefer audiences to pay attention to what they deem most important, and “normal”; the stories they tell with White individuals at the core.

At the core of everything in this series, is President Josiah “Jed” Bartlet. He is not simply a former governor of New Hampshire with a degree in Economics, nor is he a self-started politician. While other presidents of the modern time try to ideologically or politically connect themselves to the nation's founders, *The West Wing* goes a step further and connects its president to them biologically. We learn at the end of the first season (“What Kind of Day Has it Been”) that Bartlet's great-grandfather's great-grandfather was an original signatory of the Declaration of Independence. Not only does this backstory help the character to enhance his presidential

romanticism (Parry-Giles 93), but it also goes to show that he is the continuation of a long lineage of Whites in power. He continues to outwardly cherish and celebrate his ancestral connections. He is proud of his heritage; one example of this being his protection of a carving knife passed through his family and created by Paul Revere. Even his wife is a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution, an organization that basks in the tradition of elite White culture. Further, Bartlet's daughters have always had access to the privilege of these connections, getting the best education and opportunities based on their privilege, not just economic status. While never characterized explicitly this way, President Bartlet's history normalizes the Whiteness of the presidency itself. Romantic presidents in media have always been more favorable; casting his romanticism with these key details, however, adds a sense of implied racism to the text.

Inherent Biases

During the third season of *The West Wing*, the Barlet administration has its eyes on reelection. The team is working through the scandal of the president's concealed relapsing/remitting multiple sclerosis, a debilitating disease which he had not disclosed to the public or his staff during his first election. They are simultaneously campaigning as a congressional investigation is underway. Every move of this administration is being watched; in order to win America's vote, they truly have to earn it.

While out on the campaign trail, Republican candidate Robert Ritchie speaks out in support of banning affirmative action. Affirmative action is a combination of policies and programs that give limited preference in education and employment opportunities for minority demographics in order to remedy the effects of long-standing discrimination against them.

Communications director Toby Ziegler urges the president to speak in support of keeping affirmative action now that it's in conversation. He is to speak at the University of Iowa where students may rely on the policy for education opportunities unobstructed by their race or upbringing. Instead of using the lines Toby has written for him, the president dances around the issue to avoid a quote. Toby confronts Bartlet with his disappointment for a lack of moral fiber, which does not sit well with the president. He retorts, "My family signed the Declaration of Independence. You think I've got an ethnicity problem?" ("The Two Bartlets"). This is where we can begin to see implied racism in his backstory.

It is one challenge for Bartlet's lineage to perpetuate White normativity in government power, but another for it to be used by Bartlet himself to defend his morals. Using the Declaration of Independence by name, the president is trying to prove he has no racial bias; he is from a long line of individuals who created a country with many races living together. What Bartlet is seeming to forget in his comment, is that the country was founded on contradictions. The second sentence of the Declaration of Independence reads: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." However, not all humans fell under the phrasing of "all men." The only individuals with certain unalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness were free, White men. Therefore, using the document as a rebuttal to an accusation of racial bias has no footing. You would think a man of his claimed intelligence would recognize this fallacy.

Not only does he hold steadfast in his argument, but not even Toby, the moral compass of the show, goes as far as to correct the president's claim. By providing no pushback to this fallacy, *The West Wing* has defined itself, not just President Bartlet, as willfully ignorant to the racist

history of the country it represents. In addition, by reemphasizing the president's biological link to the country's founders, those who didn't consider Black individuals to be "free men," Bartlet's character is also able to emphasize the idea of a privileged bloodline and "biologically rooted notions of white superiority on matters of political governance" (Parry-Giles 99). President Bartlet, and *The West Wing* as a whole, lack the courage to stand firm in their progressive beliefs and live up to their idealistic reputation. They continue to put the stories of minorities on hold for the sake of preserving their own.

In the same episode where this clumsy argument takes place, Toby discusses the idea of affirmative action with White House Press Secretary C.J. Cregg. He attempts to vent his frustrations about the president, when C.J. claims, "I'm the wrong Democrat to talk about this." The exchange follows as so:

TOBY: Why?

C.J.: 'Cause... [pause] After my father fought in Korea, he became what this government begs every college graduate to become. He became a teacher, and he raised a family on a teachers salary. And he paid his taxes, and always crossed at the green. And anytime there was an opportunity for career advancement, it took an extra five years because invariably there is a less-qualified black woman in the picture, so instead of retiring as superintendent of the Ohio Valley Union Free School District, he retired head of the math department at William Henry Harrison Junior High.

TOBY: How is he these days?

C.J.: Who?

TOBY: Your dad.

C.J.: [pause] He's fine.

Reluctant to admit it, the underlying motive to C.J.'s comments in this conversation stem from her father's progressing Alzheimer's disease. While her statements can be overlooked as a

release of frustration, they are quite explicitly racist. Trevor and Shawn J. Parry-Giles note in *The Prime-Time Presidency: The West Wing and U.S. Nationalism* that her speech reaffirms “the popular conception of white male victimization as an outgrowth of affirmative action” (Parry-Giles 112). Ironically coming from a White woman, a demographic that benefits from the policy, C.J.'s “white male victimization” ignores the research data that supports the need for and the positive outcomes of affirmative action. She believes that jobs are being stolen from White individuals in order to hit a quota on diversity. This argument makes privileged White people feel seen. They just want to live the “American dream,” do things how they’ve always been done, and be praised for their hard work. What goes unconsidered, are all of the women and people of color working just as hard for generations prior with nothing in return.

Additionally, C.J.'s mindset offers a belief from the series that non-whites have to earn their worth in society; that non-white immigrants, or those living in underprivileged countries don’t deserve to be valued the same way White citizens of America are. This racial subject-positioning sets both nations, and individuals of color, as objects. Once again, American exceptionalism and White supremacy are inextricable from one another. Those who believe in the nation’s exceptionality stem their belief from a past America that was created from Whiteness. C.J. is the mouthpiece of the series’ thought that no other nation or race can accomplish what White America can. Not only is the series able to reinforce White superiority within the United States, but inadvertently hold that idea over the rest of the world as well. It is an outdated belief that is out of touch with the reality of its increasingly diverse world. *The West Wing* is unable to conceal its racism to live up to its supposed progressiveness. Though C.J. expresses her feelings based on a personal anecdote, she, and thus the show, effectively ignore

the concerns and histories of thousands of discriminated peoples for the issue of one privileged man. She is not the first character on *The West Wing* to do so.

Bright White at Center Stage

Midway through Season One, the audience learns that chief of staff Leo McGarry is a recovering alcoholic and drug addict. His deputy, Josh Lyman, considers his alcoholism to be the “worst kept secret in Washington” (“The Short List”), but an addiction to Valium comes as a surprise. This reveal is the result of a televised accusation given to the White House in which a congressman claims one in three staffers are using drugs on a daily basis. An investigation is launched, with the goal to expose Leo to the public; a young staffer has leaked his medical file that has records of his stay in a treatment clinic. No one on Senior Staff feels betrayed by this information of Leo’s past. They all know his character and how much value he brings to the administration. One flaw should not determine his future in their eyes.

Through negotiations run by his staff who revere him, Leo’s inpatient stay was able to be kept hidden. He requests to meet with the staffer who attempted to expose him before he fires her. “I wanted to meet you, and I wanted you to meet me” (“Take Out the Trash Day”) he tells her. This conversation works to enlighten both parties: Leo understands that she is simply a young girl afraid that someone like her father is running the country, and the staffer realizes that Leo is not the monster she assumed he would be. Empathy and active listening go a long way in this scenario to prove not all individuals tackling addiction are living up to a stereotype. Sometimes, this storyline implies, a person’s life is much more complicated than it looks on the surface.

In contrast, not all addicts represented on *The West Wing* are treated with the same kindness. Season One episode 20, “Mandatory Minimums,” handles the legislation on criminal charges for drug possession. These minimums on drugs make it so that there can be no case by case bias when deciding the judgement of someone in possession of them. The Bartlet administration is looking to make a case for treating drug addiction as a disease to be treated rather than having to jail the offenders. Coming off of Leo’s “Let Bartlet be Bartlet” initiative in the previous episode, there is new wind in everyone’s sails as they try to make real impacts without worrying about petty consequences.

