

***The West Wing: President as Symbol***

by

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## **Abstract**

*The West Wing*: President as Symbol  
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This study examines how the character of President Bartlet is constructed on *The West Wing*. Fifteen episodes from October 2001 to January 2002 were taped and reviewed for this research. Real life presidential settings and presidential roles are used as a starting point for analysis. The application of these characteristics to President Bartlet describes how this character functions as a credible fictional president. Suggestions for future research are also presented.

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## Chapter One

### *Introduction*

Strains of “Hail to the Chief” resonate in the distance. The President approaches and the audience draws quiet to hear him speak about a crisis situation in America. He begins, “My fellow Americans...” One hour later, he is finished. Crisis has been averted and life returns to normal.

This description is a run-of-the-mill day in the White House, the Bartlet White House, that is. Martin Sheen portrays President Josiah “Jed” Bartlet on NBC’s critically acclaimed drama, *The West Wing*. This television program symbolically constructs a fictional President and Presidency that are becoming ingrained in American life. While creator Aaron Sorkin contends that *The West Wing* is Hollywood, plain and simple, the potential effects of this program reach far beyond a normal television program (NBC.com, 2001).

In its first two seasons (1999-2001), *The West Wing* won 17 total Emmy Awards, culminating both years with Outstanding Drama Series. Additionally, *The West Wing* set the record for winning the most Emmys in a single season (1999-2000) (NBC. com, 2001). The Television Critics Association also bestowed awards upon *The West Wing* in 2000: Drama of the Year, Best New Program of the Year, and Program of the Year. It is the first time in history a series has won all three awards in a single season (Challen, 2001). But awards alone do not tell the whole story about this drama series.

*The West Wing* is also a popular success as measured by Nielsen ratings. For the current season (2001-2002), *The West Wing* is the ninth-highest ranked television program with 12.0/19.0 household ratings/share (as of 03/10/02) (zap2it.com, 2002). *The West Wing* finished the 2000-2001 season in 11<sup>th</sup> place with 11.6/18 household

ratings/share. The increasing popularity of this program with the general public further justifies studying its political messages.

Furthermore, *The West Wing* is in uncharted territory for its positive portrayal of the political system. According to Jackson (2000), “Before *The West Wing*, presidential parody was the best television could offer,” (p. 3). The implication of this statement is that *The West Wing* is much closer to reality than it is to parody. The tone of this show is undoubtedly liberal, yet the interactions between the President and his staff are symbolic of presidencies both Republican and Democrat (Auster, 2000). This show functions as the common man’s way of seeing inside the White House. Lehmann (2001) and Wolff (2000) each explore the growing significance of *The West Wing* in American life.

Lehmann (2001) notes the appearance of “Bartlet for President” bumper stickers in southern California during campaign 2000. Bartlet for President? What is it about this fictional Presidency that people find so attractive? Lehmann describes *The West Wing*’s purpose as two-fold. First, it functions as a television program to entertain viewers. However, according to Lehmann, that function is secondary in nature. In reality, “*The West Wing* sets out, week after week, to restore public faith in the institutions of our government, to shore up the bulwarks of American patriotism, and to supply a vision of executive liberalism—at once principled and pragmatic; mandating both estimable political vision and serious personal sacrifice; plying an understanding of the nation’s common good that is heroically heedless of focus groups, opposition research, small-bore compromise, and re-election prospects—that exists nowhere else in our recent history,” (Lehmann, 2001, p. 2).

Wolff (2000) dubs Martin Sheen as President Bartlet “our remote-control president.” Even this title implies the impact *The West Wing* is having in American culture. He contends that *The West Wing* functions as a parallel world, one in which many Americans would prefer to live. As Wolff states, “it’s a television set piece, something entirely formulaic, earnest, goody-goody, proud of itself, overproduced. And exactly for these reasons it may be on its way to being the most important political document of the age,” (p. 3). Finally, Wolff (2000) articulates the symbolic role President Bartlet is assuming in American life. He is, “...an actor who just plays the president [who] is becoming as potent a symbol as the actual presidency...President Bartlet is fully idealized. And yet, it is an oddly or beguilingly, credible portrait. We seem to want it to be, anyway,” (p. 7). Drawing upon current research concerning rhetoric in popular culture and presidential research defining essential characteristics of a president, this study will explore how President Josiah “Jed” Bartlet is constructed as a fictional president.