On the other side of things, pollsters worry that this goal of treatment will make the administration look soft on crime. To mitigate this, Leo brings in seven different employees of congressmen whose family have benefitted from their privilege when caught in their misdeeds. He threatens to publicise the backroom deals wherein children and spouses of government officials were given much lighter than deserved penalties for drug possession and intent to distribute cocaine. All that is asked in return for confidentiality is a fair, unbiased debate about drug policy reform from their employers. The administration does not want to give up on its beliefs without a good fight. They don’t want to be kicked down with negative opinions before they have a chance, either.

In the same episode, members of Senior Staff discuss mandatory minimums as well. It is argued that mandatory minimums are inherently racist, as the sentences for crack cocaine are harsher than those of powder cocaine; being that crack cocaine is cheaper to buy, it is assumed that people of color in underprivileged areas are the ones most likely to purchase it. All of this is key to understanding that *The West Wing*, no matter how much it seems as though they’re being radically progressive, is still putting White individuals first. Leo got a chance at redemption

through empathy. He is also a White man in a position of power. The family members of congressmen also got a chance at redemption through their White privilege. While treatment is an important step in addiction recovery, these individuals get the opportunity to share their “sob stories” and appeal to the emotions of those in a place to judge them. Non-white abusers of the same laws do not; especially with mandatory minimum sentencing. Who does the series represent as the champion of crack or cocaine addiction? If Leo gets redemption because his colleagues and the audience know and love him, why is there no lovable Black character that can get the administration and the viewers to have the same holistic view? The characters in the series may see the racist flaws in America’s drug incarceration, but the writers do nothing to prove it’s a change worth fighting for. This is not enough to affirm its liberal reputation. By the end of this episode, there is no real conclusion to the issue of drug sentencing. In the dialogue itself, President Bartlet admits only that he is “a day closer” to a decision on the matter. It is said that the war on drugs is to be a long and hard one. However, the issue is never mentioned again. *The West Wing* claims to have a deep desire to right these wrongs but does not show the evidence of these desires coming to fruition. The only individuals who are shown to benefit from the initiatives they care about are White people.

An explanation of the *why* behind these lackluster portrayals exists in work done by Andre Seawood on a phenomenon called the Racial Empathy Gap. This phenomenon, as described in the 2014 article “Why White People Don’t Like Black Movies,” is the idea that White viewers’ brains don’t process the pain of other races and therefore have trouble enjoying media with Black characters at the forefront. The article cites scientific studies showing there is a lack of mental activity when viewing non-white people performing a task. Black characters can maintain proximity to power and an intimate closeness with White viewers so long as they are

not the main entity trying to be related to. If *The West Wing* wants to bring attention to a conflict dealing with people of color, it must more adamantly explain the situation through the lens of a White experience, one that its majority audience demographic can understand.

However, interesting a strategy as it may be, this fictional series could have done more to find a balanced compromise between educating White viewers and demonstrating a world in which morally aloft ideals can be put into practice. Would it have hurt viewership to write a successful policy change into the script? To show both the White and Black parties benefitting? Kristina Riegert (2007) places the series in a time where reality television was beginning to boom. Despite being a political drama, the show was able to connect with the “real” and display the everyday happenings of fictional public servants in a parallel universe. Grand, liberal ideas for domestic society are expressed as wants by the characters, but the show functions by “clawing back” these progressive domestic ideals into “realistic” compromises to give viewers a better sense of what’s really possible. I believe that the series should have displayed some unlikely scenarios as an attempt to influence public opinion on important issues that otherwise wouldn’t be touched in government. Nevertheless, it continues to claw back to avoid making waves.

At the opening of the second season, viewers of *The West Wing* are met with chaos. The first episode “In the Shadow of Two Gunmen: Part I” picks up right where the previous season ended. President Bartlet has just finished speaking at a town hall meeting in Rosslyn, Virginia. On his way back to the motorcade, he walks the rope line to greet constituents when shots are fired around the scene. It is later revealed that this shooting was arranged by members of the Klu Klux Klan targeting Charlie Young. For some time leading up to this, Charlie has been receiving threats in the mail regarding the fact that he, an African American, is dating the president’s

White daughter. He disregards these threats; young love trumps caution, and they are bound to always be surrounded by the Secret Service.

Luckily, Charlie does not experience any harm from the shots fired. President Bartlet and Josh Lyman, however, are victims of critical wounds. Throughout their hospital treatments the audience is privy to flashback sequences of how the Bartlet For America campaign came to be. In this way, they are able to connect further with the personal backstories of each character, growing fonder for them as they worry for their futures in the current storyline. Everyone turns out to be fine in the end. While they'll recover physically, the mental toll this event takes is yet to be discovered.

I mention the flashback sequences of this episode because of who they pertain to. Naturally, it makes sense to focus on the memories of Josh to contribute to the idea of a mindset under anesthesia. Important to note, though, is that Charlie is not present for any of these moments as they were before his employment. The audience spends the majority of this storyline learning about the White characters' lives. This is not an inherently negative plot choice— White characters make up most of who the audience is paying attention to each episode. Even so, this act of domestic terrorism was caused in part due to Charlie and his race. The entire nation is in a state of distress and his most influential role models are in critical condition because of his existence. If he has no physical consequences, surely he must have mental ones. It would be appropriate to spend time understanding the aftermath from his point of view.

Continuing a pattern of stories for people of color, the coverage of Charlie's mental state post-shooting is infinitesimal. During Season Two episode three, "The Midterms," he is seen being inanimate in conversation and emotionally distant, or disgruntled. He is purposely pushing away those around him. There are no words put to his thoughts, only visual assumptions, and the

only time he addresses the shooting directly is with another Black man; a guest character, a father who brought his son to his unplanned shift fixing computer bugs. The scene of the man and his son reminds Charlie of his own mother, who was shot on duty as a police officer for a shift she wasn't originally meant to work. It is only this fellow African American who brings up the event in conversation with him. Through his kindness, and wise words of "if they're shooting at you, you know you're doing something right," Charlie is able to find some closure and self-forgiveness for his survivor's guilt from these two situations. This is the last time his feelings about the shooting are ever brought up. Even on this occasion, it is only a shallow dive into Charlie's true psyche. After such a pivotal moment it would be fair to expect more.

As it were, if the entire series were to move on from the attack, Charlie's closure could have been a digestible resolution. However, this is not what happens. While Charlie is never shown dealing with the aftermath again, there is an entire episode dedicated to Josh's mental healing ("Noël"). Six episodes and almost four months later in the world of the series, it is suggested he sees a therapist. More of a mandate than a suggestion, Josh is locked in a room for multiple hours with trauma psychiatrist Dr. Stanley Keyworth to fight the demons continuing to plague him after Rosslyn. He is forced to face both childhood and present trauma in order to sustain the quality of life he hopes for. It is learned that, due to a fire his sister died in, Josh suffers from PTSD that has flared up again after the shooting. He is given support and sympathy from peers and superiors alike. *This* is the end of discussion on the Rosslyn event.

Once again, a storyline originally meant to highlight the struggles of a person of color is shifted onto a White person in power. *The West Wing* claims to bring awareness to and be outraged by the realistic injustices minorities face on a daily basis, and yet it writes nothing productive about them in its scripts. The series is all talk and no action. Communications

Director Toby Ziegler wants to tighten legislation against extremist groups, but the idea is found unconstitutional and the staff moves on. Perhaps it would have been too large a task to reform policy in this way for realism's sake. If so, the series could have gone the educational route and spent more time making viewers care about and understand the magnitude of this attempted lynching. Instead, the series prioritizes the ability for White audiences to empathize and relate.

Throughout this chapter, I have demonstrated how this is the case time and time again. Catering to the sympathies of the affluent White viewership that earns them advertisers, the series perpetuates a world in which those viewers are deemed special. It portrays a White president, and all White staff, who never have to explain the color of their skin to anyone. They are not raced, they are simply people. If someone of a different race comes along, their differences must be acknowledged in order to substantiate their place in the world. *The West Wing* believes that America is an exceptional place where all races can work together, even in the most important building in the country; but this can only be true if Whites remain at the highest station of power.

Chapter Two: “Got a racial problem?”- Black Representation in *The West Wing*

LEO: Got a racial problem?
 BARTLET: A racial problem?
 LEO: It's okay to admit it.
 BARTLET: I don't!
 LEO: Okay.
 ...
 BARTLET: Racial problem!
 LEO: I'm just saying...
 (1.11 “Lord John Marbury”)

As discussed in the previous chapter, *The West Wing*'s main ensemble only consists of one Black character. Before the introduction of Charlie Young, the series received backlash from critics and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) regarding a lack of nonwhite representation. The pilot episode of *The West Wing* introduces a singular character of color: Bonnie. An assistant in the communications office, Bonnie had a handful of lines in the episode that were of no particular importance. She appears several times over the course of the series, but has a considerable lack of screen time in comparison to White individuals in an equal position. The audience learns nothing about her life or personality; she never even receives a last name. This was not a comforting first look into how the series might continue to represent an ever-diversifying society. The series continues to fail its Black characters, particularly Charlie Young, by reinforcing their inferior power and making them nothing more than White characters with Black skin. They are assimilated to meet the norms of a White world. Throughout this chapter, I analyze further lackluster representations of Blackness in the series that prove *The West Wing*'s belief in White superiority via denial to Black experiences.

Promises of Plenty: An Exaggerated Reassurance

In response to the backlash from the first episode, creator Aaron Sorkin is quoted in *The New York Times* reassuring audiences that there are plenty of racially diverse characters who've yet to be introduced. He says, "Well, we haven't met the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who's an African-American Navy admiral. We haven't met the President's doctor, who's an African-American Navy captain. We haven't met the President's body man, his close aide... Are we a little late to the party? Yes we are" (Weinraub 1999). I'd like to break this quote down in sections. To start, the second character Sorkin hints at is a character who debuts in the second episode: "We haven't met the President's doctor, who's an African-American Navy captain" (Weinraub 1999). Here, Sorkin refers to Captain Morris Tolliver, MD, a temporary stand-in for the official physician to the president. During Season One episode two, "Post Hoc, Ergo Propter Hoc," President Bartlet and Captain Tolliver have a heart-to-heart conversation about fatherhood, as Tolliver has just welcomed his first child into the world. He negates the stereotype of Black fathers walking out on their families. Bartlet likes Tolliver; he enjoys his lighthearted attitude over more serious doctors he's had in the past. Due to this, he offers Tolliver the opportunity to be his official physician full-time. The job would start a week from that day, when Tolliver returned from a mission trip in Jordan. By the end of the episode, Tolliver's plane is shot down by the Syrian defense ministry. The captain never makes it back for the first day of his new position.

Tallying his time with the audience, Tolliver has around 5:15 minutes of screen time in his one episode of the series. Comparative to a lead character, Leo McGarry has hundreds of minutes of screentime over the course of the show. This isn't inherently negative. Not all characters in a series are going to be in the spotlight, and newly introduced characters don't

necessarily need to outshine series regulars on their introduction. For Captain Tolliver, however, his introduction and exit from the series exist in the same hour of airtime.

It is routine to see a character appear for one episode on television. Whether it be for a special guest star, a temporary location setting, or a driving force to move a story along, there are plenty of opportunities for one-off interactions outside of the primary ensemble. The issue with Tolliver is that he is used by the series' creator to earn diversity points. Aaron Sorkin specifically mentions Captain Tolliver, the "African-American Navy captain," to ease the minds of media critics and the NAACP. Spoken of in combination with characters who brought value to the production over many episodes, readers would likely assume that Tolliver, too, was an important character of color whose impact was worthy of special notation. In reality, his time on *The West Wing* was nothing more than a justification for President Bartlet's extreme reactions to both Syria and his staff in the subsequent episode, "A Proportional Response."

In this next episode, we meet another character Sorkin references in his interview: Admiral Percy Fitzwallace, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. With this title, the creator also makes sure to note that he is an "African-American Navy admiral" (Weinraub 1999). We meet Admiral Fitzwallace amidst President Bartlet's outrage at the Syrian attack on his physician's plane. The president is unhappy with the unimaginative response attack that would be routine in this situation. He is being ruled by emotion, hoping for larger destruction as vengeance for the killing of someone he cared for. At the close of the previous episode, Bartlet remarks "I am not frightened. I'm gonna blow them off the face of the earth with the fury of God's own thunder" ("Post Hoc, Ergo Propter Hoc").

The president exemplifies traits of American exceptionalism in this situation, believing that the United States is responsible to govern and determine what defines justice globally.

Though rebutted by O'Connor et al, religious thinkers Gitlin and Leibovitz set out the centuries old belief that "America was a nation unlike others, uniquely blessed by the God who created the world" (Gitlin and Leibovitz XVI). By invoking God in his statement, Bartlet implies that the higher power would back the decisions of the U.S. military. This further plays into the idea that the country has an exceptional destiny to uphold (Maass 2). It also implies a belief in the nation's power so strong that Bartlet has no concern about surviving foreign backlash.

With the assistance of Bartlet's chief of staff, however, Fitzwallace is able to talk the president down from an attack order that would undoubtedly injure or kill many innocent civilians; Syria would understand the message even with what they call a "proportional response." By pulling back the military efforts, the fictional America is able to avoid a reputation of being overly violent or vengeful in modern times. Such a reputation would cause strain on the exceptionalist belief that the nation can interfere where it deems necessary due to moral superiority. In reality, the United States remains uncontested in its power because of the people of color who keep its leaders rational. Behind the public facing President Bartlet, is Admiral Fitzwallace advising against destruction. This is one of many examples that contribute to *The West Wing's* portrayal of a "magical negro" stereotype.

Defined by Matthew Hughey in "Cinethetic Racism: White Redemption and Black Stereotypes in "Magical Negro" Films," a magical negro is a Black character in the main cast of a film that serves to redeem and give sage counsel to a disheveled White counterpart in whatever way fits the narrative (Hughey 544). Hughey examines 26 films considered to be racially progressive, that resonate with mainstream audiences' understanding of race relations, finding that they fall under "cinethetic racism." Cinethetic racism, also known as averse racism, is a subtle form of racism in film where apparent racial progress is combined with underlying

anti-Black stereotypes (Hughey 551). His overall argument is that these kinds of films have harmful representations that perpetuate and reflect the dominant White supremacist ideologies and marginalized Black agency of the time. For the purposes of this thesis, Hughey's definitions will serve to expose the cinethetic racism within *The West Wing*, having Black characters in higher positions of power, but ultimately existing to serve their White counterparts.

To better explain this concept, I'd like to cite the 2024 film *The American Society of Magical Negroes* directed by Kobi Libii. This film serves as a parody to the stereotype of a "magical negro" by putting it into practice quite literally. The main purpose of Black characters in this society is to use their magic powers to keep their assigned White person happy at all times, even if it negatively impacts their own life. If they cannot accomplish this, it endangers the entire Black race around the world; it is said that an unhappy White person can cause mass destruction. While the film portrays this to an extreme that could seem comical, *The West Wing* involves stakes that are realistically just as serious. To use Admiral Fitzwallace as an example: He is a Black man in a high position in the American military. Not quite a member of the main ensemble, he is still featured over 22 episodes of the series. Were it not for his efforts in "A Proportional Response," there could have been a number of Syrian fatalities that were unnecessary. If he had not walked on eggshells to make President Bartlet content, perhaps it would have affected the safety of his job rather than his person. The same risk would be true for all military matters. It is also important to note that Fitzwallace is introduced in the wake of losing another well-liked Black man. He serves as a replacement as well as a moral compass meant to offer magical advice.

Admiral Fitzwallace works alongside another Black character in the series, National Security Advisor Nancy McNally. Together, the two advise President Bartlet on military

decisions; it is their sole purpose. It is ultimately up to them to make sure the president doesn't start wars without reason. If they are not convincing enough, there is a proverbial "red button" within reach. As far as avoiding mass destruction, these two characters follow *The American Society of Magical Negroes*'s depiction of the "magical negro" stereotype almost exactly. They also have minimal personality or backstory beyond that.