### **Rhetoric in Popular Culture**

Television shows, comic books, popular music, and even graffiti are all examples of rhetoric in popular culture. Historically, rhetoric has been defined as the study of how messages affect people, with the understanding that messages are context-bound and generally in the form of a speech or an essay (Hart, 1997). Rhetoric in popular culture expands this historical definition to include both more media and contexts.

Brummett (1991, 1994), in two separate works, elaborates on the concept of rhetoric in popular culture. He begins by expanding the definition of rhetoric to “ways in which

signs influence people,” (1994, p. 4). Brummett also discusses popular culture. He contends that popular culture includes artifacts that influence the widest groups of people. For example, a speech given at a local Rotary Club meeting influences only those present at the meeting. By contrast, a television program influences much wider audiences and often, on a more regular basis (i.e. daily, weekly, monthly). Brummett concludes by saying that since popular culture influences those who partake of it, it is, by its very definition, rhetorical (Brummett, 1991).

In any given culture, a specific medium may be considered dominant, and therefore, be the vehicle for transmitting popular culture to the largest number of people. Media determinism states that, “[the] content of cultures is dictated by the inevitable domination of a medium of communication,” (Brummett, 1991, p. 5). For today’s society, that medium is television. Postman (1984) contends that society today is formed by television at its core, extending even to its epistemology. Postman concludes by saying (of television), “...because of the way it directs us to organize our minds and integrate our experience of the world, [it] imposes itself on our consciousness and social institutions in myriad forms,” (Postman, 1984, p. 18). Television is deeply ingrained in our culture today and serves to inform many of our ideas. Therefore, one can conclude that television, as the dominant medium, is informing many of our ideas concerning politics. Consequently, it is appropriate to study how a television program portrays fictional politicians.

Rhetoric is often used to study popular culture in television and film. Cops and robbers, young doctors, teachers, and now even presidents are portrayed weekly on television. These portrayals are billed as entertainment, but many scholars contend that

they do much more than just entertain (Nimmo & Combs, 1990, Medhurst, 1993; Giglio, 2000; Gladstone-Sovell; 2000). From portraying organizational life as we would like to see it, rather than as it is (Vande Berg & Trujillo, 1989), to examining the core values of our culture (Sandeem, 1997), entertainment television reflects our views of reality as well.

Scholars have many concerns about the portrayal of politicians and presidents on television. These portrayals are either completely idealized or overwhelmingly negative, and generally, not an accurate reflection of American experience. Giglio (2000) contends that Americans want their presidents to function as superheroes—strong, yet sensitive, royal, yet common, human, yet not flawed. He says, “the reel presidents...are glamorous heroes, creative inventions, rather than real people,” (p. 94). These “reel presidents” embody the idealistic hopes and dreams of Americans created by entertainment and thereby, make reality seem even more mundane and unsatisfactory.

By contrast, Gladstone-Sovell (2000) specifically explores the negative portrayals of elected officials on television. According to Gladstone-Sovell (2000), entertainment television has a distinctly anti-politician bias. She sees two dominant portrayals of elected officials: criminal or buffoon (p. 118). Officials are often portrayed as criminally corrupt. Some examples are politicians on *Another World*, *Days of Our Lives*, and *Knotts Landing*. These politicians embezzle money, have affairs, and even commit murder. While these things do happen in real life, they are far more often the exception than the rule.

The opposite extreme is also portrayed on entertainment television, that is, elected officials as buffoons. These characters fumble around never quite knowing what to do or how to behave. Examples of such politicians can be found on *The People’s Choice*,

*Benson, Spin City, Hearts Afire, The Powers That Be, and Women of the House*

(Gladstone-Sovell, 2000). Furthermore, she contends that politicians are rarely shown in a positive or realistic light. Due to these negative portrayals of elected officials, very little serious scholarly or public attention has been paid to politicians on entertainment television (Gladstone-Sovell, 2000). If one assumes that what we watch on television matters and actually helps shape our consciousness, then it can be assumed that these negative portrayals of politicians are detrimental to American perceptions of politics in general.

Gladstone-Sovell (2000) concludes by noting that there are a few exceptions to the criminal/buffoon archetypes. Examples include *Mayberry RFD*, *Top of the Hill*, and *Northern Exposure*. She also notes *The West Wing*, but states that when her research was conducted, *The West Wing*, was still in its first season and therefore, too early to categorize its portrayal of the president. She believes that part of the problem in portraying politicians on television is that a role model for positive portrayals on television simply does not exist. As indicated by the research, the current portrayal of politicians and presidents on television is primarily negative. This negative portrayal may be affecting the expectations the typical American holds concerning politics.