If the audience sees these two, it is because they need to use their magic. Fitzwallace is considered a reasonable man prepared to use force when necessary, and Dr. McNally is a badass female advisor who could hold her own in any room. This is the extent to which the audience gets to know these characters. *The West Wing* is able to showcase people of color in powerful positions, but as Parry-Giles (2006) put into words, "such performances, particularly those involving the military, reinscribe the hierarchy of a white male president in command of black military leaders, ensuring the containment of black power and advancement" (Parry-Giles 93). Not only does the series keep these individuals contained to their inferiority, but it denies them any opportunity to truly be Black beyond their skin color.

Over the history of film and television, Black actors have been cast in roles that are meant to be whitened. The only thing truly Black about the characters is their actor. According to Ed Guerrero (2005), it's an all too common industry practice to have them "completely isolated from other blacks or any reference to the black world" (Guerrero 126). Instead, Black characters are "surrounded and appropriated by a white context and narrative for the entertainment of a dominant or crossover audience" (Guerrero 126). Thinking of the foundation laid in my first chapter, the motivation of a majorly White audience that suffers from the racial empathy gap (Seewood 2014) would lend itself to having an all White writers' room that doesn't want to deter

them. It seems likely that this is a driving force behind *The West Wing*'s portrayal of the characters laid out thus far. Their creation perfectly fits this common industry practice.

One for All: Acceptance in Assimilation

Returning to Aaron Sorkin's quote in *The New York Times*, there is one final character he boasted about: "We haven't met the President's body man, his close aide" (Weinraub 1999). Established previously, he is referring to Charlie Young. Charlie is the first character Sorkin hasn't specified is Black in this quote, and he is the most notable person of color throughout the entire series. Also introduced in "A Proportional Response," his character is given important context beyond the worries of his race discussed in my first chapter. It is revealed that Charlie is looking for a job with the White House to simply keep the lights on. His mother was shot and killed in the line of police duty, and he is now the sole caretaker of his younger sister. Taking time off before officially going to college, he would be able to enter as a Junior due to credits.

In his introduction to the audience, Charlie both fulfills and lampoons the typical racist expectations. He was fatherless, now orphaned, growing up as a young Black person in the blackest city in the country (Spivey 2023), while also being an intelligent, respectful, self-sufficient member of society. Racist expectations would have him trapped in his negative conditions. Charlie takes these conditions and pushes through to exceed what his limits are seen as. Put most concisely by Simon Philpott and David Mutimer (2005), "Charlie fulfils the ethnic fantasies of many liberals: a young, self-possessed, sober, drug-free black man taking charge of his battered family and all the while bettering himself. This is the kind of black man that liberals like Josh and Sam know they can whiten and integrate into their world" (Philpott and Mutimer 346). Calling back to Richard Dyer (2005)'s claim that White people are just "people" while all

others are raced, *The West Wing* makes an effort to keep Charlie away from other raced individuals so as to ignore that he is one.

For starters, the series immediately profits off of his backstory. In the same episode where he is introduced, it is clear that the White House staff has sympathy for him. They feel what Philpott and Mutimer note as “noblesse oblige” towards him. That is, they feel a sort of responsibility as privileged people to act generously towards someone less so. This largely comes into play in the episode’s last scene. Charlie has just offered the president a lead on where his glasses might be— a mystery he’s been trying to solve for hours— and Bartlet lashes out at him for being a new voice in the room. Josh apologizes on the president’s behalf, as that was an uncharacteristically rude reaction to someone who is clearly apprehensive, and Leo reprimands Bartlet before telling him who Charlie is and what he’s coming from. This scene can be a metaphor for physical sight affecting moral vision. When the president loses Tolliver, he also loses his literal glasses and his code of ethics. Upon meeting Charlie, he finds his glasses and restores his honorable principles. This is a textbook example of a “magical negro” in action.

President Bartlet, returning to his romantic stereotype of a U.S. leader, expresses his condolences for Charlie and the fact his mother was killed with "cop killer" bullets. Bartlet asks him if he wants to help the administration try and pass legislation banning the ammunition and the guns used to fire them. After a moment, Charlie smiles and says he does. The promise of a better future for others like him is what gets him in the door. It is a promise that is never fulfilled; at least not where the audience can see. In fact, Charlie himself becomes a victim of such gun violence later that same season (“What Kind of Day Has it Been”). Once again, *The West Wing* is all talk and no action. The White House brings on a young Black man out of moral obligation,

and instead of making broad impacts based on their sympathies, they mold him to their world of Whiteness. He does not benefit in the ways that he planned to.

In his tenure on the show, Charlie rarely interacts with other Black characters. He spends almost every waking moment in a building full of powerful White people, tending to their needs. When he isn't on duty, he is taking night classes at Georgetown University to finish his degree with hopes of law school. Where is he able to fit in a social life? It can be assumed at first that he doesn't have one. President Bartlet has to convince Josh to take his bodyman out to a bar for a breather early on ("Mr. Willis of Ohio"). From that night, his personal and professional lives are intertwined; he fosters both businesslike and emotional relationships with his colleagues, all of whom are White.

As for a romantic life, Charlie's path could not have gone in a whiter direction. His main love interest throughout the series is Zoey Bartlet, youngest daughter of the president. Zoey takes the initiative to ask Charlie out first and practically sends her father into a coma ("Lord John Marbury"). Besides an initial shock due to age difference, and in spite of public scrutiny and threats from terrorists ("The White House Pro-Am" and "In the Shadow of Two Gunmen"), the couple are given full support from those around them. There are no objections for the relationship among loved ones due to race. Exacerbated by this plot line, Charlie becomes very close with Bartlett, becoming like a son to the president. In season two, Bartlett gives Charlie a family heirloom, an antique carving knife made by Paul Revere ("Shibboleth"). Such a gift reminds the audience of Bartlett's historical lineage. In doing so, audiences are also reminded of the elite whiteness that the president has been bred to believe in. Charlie is reminded that he only got this far by assimilating to that whiteness. He has transcended systemic racism by knowing the right people. Being a part of Bartlett's family is inherently linked to that elitist belief.

Perhaps his gift could be taken as a gesture of good faith; Bartlet passing on a relic that has otherwise been owned by Whites in power, may imply that he's not written to believe his family must remain White to keep its reputation. I, however, do not take the gesture in this way. From my perspective, this bond with the president only further promotes White superiority through racialized subject-positioning. As though he were a nation (Maas 2024), Charlie is subject-positioned as an "other." He is taken under the wings of some of the most influential people in the world and they paint him in their image over the course of seven seasons. Charlie lacks agency in his position because if it weren't for these same people, he would miss the opportunity to do such important things that others in his neighborhood or high school couldn't. Were it not for the president recommending him, Charlie may not have gotten into Georgetown Law either. Outside of that, though, what does Charlie really do? We as viewers never get to see him do anything of comparable importance to his White ensemble members. The only storylines specifically about Charlie include racist actions; and even then, the story ends up centering on White characters. He additionally is placed in a position of inferiority that never changes; Black or not, he will always be younger and less experienced than the rest of *The West Wing's* ensemble. It has no need for justification, the same way an object nation would be considered inferior to a subject. He is a resource that could be exploited if his superiors so chose. Another character who follows the "magical negro" stereotype, Charlie would not want to make the president or his staff unhappy. These traits of his character's storyline represent a domestic version of exceptionalist belief. Before *The West Wing* ever projected its overly White way of life onto foreign nations, the series did so to Charlie.

Returning to those he surrounds himself with, Charlie only has brief interactions with other Black individuals. He entertains a three week romantic situation with another woman

during an off period from Zoey. Only appearing for a portion of a single episode (“The Benign Prerogative”), Meeshell Anders (Gabrielle Union) is an aspiring political reporter he met at a party. The first exchange the audience sees between them is a curt greeting and a strong slap from Anders before the intro rolls. When the scene is back, Charlie remarks that “three weeks was too long” for their relationship and dismisses her to prepare for the State of the Union. She does not represent any insight to an authentic Black experience. Besides suggesting that Black women are violent, the writing of this character has no consequence to the series and is never seen again.

Additionally, Charlie spends time with two other young Black men as a mentor. First, and most notably, he works with Anthony Marcus (Andrew McFarlane). Anthony was previously mentored by Secret Service agent Simon Donovan, C.J. Cregg’s personal protection, before he was shot on duty. C.J. wants to find Anthony another Big Brother because she feels partially responsible for what happened to his original one. The person she asks to step in is Charlie. Reluctant at first due to his schedule, Charlie changes his mind after hearing Anthony call C.J. a “bitch” outside of her office. He throws Anthony against the wall and tells him he has a choice: juvenile detention or meeting with Charlie every Saturday morning at 9:00 at Cosmos (“Twenty Hours in America Part Two”). It is quickly made clear where Anthony’s preference lies.

In his time with his “little brother,” Charlie runs a tight program. He has always been a character who showed deep care for respect, professionalism, and reverence towards government; he does not tolerate any negativity or disrespect from his mentee. During Season Four episode four, “Red Mass,” he catches Anthony in a snarky assumption about the rules of church and state that seems like he’s actually interested. Charlie seizes this moment to foster excitement about learning; he gives Anthony a copy of the constitution and tells him to read

through and find the law he claims will separate church and state. By the end of the episode, Anthony writes him a foully worded note, but it is on the back of the First Amendment. Charlie feels progress coming.

Generally, his feeling was correct. Anthony ends up warming to Charlie enough to trust him with a friend's personal matter ("Election Night"). Orlando Kettles (Omar Benson Miller) was pulled over with an open can of Pabst Blue Ribbon in his car. Anthony is hoping that Charlie will "do his thing" and write Orlando a note so that he can still play football. Instead, Charlie learns that Orlando is old enough to vote, and teaches him about the election process. He takes him to the polls for Orlando to redeem his help with football. Everyone enjoys the adventure; Charlie has taught yet another black youth about the joys of American government.

In this scenario, Charlie is interacting with two people of his own culture, who haven't been whitewashed by his colleagues, for the first time on screen. It is the closest he gets to coming in contact with Black spaces or true Black identities. Anthony seems to remind him of this early in the episode, saying:

ANTHONY: Hey, could you try to think back to the days before you were Secretary of State or something? There are good guys and there are bad guys, and when good guys stop letting you play with them, the bad guys have a recruiting field day.

This moment is important for both Charlie and the audience. Charlie is brought back to a life he was once familiar with, realizing that people's stories are subjective, and not everyone is given the same resources he was to find better. He already knows how easy it is to fall into a gang or a lifestyle of violence, as demonstrated in a speech from Season Three's "Isaac and Ishmael." Anthony's words ask the audience to consider the story with compassion as well. Charlie's decision to show these boys kindness may go a long way in their lives, though it is not confirmed because this is the last time we see them. However, in this short time, Charlie has done to his

mentees what the White House has done to him: given them a belief that there is safety in White power.

A bold statement, it is likely that he did not do this on purpose. His character is written to be indebted to the institution that changed his life. It is a logical step for him to use the institution to help others; he knows it's a method that works. The series only sees Black men in two ways: respectable ones like Charlie who seek out Whiteness, and the other "bad" ones who don't. In his own life, he is not able to recognize how whitewashed he's become because a White world is all he now knows. He is Black, but not *too* Black, recalling Guerrero (2005)'s explanation of diverse casting in Hollywood. If these boys can acclimate to White standards the way Charlie has, then they're more likely to find success and safety outside of the dangerous life that racist expectations would have them live. The series once again does unto Black individuals what a global power (subject) might do to an underprivileged group (object). They are welcomed into more privileged spaces on the condition that they can mimic the approved practices.

In fact, this portrayal of a comeback story is no different than the way U.S. leaders regarded the emancipation of African Americans after the Civil War. Quoted by Richard W. Maass (2024), President Calvin Coolidge in 1925 remarked "Nearly one-tenth of our population consists of the Negro race. The progress which they have made in all the arts of civilization in the last 60 years is almost beyond belief" (qtd Maass 8). Such a statement implies that it is only because of White intervention that Black individuals could make such progress, that they could not have achieved anything living on their own. In order to do so, they would have had to tone down their blackness; to seem "civilized" in the eyes of White America, the blackest thing about anyone would be their skin.

As for Charlie, the blackest thing about his character becomes increasingly the same over the course of the series. When starting out, *The West Wing* took the time to note his racial difference and the struggles that came with it. There was screen time dedicated to battles with grief, violence, and overt racism in his life. After the attempted lynching at Rosslyn (“In the Shadow of Two Gunmen”), though, those issues had been exhausted. Had any of the empty promises to him been given tangible progress, perhaps Charlie could represent what’s possible when the government and the public take action in real life. A solution for those in Black spaces on screen could provide hope for those at home; and if those at home felt so inspired, they might provide pressure on the government for mirrored change. As mentioned in Chapter One, Kristina Riegert (2007) explains how a series like this is able to connect with the audience’s perception of the “real” during the boom of reality television. If it happens on their television, they might believe there’s no reason it couldn’t in their country.

Despite nothing truly being solved for Charlie, his race is scarcely acknowledged again. He is an exemplary employee, a motivated student, a full-time guardian, and a charismatic, dependable friend; he hardly complains about anything, and certainly does not complain about being Black. If his actor were replaced after Season Three, a White man may have been able to portray the remaining storylines without complication. Charlie Young went from an important representation of Black stories in media, to a character representing a good person who just happened to be Black.

According to William Spivey (2023), “Charlie was a composite who represented the entire Black race, as seen through Aaron Sorkin's eyes.” Spivey also refers to him as a “near-perfect Black person whose only missteps revolved around helping others” (Spivey 2023). If Charlie has been pushed away from Black spaces to where he seamlessly fits into a White

world that racism still exists in, does that imply a belief from *The West Wing*'s creators that Black people are at their best, most socially acceptable, when acting White? An exceptionalist reading of the series would determine that it does. All through its history, leaders of the United States have wanted the world to conform to the greatness they believe it already exudes; large majorities of its contemporary public, even, believe that the country should have a dominant or shared leadership role in the world (Maass 8). Up until 2008 with the election of Barack Obama, these leaders were White. Therefore, this greatness in the American civilization that leaders want to spread, is innately tied to being or acting White. It is an example of assimilation that is written into the arc of Charlie's character.

Within this chapter, I have discussed the representation of blackness in *The West Wing* in comparison to creator Aaron Sorkin's own words. Combined with my analysis, Sorkin has proven himself to only support progressive change performatively. The series only presents the bare minimum for critics of diversity. Black characters remain few in number, and lackluster in cultural identity. Each character represented follows a "magical negro" stereotype, in which their main purpose in existing is to serve and redeem White people with flaws. They are also written to lack flaws themselves, avoiding the racial empathy gap that denies the brains of White viewers the ability to care about the environmental factors that might contribute to any. Black characters on *The West Wing* can only be close to power if they are overseen by White characters. They remain in an inferior position no matter their circumstances. As I have demonstrated through my examples, ignoring their own race is what provides these characters the most success. In the blackest major city in the country, the most powerful Black people must act White. Due to uplifting these characters only under these conditions, *The West Wing* perpetuates White

supremacy with the exceptionalist belief that being a traditional American is what the world should strive for.

Chapter Three: When Parallel Worlds Cross - A Fictional United States, Post-9/11

LEO: This is the most horrifying part of your liberalism.

You think there are moral absolutes.

(3.20 “We Killed Yamamoto”)

On September 11, 2001, the United States of America was forever changed by the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and the diverted attack on the U.S. Capitol. The event is recounted year after year, with the slogan Never Forget. In the weeks directly following, it was impossible to ignore; the country was confused, afraid, and unsure of what would be next in its history. Given its subject matter, *The West Wing* couldn't ignore the event either.

9/11 doesn't occur in the timeline of this series– it is never mentioned by name. There are, however, allusions to a similar uproar in *The West Wing*'s United States in which the country's citizens are just as confused, afraid, and unsure of what's next. The mention of terrorism, middle eastern nations, and foreign relations at-large increase exponentially through the rest of the series post-9/11. In this chapter, I am analyzing the clumsy representations of these topics and their saturation in the series to demonstrate how *The West Wing* portrays the United States as above international law, driven by necessity, and a needed leader in the world. The series' beliefs in White supremacy and American exceptionalism are inseparable from these portrayals, and are only exacerbated by them.