According to Nimmo and Combs (1990), people create their own realities based on the myths and stories they encounter. In turn, these realities then shape how they view the rest of the world. They conclude that because television is the central medium of today's society, a person's political views are indeed created, in large part, by mass media. As Nimmo and Combs state, "movies [and other forms of entertainment television] tell us about ourselves in relation to our politics," (p. 110). That is, entertainment has so

profoundly influenced our views of politics that we see our views reflected on the screen. Therefore, studying *The West Wing* as a multidimensional model for politics on television is an appropriate and timely examination to undertake. To better understand the portrayal of the President and Presidency on-screen, examining real life presidencies off-screen is first appropriate.

### **Presidential Research**

Presidential research studies the office of the president in many ways. First, a president's job duties and functions are described as being a core part of the office. Second, the president himself is defined as a symbol of the presidency. In order to understand president as symbol, political symbols and language must first be examined. Then, the symbolic roles and models co-created by the president and the public will be discussed. Finally, the creation of a presidential persona will be explored. This presidential research serves to delineate the essential characteristics of a president and how they are manifested in a given presidency.

According to Denton, Jr. (1982), a function is a specific natural action or activity of something, that is, a job requirement (p. 40). Presidential functions have been defined in many ways. Cronin (1980) believes a president has six basic functions or job duties while in office:

- 1) symbolic leadership which must generate hope, confidence, and national purpose
- 2) setting national priorities and designing programs which will receive public attention and a legislative hearing
- 3) crisis management

- 4) constant legislative and political coalition building
- 5) program implementation and evaluation...
- 6) general oversight of government routines...responsible for governmental performance on all levels.

These functions are both procedural and symbolic in nature, and theoretically, should be embraced by all presidents. Buchanan (1978) contends that there are four generic functions of a president: 1) to act as a national symbol, 2) to be a policy advocate, 3) to be a mediator among national interests, and 4) to be a crisis manager. Functions are the “how-to” of the presidency. Functions, however, make up a very small portion of how the president acts during his presidency. Scholars contend that a president’s symbolic actions are actually as significant, if not more so, than his job duties.

In order to understand the role of president as a symbol, one must first ask, what is a symbol? Hinckley (1990) contends that an object referred to by a symbol has a range of meaning beyond itself. Furthermore, symbols are socially based, defined by both the giver and the receiver. Also, symbols are purposive; they have an intended action. Symbols refer to concrete objects, while extending the meaning of the object to include social expectations.

Edelman (1988) examines political symbols. He contends that politicians stand for ideologies and values, both good and bad, and that they become signs of success or defeat for the American public. In an earlier work, Edelman (1967) explains that symbols evoke expectations of an attitude, set of impressions, or events in the minds of an audience. Political symbols can also be described as condensation symbols. Condensation symbols evoke emotions associated with a situation and “condense into

one symbolic event, sign, or act patriotic pride, anxieties, remembrance of past glories or humiliations...” (p.6). Hinckley (1990) and Edelman both highlight the role of the public in co-creating meaning and therefore, warrant a discussion of role expectations placed upon presidents.

According to Denton, Jr. (1982), the concept of role deals with expectations. These expectations are situational in nature. For example, as chief executive, the president functions as CEO of one of the largest corporations in the world. As commander-in-chief, the president must take responsibility for executing military strategy (p. 43). Roles, like rhetoric, are created and/or enacted to deal with specific situations. Furthermore, appropriate role behavior is a product of what the actor, in this case a president, perceives his role to be, which in turn, fulfills the expectations of the public, (p. 38).

While the concept of role is often used to encompass all aspects of a president’s behavior, a distinction can be made between function and role. Presidents both concretely perform many functions and enact many roles. A role is a part or character assumed by an individual (Denton, Jr., 1982, p. 40). Roles will now be explored in greater detail.

Roles can be defined either constitutionally or extra-constitutionally (Denton, Jr., 1982). Constitutionally, Corwin (1957) contends that a president has five roles: chief of state, chief executive, chief diplomat, commander in chief, and chief legislator. With each of these roles come a different demeanor and a different end goal for a president. Extra-constitutionally, Rossiter (1960) also delineates five roles for a president: chief of party, protector of peace, manager of prosperity, world leader, and voice of the people.

While the manifestation of the roles may vary for each individual, too much variation from the norm can be viewed as dangerous.

Hughes (1973) summarizes the role expectations of a president. He must have a sense of confidence, preparation, drama, timing, constancy, humanity, perspective, and history. These expectations are lofty and idealized, but ones that Americans hold for their chief executive.