A Well-Intentioned Attempt - Textual Disagreement in the Weeks Following 9/11

As stated, *The West Wing* could not shrug off such a monumental moment, even if it didn't exist in its fictional world. Other tragic incidents, such as the murder of Matthew

Shepherd in 1998, could be inspiration for episode plots (“Take Out the Trash Day”) after the immediate relevance had lessened. This could not be the case in response to 9/11. Summarized by Patrick Webster, the show “had to find a way of dealing with the effects of 9/11 if it was to remain credible” (Webster 68). The everyday patriotic imagery and witty dialogue expected in this world would not have meshed well with the realities facing its audience. In turn, the show’s writers scrambled to create a response to the tragedy, airing just three weeks later on October 3, 2001. It was a special episode that would live outside of the series’ timeline and would never be brought up again. Regarding the motivation to write it, Sorkin is quoted as saying “The only thing I could think of to do was to write an episode that somehow recreated the conversations that we were all having at our kitchen tables, at our offices, at our schools. And it had to be done very quickly, so this is what I decided to do—to talk about the history of terrorism” (Webster 67). One thing to note about “conversations at kitchen tables” is that they are often utterly uninformed. While this uninformedness is an idea I discuss in my analysis, it also is a result of Orientalist thinking. Westerners have the habit of defining Eastern cultures and nations based on whatever works for the White man’s imagination. Orientalism as a concept was established by the seminal Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said. An outspoken political activist, Said dedicated his life to writing numerous works on literature regarding Western Asian (or Middle Eastern) nations, the most famous of which being *Orientalism* (1978). Most simply put, Orientalism is “a style of thought based upon... distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’” (Said 2). A perfect example of this is the term “Middle East” itself; more accurately, countries such as Palestine are in Western Asia, but Americans only understand that part of the world based on relation to the West. After times of frustration or tragedy such as 9/11, it is common to use “Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and

having authority over the Orient,” (Said 3) in order to make sense of the events and regain some kind of agency in how the aftermath is coped with. This way of thinking is how we will see the representation of *The West Wing*’s Middle Eastern narratives.

Starting off the third season, the special “Isaac and Ishmael” has two distinct storylines: the first follows deputy chief of staff Josh Lyman and a group of high school students from “Presidential Classroom” and the second focuses on Leo McGarry as he conducts an interrogation of an Arab White House staffer who has suspected involvement in terrorist activity. The storylines are tonally opposite; the first being bright with curiosity and debate, and the second in dark lighting and sharp tension. With the entire White House on lockdown, Josh and a number of other senior staffers conduct an impromptu teach-in for the students who are asking about terrorists. At the beginning of this conversation, a student corrects Josh for calling the executive branch “the most powerful of the three branches of the federal government.” The truth is that all branches of the government were created to be equally as powerful. These students are representing the nation in real life as a people who are inquisitive, but not stupid. Josh concedes to the students, expressing confidence in their knowledge and ability to keep up with deeper conversation. He is expressing the same confidence in the audience at home that the students represent.

In this way, *The West Wing* provides viewers with a space to gain reassurance and knowledge on an anxiety-inducing topic by broadcasting a relatable body of characters. Rachel Gans-Boriskin and Russ Tissingier describe the success of this through the “cultivation hypothesis– that the more people watch television, the more they tend to think that the real world resembles the world portrayed on television” (Gans-Boriskin and Tissingier 101). Viewers of fiction media are susceptible to forming opinions based on what they repeatedly watch. It once

again relates to Orientalist thinking: televised depictions of exotic or violent Arabs will influence the public's interracial reactions post-9/11. People are no longer gaining insight only from non-fiction newscasts. This works in favor of Sorkin's hope that the episode would reach and recreate the feelings of real Americans.

However, this episode also implies that the White House is the most trusted, credible source of information. A group of privileged, White individuals on the most exalted stage in the country are given the power to mold opinions about other non-White individuals and countries. In the same vein, the teachings of these White individuals explicitly promote the United States as a superior nation. The teachings are also directly related to how President George W. Bush addresses the nation regarding the attacks on 9/11. President Bush describes the Islamic terrorists as murderers who hate freedom. Members of President Bartlet's staff speak of pluralism, and jealousy from other cultures who don't have the same freedoms that America does; that while their actions are wrong, their upsets are justified. Some nations don't have the freedom to use more than one chant at a soccer game, or pray next to someone of a different religion, or see a woman drive a car. Americans have the choice to do all of these things. The staffers only briefly entertain any other reasons why different cultures might have grievances with them. They completely leave American blame off of the table by boasting about its achievements, substantiating the idea that the United States is so superior it has no choice but to accept that envious actions will greet its people. It is a clear proclamation of American exceptionalism. So too, is it a proclamation that this White nation should be an example for other countries to follow. They don't give examples of what any non-White nation is doing right, just what they're doing that feels wrong. From the show's point of view, terrorism would cease to exist if other

countries had access to the American ways of life. This is the White man's imagination at work; *The West Wing* assumes all oriental nations are unhappy and in need of saving.

Given the gravity of the situation alluded to, many critics felt this teach-in lacked nuance. Gans-Boriskin and Tissinger, for example, found it to "provide easy answers that implicate Arabs simply for the convenience of the times" (Gans-Boriskin and Tissinger 105). Other adjectives found in responses to the episode include "preachy," "gutless," "condescending," and "simplistic" (Webster 68). In combination with insights from Trevor and Shawn J. Parry-Giles, as well as Brigitte Georgi-Findlay, I disagree with such an automatic write-off of the episode's discussion. While it continues to promote White supremacy and American exceptionalism, one thing the episode succeeds in is specifying the enemy. Instead of leaning into Islamophobic practices, the more "preachy" parts of the episode warn against them. Josh's first lesson to the students comes in the form of an SAT prep question: "Islamic extremist is to Islamic as 'blank' is to Christianity." A student had just made the assumption that it is Arabs or Islamics as a whole that want to hurt Americans. He then writes "KKK" on his whiteboard.

JOSH: That's what we're talking about. It's the Klan, gone medieval and global. It couldn't have less to do with Islamic men and women of faith of whom there are millions upon millions. Muslims defend this country in the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, National guard, police and fire departments. So, let's ask the question again.

GIRL 1: Why are Islamic Extremists trying to kill us?

JOSH: That's a reasonable question if I ever heard one.

From the beginning, he is denouncing the idea that all people of Islamic cultures and countries are to be feared. This is an important distinction to make early on, as he is speaking to the impressionable minds of the young people before him as well as those at home.

On the other hand, there are certain characters in the episode who could have benefitted from Josh's lesson. Leo, whose plot line is the reason the White House is on lockdown, is trying to decipher if an Arab employee is involved in suspected terrorist activity. Raqim Ali is one of three people in the United States who match the alias name for Yaarun Nabi, a coconspirator in an attempted bombing. It is not totally unreasonable to ask questions for security in this situation; but Leo proceeds with this in an uncharacteristically xenophobic manner. He is known to be an upstanding man who previously never cared much about race beyond optics ("A Proportional Response"). In Raqim Ali's office, however, he is unashamedly prejudiced in his comments. Ali attempts to voice the objections held in the Arab world about U.S. policy, such as protesting American military presence in Saudi Arabia and asserting that Americans would not be so fond of a reversed situation surrounding the Vatican. Leo dismisses him, replying that he'd like it fine if the presence was there for protection. In just one comment, he is able to sweep American faults off the table and imply an inability of Arab countries to do the same.

Described succinctly by the Parry-Giles brothers, he "ideologically personifies the voice of civic nationalism, portraying the United States imperialistically as the savior of the Arab world and justified in its prejudices" (Parry-Giles 164). When Ali expresses that the perpetual questioning of Arab Americans in the aftermath of terrorism is "horrible," Leo concludes with no sensitivity that "that's the price you pay." It is later revealed that the rest of his sentence would have been "... for having the same physical features as criminals," which completely contradicts Josh's plea not to think of all Islamics as Islamic terrorists. Not only is Leo explicitly racist in this episode, but he finds a way to reemphasize the prevailing status of the United States when it is not even being debated. His beliefs in White supremacy and American exceptionalism are intertwined so strongly that one cannot exist without the other in a given situation.

While critics dislike “Isaac and Ishmael” for its polarizing portrayals of issues with terrorism, I believe that this is what makes the episode successful. There are still harmful notions of racial superiority being perpetuated within it, but the overall goal of creating the episode was reached. Sorkin wanted to replicate the debates at kitchen tables. He also filled the hour with Orientalist ideas in the process, which further promotes the belief that the U.S. has the responsibility to define global progress. As Georgi-Findlay explains it, *The West Wing* provides the audience with an “in-text dissensus” (Georgi-Findlay 7), meaning that even the episode itself does not have a clear stance on the aftermath of 9/11. Josh and his colleagues debate the history of terrorism, not always agreeing. Leo even seems to disagree with himself when the smoke clears on his interrogation, giving Ali an embarrassed, albeit lackluster, apology for his actions. The two storylines contradict each other as much as they contradict themselves. In this way, the audience is left with more questions than answers. They are prompted to continue asking questions and having these hard conversations, rather than being quick to judge and being comfortable with ignorant prejudices. Overall, the main point that both storylines eventually concur with is that not all Arabs are terrorists, nor should they be treated as such. The episode certainly does not promote equality of race relations through its lessons, but it at least warns against such broad discrimination at a time when that warning was needed. This format as a whole, though, directly contradicts *The West Wing*’s reputation as a fantasy. The confident, fairytale government the show is known for would never be so confused. It is simply yet another indicator that the series is founded on lofty ideals with no actions behind them.

Fictional Countries, Real Concerns - Narrative Restructuring Post-9/11

Moving forward from the response to 9/11, seasons three and four of *The West Wing* are mainly focused on reelection. Bartlet has just declared his deception and concealment of his relapsing and remitting multiple sclerosis to the American public. He and his administration are working tirelessly to combat the repercussions of this and run a strong campaign to renew the Bartlet presidency another term. However, there is something about these plans for the future that no longer retain the series' excitement. Janet McCabe writes that after 9/11, "a sense quickly emerged that the series was no longer relevant" (McCabe 99). Similar to the way the expected witty banter would not have fit in the face of the attacks, it still proves difficult to be 'business as usual' after them. One response was not enough. The everyday happenings of the United States government were no longer as interesting when the "remote possibility" (McCabe 98) of terrorism became a lived experience for its imagined audience. *The West Wing* needed to expand the scope of which its storylines took place; and once widened outside of Washington D.C., it never quite tightens back up again.

Midway through the third season, the series introduces the fictional nation state of Qumar. Qumar is considered an Arab ally in the Middle East that seems to be an amalgamation of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia. Rather than create hypothetical narratives about real nations, *The West Wing* uses Qumar to broadly represent the Arab Middle East overall. Upon its introduction, viewers learn that Qumar is known for not having equitable human rights practices, particularly with women. In fact, its introductory episode, "The Women of Qumar" centers on C.J. Cregg's feminist empathy towards these women, and outrage towards President Bartlet, who just announced a military weaponry exchange with the nation. The women of Qumar are notoriously abused as the episode implies. C.J. compares their treatment to the Nazi treatment of Jews. It is not the most pressing portrayal of the country throughout its relevance on the show,

but it is a harmful one nonetheless. By creating a surrogate nation for the majority of the Middle East, *The West Wing* invites viewers to assume that this representation is accurate to how all of them operate. We again are seeing Orientalism in the series' White American authority to decide what the supposed reality of these cultures are. Regardless of any truth there might be to the depiction, the series is dangerously "blurring the line between fact and fiction" (Gans-Boriskin and Tissinger 106). This eventually applies to the topic of terrorism as well, when Bartlet's administration contradicts its grace given in "Isaac and Ishmael" and takes on an even more hawkish approach than the Bush administration of the time.

Later on in the same season ("The Black Vera Wang"), there are reports of an intended act of terrorism in California— a bombing of the Golden Gate Bridge that is never seen due to a timely arrest. The president then learns that Abdul Shareef, the defense minister of Qumar and a chief U.S. informant, may be involved in this terrorist plot. The next two episodes are spent trying to figure out what to do with this knowledge. More and more evidence is being presented that demonstrates Shareef as a terrorist mastermind who has planned several future attacks against the United States, alongside the election campaign.

Conveniently, Shareef is set to visit the United States within the next two weeks. Can they arrest him when he gets off the plane? No, it would be a breach of diplomatic immunity. Can they consult with the sultan of Qumar? It would be useless, given that Shareef is the sultan's brother. Surely, with the evidence and testimony they've been given, you would hope they could find a way around the immunity issue through legal routes; but since the evidence was obtained by "prolonged physical abuse by Russian soldiers," it would be inadmissible in court. They are running out of options. Being the morally conscious man he is written to be, Bartlet pleads with his military advisors to find any sort of way to handle this above board. Admiral Fitzwallace and

his men in the Situation Room come up short with anything other than eliminating this enemy. He is seen as a real threat, scaring even the toughest veterans in the deliberation. With Bartlet's refusal to listen, Fitzwallace moves on to Leo ("We Killed Yamamoto"):

FITZWALLACE: Can you tell when it's peacetime and wartime anymore?

LEO: No.

FITZWALLACE: I don't know who the world's leading expert on warfare is but any list of the top five has got to include me and I can't tell when it's peacetime and wartime anymore.

LEO: Look, international laws always recognize certain protected persons who you couldn't attack. It's been that way since the Romans.

FITZWALLACE: In peacetime... The international laws that you are talking about... were written at a time and place where a person could tell the difference between peacetime and wartime. The idea of targeting one individual was ridiculous... That all changed after Pearl Harbor.

LEO: I don't like where this conversation is going...

FITZWALLACE: We killed Yamamoto. We shot the plane down.

LEO: We declared war... and the plot to kill Hitler was an international rebellion ... I'm going back to my office.

FITZWALLACE: We measure the success of a mission by two things. Was it successful and how few civilians did we hurt? They measure success by how many. Pregnant women are delivering bombs. You're talking to me about international laws? The laws of nature don't even apply here. I've been a soldier for thirty-eight years and I found an enemy I can kill. He can't cancel Shareef's trip Leo. You've got to tell him he can't cancel.

In this conversation, Fitzwallace is trying to persuade Leo under the argument of necessity. He is insinuating that the people of Qumar are unable to stop Shareef themselves, and for the good of their nation and his own, America has no choice but to take this into its own hands. Richard W. Maass writes that the United States and fellow subject nations are "governed by laws of politics that regulate their social interactions," while object nations such as Qumar are "incapable of such

sociality and hence beholden to laws of nature” (Maass 4). Through subject-positioning, *The West Wing* is establishing why they are uniquely situated to be above such international laws. Fitzwallace takes this notion and knocks Qumar even further down the hierarchy of object nations. Instead of being governed by the laws of nature, Qumar cannot even adhere to that bare level of civilization.

It is interesting to note the voice of this harsh stance. Admiral Fitzwallace, one of the few Black people in a position of power in the series, is the biggest proponent of assassinating Abdul Shareef. He is meant to convince the two most powerful White men in the administration to believe in the necessity of these questionable tactics based on his intuition. *The West Wing* uses Fitzwallace as the face of promoting America’s exceptionalist destiny. It is America’s responsibility to define justice globally. The series also uses him to promote White superiority in the same moment. President Bartlet, the White man, is the one who has moral objections to an assassination. By having a Black man be so heavily in favor of the killing, the series portrays his race as lacking conscience. If Black men are positioned as the framers of Bartlet’s moral vision, then Fitzwallace’s arguing for a Qumari assassination instead of arguing against Season One’s Syrian attacks implies that *The West Wing* doesn’t truly see this as a moral failing at all. The United States is then portrayed as superior by ultimately acting as the “world’s police” (Riegert 231), and maintaining the idea that White people aren’t the ones who choose violence first. An opposite mindset from Bartlet in Season One’s “A Proportional Response,” this storyline still accomplishes the same message.