Finally, every president utilizes these roles to create a persona for himself. In order to truly understand a president, Barber (1977) contends one must look even deeper than the roles a president portrays. He discusses style, worldview, and character as the foundations necessary to understand a president. Style is the president's way of acting. Style incorporates the habitual ways he performs his political roles. In theory, a president should act and react in a similar manner when presented with similar problems.

Second, Barber (1977) examines the worldview of a president as his way of seeing. Worldview "consists of primary, politically relevant beliefs, particularly his conceptions of social causality, human nature, and central moral conflicts of the time," (p. 7-8).

Character is the way a president orients himself to life (Barber, 1977). Fundamentally, character determines whether a president is true to himself or not. Is he willing to take an unpopular position if he knows it is the correct one for him?

In summation, a president is expected to be all things for all people at all times. Denton, Jr. (1982) asks, "Are desired presidential qualities found in history, myth, and merely perpetuated through textbooks?" (p. 50). That is, where do the expectations we have for presidents originate? The answer it seems, is that expectations come both from

history and from the mass media, as we co-create our own realities. Four years later, Denton, Jr. (1986) answers his own question. He states, “politicians have become fantasy figures and symbolic leaders because they are shown to represent not only issues [and] positions, but values, lifestyle, and vision,” (p. 180). This “political celebrity” is blurring the lines between fact and fiction, making presidents both politicians and stars. Therefore, the examination of a fictional president straddles the same fence, in the opposite direction, between truth and fiction.

### ***Methodology***

This study will examine 15 episodes of the 2001-2002 season of *The West Wing* beginning on October 3, 2001 and ending on January 30, 2002 (See Appendix 1). This sequence of episodes will provide continuity in plot and character development, with a focus on Martin Sheen as President Josiah Bartlet.

In order to explore the construction of the fictional President Bartlet, the episodes will be viewed once and detailed, careful notes about all interactions concerning the President taken. A second viewing will then describe the setting constructed by the creators of *The West Wing* and the roles President Bartlet portrays. The roles enacted by President Bartlet cannot be understood apart from the creation of the Presidential setting. This fictional setting will be studied utilizing real life political settings as a starting point. Burke (1945) contends that the scene determines the action that will take place within it. Examining the scene will provide insight into the roles President Bartlet embodies. Edelman (1967) delineates massiveness, ornateness, and formality as characteristics specific to political, and by extension, presidential settings. Therefore, Edelman will be

applied to *The West Wing* to understand the setting that President Bartlet functions within.

After the scene has been described, President Bartlet's way of enacting presidential roles and functions will be examined. Again, many of the roles in the study will be drawn from real life, while simultaneously looking for characteristics not specifically discussed in the literature review. Barber (1977) and Denton, Jr. (1982) will be drawn upon in the analysis of the construction of President Bartlet.

This study will define how this fictional President is constructed and what roles he embodies. Barber's (1977) discussion of style, worldview, and character as important elements to understanding presidential roles will be considered when viewing the episodes collected for this study (p. 7). Style is the president's way of acting, while worldview is his way of seeing. Character is described as the president's stance as he encounters life during his time in office. The portrayal of President Bartlet will first be analyzed broadly according to these three categories using descriptive analysis.

Denton, Jr. (1982) divides the presidential portrayal of self into two relevant categories: functions and roles. Functions are the job requirements of the president and roles are parts assumed by a president (p. 40). President Bartlet's actions on *The West Wing* will be examined to determine what roles he portrays as President.

The challenge of this study is to determine how the fictional President Bartlet is constructed on *The West Wing*. The hypothesis is that the creators of *The West Wing* draw upon real life settings and Presidential roles to construct President Bartlet. Understanding to what extent and in what manner they draw upon these roles is the goal of this research.

## Chapter Two

### *Construction of the Presidential Character*

#### **Setting the Scene**

Edelman (1967) discusses the impact of television on real life Presidential interactions. He states, “[t]he television screen, presenting a live performance creates not close contact, but a semblance of close contact, and the distinction is crucial. Though the picture is in one’s living room, the President is remote and in a frame, and he is patently offering a performance,” (p.101). For real life presidents, then, television creates a performance that reaches many, while giving the illusion of intimacy between a few. The challenge facing the creators of *The West Wing* is to use the medium of television to construct a believable, yet fictional, President.

Perhaps the most expected element of creating a believable presidency on television is setting the scene. A well-constructed scene both foreshadows and limits the type of action that will take place within it. Burke (1945) discusses the scene-act ratio in his theory of dramatism. He contends that the scene determines the type of action that will occur. Edelman (1964) extends this idea by specifically addressing political settings as symbol. Not only is a setting made up of the obvious elements of buildings, trees, and houses, but more importantly, contains a social (symbolic) meaning as well. The construction of the White House, and more specifically, the offices of the West Wing, on *The West Wing* carry with them certain expectations of the behavior that will occur there.

Edelman (1964) further extends the symbolic nature of settings by discussing the contrived character of political settings. He asserts that political settings are marked by three characteristics: massiveness, ornateness, and formality. These characteristics work together to give a setting the authority of a political function, or as in the case of *The West Wing*, the Presidency. The extent to which each characteristic is employed on this television program helps create a Presidential setting specific to *The West Wing*, while remaining grounded by real life political setting characteristics. Subsequently, as expected from Burke's (1945) scene-act ratio, the setting will then determine the action that occurs within it.

Political settings often possess the characteristic of massiveness. Massiveness refers not only to buildings, rooms, and physical objects, but also to the scale on which events are carried out. The challenge facing the creators of *The West Wing* is to make a setting feel massive in a medium that inherently reduces objects. Camera angles and placement of individuals in relation to objects help create this characteristic. *The West Wing* utilizes massiveness in both objects and events to construct the setting of a Presidency.

First, physical objects appear strikingly massive on *The West Wing*. One way the entire scene is made larger is through letterboxing. Letterboxing is a television production feature where black lines are placed at the top and bottom of the screen. By compressing the action into a smaller vertical space, horizontal action is expanded. As *The West Wing* executive producer Thomas Schlamme states, "A shot of one person isn't necessarily going to be better in widescreen. But when you're dealing with the Oval Office...you get so much more information," ([Colorado Springs Gazette](#), 03/01/02).

Within the Oval Office, the President's desk appears to be the largest object. To capitalize on this appearance, the camera shows the President seated behind his desk with everyone else a respectable distance away. This placement not only literally and figuratively separates the President from the rest of his staff, but also draws attention to the size of the desk. In at least seven different instances in the episodes collected for this study, the desk is used to create a feeling of massiveness in setting and authority in action for the President (10/10/01, 11/07/01, 11/14/01, 11/21/01, 12/19/01). One such example of the desk as massive and its impact on the President's actions is seen in "The Indians in the Lobby" (11/21/01). President Bartlet spends much of this episode conducting meetings with his staff before the Thanksgiving holiday. In one scene, Toby (Richard Schiff) is talking with the President about how to cook a turkey for Thanksgiving dinner. The President calls the Butterball Hotline for advice. While the subject matter seems trivial, the prestige of the President is maintained, in part because of the massiveness of the setting. The placement of President Bartlet behind his desk creates an official feel to his interactions.

A second example of massiveness in physical objects is seen in the portrayal of Air Force One. Both externally and internally, this plane is portrayed as massive. Externally, the plane is shown from a distance with people moving around underneath it ("Manchester, Part I," 10/10/01). The camera also shows staff members boarding Air Force One and the contrast between their size and the plane's size is visually striking. The external massiveness, however, is comparable to the portrayal of planes in other movies or television programs.

The construction of the internal environment of Air Force One as massive is more significant. As a contrast to typical airplanes on television or in real life, Air Force One is not cramped or crowded. Rather, it is portrayed as spacious and contains rooms for meetings, relaxation, and the White House Press Corps. The size of Air Force One creates a perception that the work done by the President and his staff is so important and necessary that it cannot be stopped even in the air and consequently, the airplane must be equipped for all emergencies. The structure of this airplane, then, defines the action occurring within it. A desk and the interior of an airplane are not necessarily massive objects in real life. However, in the medium of television, the creators of *The West Wing* use these objects to construct the illusion of a presidential setting.

Massiveness is not only present in physical objects, but also in the scale of events portrayed on *The West Wing*. The creators of this television program use pomp and circumstance to make events feel massive and thus, presidential. The clearest example of this principle is in “Manchester, Part II” (10/17/01). This episode chronicles the activities leading up to the President’s official reelection announcement. A press conference is planned at a high school in New Hampshire, complete with a marching band and a crowd of several thousand. To create the illusion of a crowd, the camera cuts back to the people in the audience several times during the press conference. Also, as President Bartlet exits the holding area to begin his speech, the crowd is shown as a sea of people from his point of view. To further develop the sense of importance and massiveness surrounding this event, a Presidential motorcade brings the President to the reelection announcement. The scale of this event is massive, both in design and enactment, and further develops the political setting on *The West Wing*. The design

elements are those that use massiveness to imply importance, while the enactment elements simply represent size. In design, small details, like the motorcade and the marching band, collectively increase the illusion of importance. For example, the motorcade is escorted by police to assure the President is able to navigate his way through the crowd. The marching band simply increases the festivity associated with this event. In enactment, the crowd is the key factor in making the announcement event seem massive.