This becomes especially true when Leo is finally on board with the plan. Leo helps justify to the president that the rules have changed because Qumar provoked violence first, not the United States. President Bartlet tries again to insist that “There are moral absolutes” (“We

Killed Yamamoto”). Leo counters: “He’s killed innocent people. He’ll kill more so we have to end him. The village idiot comes to that conclusion before the Nobel Laureate....This is justified. This is required.” His choice of language once again emphasizes the belief of American exceptionalism from the series. Yes, they are breaking laws, but it is *required*, for the safety of all nations. It is up to this administration to dictate who and what is allowed to deviate from the norm.

In the season’s finale episode, “Posse Comitatus,” the assassination plot is underway. President Bartlet learns that there are two executive orders that ban political assassination, and therefore, it cannot take place on American soil. He also learns that the British are supporting this plot, which further suggests that White, colonizing nations are meant to be leaders of the world. When the plan is executed, Shareef will be assassinated on a remote air strip in Bermuda, where his plane has emergency landed due to a fake mechanical issue. Bartlet is waiting until the very last second to officially order the killing. He meets with Shareef in the Oval Office during his visit, trying his best to remain diplomatic with his anxieties coursing through him. He can’t get himself to shake Shareef’s hand, blaming it on a nonexistent rash. That same night, the president attends a benefit performance of *The War of the Roses*, based on William Shakespeare’s history plays. The performance parallels the tensions of the episode; conspiracy, violence, and victory are presented in a series of cinematic transitions between the stage and the assassination plot. President Bartlet finally resigns himself to moral corruption. The curtain falls on the third season just as Shareef and his fellow passengers fall to their deaths.

All throughout this season, *The West Wing* has convinced its audience that this course of action was the only viable option. Viewers are asked to feel empathetic towards their fictional president. If they do, then where does he find the consequences to his actions? Most of the fourth

and following season is focused on trying to get Bartlet elected president for a second term. No one is aware that he has broken international laws. The political assassination does not get in the way of his success at the polls; in fact, he wins against Republican Robert Ritchie in a landslide despite the major scandal about his health. When word spreads about Shareef's death, Israel is the nation given immediate blame because of manufactured evidence. Bartlet seems to be getting off scot-free.

Further on, however, suspicions begin to arise. Danny Concanon, a talented reporter with close relationships in the White House, wants to break a story on ties between the U.S. and the assassination. It turns out that Qumar has manufactured the evidence against Israel itself to incite international conflict. Knowing the accusation towards Israel is false, the United States can't do anything to help, because they would be incriminating their own government. This results in the death of Israeli Foreign Minister Ben Yosef, a close friend of Leo's. Tensions are rising as the administration wonders when the metaphorical "other shoe" will drop. When five Bahji sleeper agents – terrorists from Qumar – have disappeared from U.S. surveillance, the president and chief of staff decide to loop in the rest of their senior counsel ("Commencement"). The mystery of what has been planned is solved when, on the night of her graduation from Georgetown University, Zoey Bartlet is kidnapped.

It is no secret what President Bartlet's daughters mean to him. They are his true weakness, and the Qumari government must have known that; this was their best shot at true retaliation. They are counting on him to act as a father first and a leader second. Since it is such a sensitive subject for the president, even he felt himself slipping into the skin of a protective father. He knew it was only a matter of time before his emotions would directly control his military decisions. President Bartlet decides to invoke the 25th Amendment to the Constitution,

temporarily removing himself from power. Will Bailey, new deputy communications director, calls it a “fairly stunning act of patriotism. And a fairly ordinary act of fatherhood” (“Twenty Five”). The season finale ends with House Speaker Glen Allen Walken taking the oath of the presidency in the Oval Office. During his time as president in Season Five, one of the first things Walken does is break the news that it was President Bartlet who ordered the assassination of Abdul Shareef (“7A WF 83429”). It is one of the only things he does as president, as Zoey is rescued in the following episode, “The Dogs of War,” which is only two days later in the timeline of the series.

Given all of this context, I am writing to note that Bartlet did not truly suffer any consequences for his international crime. He still earned himself a second term of presidency, winning in a landslide. This presidency was not taken from him, either, when revealed that he committed such acts. He does not find himself with a cellmate in the Hague prison for war crimes. While he suffered emotional distress from his daughter’s capture, she was returned merely 50 hours later. From then on, the administration gets to continue like nothing ever happened. The public continues to forgive. In actuality, there were innocent people who suffered the consequences of Bartlet’s actions. Ben Yosef, for example, and all those on his aircraft, died in vain. The companions of Shareef himself were not all guilty either; surely, there would have been a few staff members who were collateral damage to the U.S. plans. Those who suffered the least were objectively furthest in the wrong.

Once again, *The West Wing* has set the United States up as a nation that can do no wrong. In Sorkin’s last two seasons as the show’s writer, he continually boosts the status of Americans while tearing down those of Arab Middle Eastern nations and cultures. His characters preach of pluralism, freedom, and justice, while implying that other nations are nowhere near capable of

accomplishing any of those things. While there is a well-intentioned attempt at responding to the attacks on 9/11, portrayals of non-White races beyond that have been clumsy and overly simplified, leaving audiences room to generalize that the negative behaviors belong to all members of the Arab world. Throughout this, White individuals are promoted as the pinnacle of knowledge and moral fiber. They are the ones trusted with informing viewers and fellow characters alike, as well as making proper decisions. This same privilege is given to the United States as a whole, constantly substantiating that it has a God-given responsibility to dictate where power lies around the globe. Even when playing a questionable role in international affairs, the U.S. is only ever rewarded for its ability to make hard choices. *The West Wing* is unable to separate its beliefs in White supremacy and American exceptionalism from any storyline, particularly those regarding other nations or races. Its nationalism directly correlates to innate, rather than earned, superiority.

Conclusion

BARTLET: What's next?

(1.1 "Pilot")

Throughout this thesis, I have demonstrated that not only does *The West Wing* believe in the idea of American exceptionalism, but that this belief prevents it from living up to its idealized reputation. It oversimplifies the complexities of race, religion, and terrorism, while striving to maintain the status quo above all else. The series additionally believes in White supremacy, a notion that time and again proves inextricable from American exceptionalism due to Whiteness being the foundation of the qualities adored about the nation.

When I began this work, I was convinced that these fictional politicians were the gold star standard. Plenty of others believed they were, too. They were so much more empathetic and reasonable than I felt my present-day administration to be. Not only has my opinion changed on this after careful research, but I have begun to wonder whether *The West Wing's* lack of fortitude is a contributing factor to today's mediated political landscape. Everywhere I turn on social media, I see individuals pleading to be heard. They spread the word of untold stories, untelevised tragedies, and hidden truths. The United States of today is suffering from widespread censorship— a direct violation of its citizens' First Amendment rights. When the owners of social networking companies are directly affiliated with a far-right, racist administration, such as Elon Musk was with Donald Trump, how are we as Americans to know what information is safe online? There are new restrictions on what journalists are allowed in the White House press room (Grynbaum 2025), and the press at the Pentagon is required to sign a pledge that they will only report on the information that has been "approved for public release" (Lawrence and Wise 2025). I imagine if it is this difficult to get factual data released, then there must be new hoops to

jump through in fiction media as well if a producer wants to publicize content unaligned with or in resistance to the current administration.

My speculation of *The West Wing*'s negative impact is drawn greatly from the work of Rachel Gans-Boriskin and Russ Tissingier in "The Bushlet Administration: Terrorism and War on *The West Wing*" (2005). The two write of the "cultivation hypothesis" and the idea that viewers of fiction media are susceptible to forming opinions based on what they repeatedly watch, as opposed to only gaining insights from non-fiction newscasts. Had *The West Wing* had the guts to follow through with their grand plans for change, no matter how unrealistic, perhaps the public could have been influenced to fight for a more just America as well. The people are those who ultimately have the power to influence politicians. Writers on *The West Wing* had much more freedom of expression than a program would likely have today. We know it had already begun to push the boundaries of normalcy with its progressive plot lines, so it wasn't similarly being censored at the time; why didn't it push further? The series was a piece of fiction. It could have been an America of any kind. There could have been gun reform, the abolishment of mandatory minimums, and representations of peaceful conflict resolution. Instead, the series continuously fought for realism and compromise that maintained a contradictory, exceptionalist narrative. In comparison to the limitations of the modern day, *The West Wing* is actually a disappointment, not an idealized vision of the United States.

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