A second example of a massive event occurs in “Noel” (12/19/01). The White House Christmas party is depicted as a large event. Charlie (Dule Hill) and the President spend time discussing attire ahead of time, Yo Yo Ma is booked as the entertainment, and a crowd of people are again visually portrayed as being in attendance. Attire and entertainment are the design factors that help create a feeling of importance and the crowd is the visual representation of size. Massiveness in events is a less concrete, but equally important way of constructing the political setting of *The West Wing*. Massiveness, in objects and events, creates a scenario of political authority on this television program. Equally important as the grandiose elements of a political setting are the small details. The small details can be seen in ornateness.

According to Edelman (1964), ornateness is the second characteristic found across political settings. In everyday usage, ornateness implies embellishment or excessive decoration. This definition does not apply to *The West Wing*. Rather, ornateness deals with the minute details important in making a fictional setting believable. The creators of *The West Wing* focus on ornateness to further develop the picture of the Presidency begun with the large-scale characteristic of massiveness.

Ornateness is first utilized in the placement of the Presidential seal on *The West Wing*. In the sample of episodes collected for this study, the seal is highlighted at least 15 times. The opening credits of *The West Wing* begin with the seal of the President of the United States. It also appears on the wall of the lobby of the West Wing, in the mess hall, and on Air Force One. Two examples highlight the use of the seal to create the feeling of a political setting.

First, in the season premiere, “Manchester, Part I” (10/10/01), the President’s staff is traveling via Air Force One. A senior assistant, embarking on her first trip on the plane, notes the presence of the seal of the President on M & M’s. This small detail expands the domain of the President on *The West Wing*. The President’s authority seems to stretch far beyond creating policy onto even mundane artifacts like candy. The placement of the seal on the M & M’s does as much for creating the legitimacy of the enactment of President on this show as the use of Air Force One itself because it is an unexpected reminder of the importance of the President. The small details are used on *The West Wing* to establish the pervasiveness of the institution of the Presidency.

A second example of ornateness is seen in “War Crimes” (11/07/01). Much of the show focuses on a conversation between the President and the Vice-President (Tim Matheson) in the Oval Office. In this example, ornateness is used to remind the audience of the legitimate power the President possesses. More than once, when the camera cuts to this scene, the first thing the audience sees is the seal of the President on the floor of the Oval Office. The conversation escalates into a disagreement between the President and Vice-President, but the use of the seal reminds the audience who will have the final decision. This ornate detail not only creates the political setting, but also prescribes the

type of action that may take place in the Oval Office. Even in anger, the Vice-President never disrespects the President. Ornateness is also used to imply the importance of history to the institution of the Presidency.

Ornateness is illustrated by the placement of pictures of former presidents. Hughes (1973) states that a sense of history is one of the roles that a president must embody. One way *The West Wing* accomplishes this task is through the use of former presidents. Portraits of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln are on the walls of the West Wing. If one was not looking for these portraits, they could be easily missed. The small detail of Presidential portraits implies the importance of history to the Presidency and foreshadows a role the President embodies. Ornateness and massiveness together create a foundation for the third common characteristic of political settings, formality.

Formality is embodied in both word and deed on *The West Wing*. Both main characters and those on the periphery generally display a degree of formality when dealing with the President. Also significant in characterizing what is appropriate in the White House are the few violations of formality portrayed on this program.

Formality in word is best seen in the way the staff addresses the President. Every interaction ends with either a “Thank You, Sir” or a “Thank You, Mr. President.” Even Leo (John Spencer), who has been the President’s friend for over 30 years, addresses him in this formal manner when dealing with official business.

Formality in deed is exemplified by the change in behavior that occurs when the President enters or exits a room. Everyone stands immediately when he enters or leaves. This behavior is portrayed on at least seven occasions in the episodes reviewed for this study (10/03/01, 10/17/01, 10/31/01, 11/14/01, 12/19/01, 12/26/01). Three specific

behaviors extend the sense of formality portrayed on *The West Wing*. First, when the President walks down the hall or anywhere on the grounds, he is guarded by members of the Marine Corps. These members routinely salute him as commander-in-chief when he passes. Second, Charlie, the President's intern and personal assistant, escorts all visitors and staff to see the President. No one ever enters his office alone. The final example of formality in action that helps create this political setting is seen in "H. Con 172" (1/09/02). Leo is working late one evening and the President asks him to step into the Oval Office. Before entering, Leo puts his suit jacket back on. This action exemplifies the formality of the setting, even between two old friends. Formality in word and deed complete the creation of the political setting.

Burke's (1945) scene-act ratio states that the setting defines the type of action that may take place within it. Therefore, departures from formality are significant because they defy the generally accepted boundaries. Two examples illustrate this principle.

First, in "H. Con 172" (1/09/02), the President is waiting for Leo in Leo's office after his testimony before Congress concerning the President's multiple sclerosis. When Leo enters the room, the President has his feet on Leo's desk. This behavior signals a departure from the role of president and a transition to one of a friend. Formality has been abandoned because the situation calls for it. Furthermore, the President initiates this departure from formality and it is acceptable because of his status. By contrast, the action of Leo putting on his suit jacket before going into see the President late one evening reinforces the directionality of formality on *The West Wing*. Leo recognizes that certain behaviors are expected when dealing with the higher status President. Formality,

then, is used to create a character of president who defines standards of behavior with his status.

A second example of departure from formality occurs in “Noel” (12/19/01), a repeat from season 2. Josh (Bradley Whitford) is being treated by a psychiatrist for posttraumatic stress disorder. This episode focuses on his initial diagnosis and utilizes flashbacks to explore certain events in the past. In one flashback, Josh and other senior staff are in a meeting in the Oval Office with the President. Josh blows up and starts yelling at the President and tells him that he has to listen for his own good. Leo makes Josh leave the Oval Office for this behavior. This departure from formality not only gets Josh ejected from the Oval Office, but also lands him in therapy for his behavior. The expected behavior standards within this setting were breached and action was taken to restore order.

Massiveness, ornateness, and formality work together to create the perception of a presidential setting on *The West Wing*. Large-scale details without the accompanying small ones would be ineffective. Formality would not be possible without the other two characteristics of a political setting. As Edelman (1964) asserts, these characteristics are often present in political settings. The creators of *The West Wing* capitalize on them to create their fictitious world. Furthermore, they adapt the characteristics of the real world to work within the medium of television, especially in the cases of massiveness and ornateness. Setting is just the first element of creating this presidential character; role enactment plays an equally important part.

## **Presidential Roles**

The creators of *The West Wing* are faced with the challenge of constructing a fictional president that is believable to the general public. The general public has certain role expectations of presidents based on what we see enacted in real life. Therefore, the character of President Bartlet is created by his enactment of roles that are embodied by real presidents. These roles highlight a decision-making process that makes the president at the same time credible and human.

An expected role of any president is to set policy for the nation. This policy may be domestic or foreign and created by law or executive order. *The West Wing* portrays the domestic policy decision-making processes through the roles of chief legislator and chief executive and the foreign policy decision-making processes through the roles of commander-in-chief and chief diplomat. The fictional roles of policy decision-making processes on *The West Wing* are grounded in real life role expectations.

### *Chief Legislator and Chief Executive*

Corwin (1957) discusses the roles of chief legislator and chief executive as being constitutional expectations of the president. The president is expected to decide what pieces of legislation are best for the American people and when such legislation should be enacted. The roles of chief legislator and chief executive are blurred together on *The West Wing*. Both roles focus on the end goal of policy and, therefore, a clear distinction between the two is not made. What is clear, however, is the process by which such policy is set.

The first element in the decision-making process exemplified by the chief legislator and chief executive roles is that of consultation. Before President Bartlet

makes any major decisions, he consults with his staff and others about the best plan of action. A common story device used by the creators of *The West Wing* is portraying the President in a meeting with his advisors. These meetings often show the President asking for input on a given topic from an informed group of people. More illustrative of the element of consultation are the discussions that occur between senior staff on pieces of legislation or domestic policy crises being considered by the President. In the episodes reviewed for this study, the senior staff are consulted on most major issues of domestic policy. By the time the President makes a final decision, the senior staff have carefully considered the issue and so has the President. This process gives the impression that policy decisions are made in a careful, collaborative manner.

The clearest example of the consultation step in the decision-making process occurs in “The Woman of Qumar,” (11/28/01). At the beginning of this episode, Leo tells the President that there is a presumptive positive for mad cow disease in the United States. The President then asks Leo to “paint a picture” of the scenario that would occur if the mad cow test is confirmed. Leo and the President conclude that fast food and steakhouses would be finished and the only good news would be for the fishermen. The President’s discussion with Leo represents information gathering of relevant facts.

Later in “The Women of Qumar” (11/28/01), the President again asks his senior staff for advice on the mad cow problem. This time, the focus is on whether or not to tell the public. Toby, Sam (Rob Lowe), Leo, and CJ (Allison Janney) debate the issue with the President. CJ believes the public should be told immediately because the White House will look untrustworthy if it seems they have been withholding information. Toby, Sam, and Leo believe that the public should not be told yet because it may incite

mass chaos for a non-issue if the test is negative. The President considers all the information and sides with the latter viewpoint. This interaction differs from the one with Leo. Initially, the President just wanted information. In this case, he wants advice. As the chief executive and the one who ultimately bears responsibility for policy, the President retains the final decision. He blends advice of others with his own thoughts on an issue to make a final decision. The consultation stage, as portrayed on *The West Wing*, begins on a superficial information gathering level and moves to a more significant advice seeking one.

In at least four other episodes collected for this study, the consultation stage of the decision making process is portrayed. In “Manchester, Parts I and II” (10/10/01 and 10/17/01), the President seeks advice on the approval announcement for RU 486. The FDA decides to announce the approval of this drug on the same day President Bartlet is scheduled to announce his reelection. Senior staff debate the merit of postponing the reelection announcement and Josh even says he can get it postponed with one phone call. After much debate, the President finally says, “Screw it, let’s go.” Again, consultation is sought before any decision is made, but the President retains the ultimate decision.

In “Ways and Means” (10/24/01) and “On the Day Before” (10/31/01), the elimination of the estate tax is the issue before the President. Josh, Toby, and the campaign team discuss whether or not the President should veto the estate tax bill. They decide he should and tell him of their decision and the reasoning behind it.

The final example of the consultation step of the decision-making process occurs in “The Two Bartlets” (1/30/02). The President must decide whether to address

affirmative action after a Republican challenger attacks it. CJ and Toby debate this issue for the President.

Consultation can occur between the President and his staff or between staff members. In both cases, this stage of the decision-making process constructs a President who is willing and eager to listen to the advice of others in order to make the best decision. Consultation is not a phase most people see with real presidents. It occurs behind the scenes with only the final decision being visible. The portrayal of this process on *The West Wing* allows the audience to understand the character of this fictional president.

The consultation stage also supports the next stage, making the final decision. In “Manchester, Parts I and II” (10/10/01, 10/17/01), “The Women of Qumar” (11/28/01), and “The Two Bartlets” (1/30/02), the decision to be made is simply an acceptance or denial of policy or action. “Ways and Means” (10/24/01) and “On the Day Before” (10/31/01) take a policy decision beyond just a verbal exchange between characters. A veto ceremony is discussed and then portrayed nonverbally as well.

After consulting his staff on the veto of the estate tax bill, the President decides vetoing is the only option. CJ cements this decision by announcing it to the White House Press Corps. In “On the Day Before” (10/31/01), a state dinner is being held on the same day of the promised veto. Seven Republicans decide not to come to dinner as a result and Toby and Sam discuss why. They hypothesize it is because of the veto threat. The President concurs, but does not waiver from his original intention to veto.

A striking visual example of President as chief executive occurs when the bill is brought in for the President’s approval or veto. He asks the aide who brings in the bill

what is in the box. The aide says it is the estate tax bill. The President gets out a rubber stamp, stamps the bill, and says, “[s]end it back.” This action completes the decision-making process begun in the consultation phase. It makes the President seem authoritative, not only in word, but also in deed.

“10,000 Airplanes” (1/16/02) portrays a domestic policy decision-making process in a slightly different way. After having dinner with some of Abby’s friends, the President decides he can cure cancer in ten years and that he wants to tell the American people about it in the State of the Union address. He summons the senior staff to the White House at 11 PM to tell them about his idea. In this case, the consultation process occurs after the initial decision. However, as expected from the other examples of consultation in this study, the President listens to what his staff had to say. After reviewing a draft of the proposal Sam wrote for the State of the Union and hearing his staff’s uncertainty about the issue, the President decides not to announce he can cure cancer. This episode portrays a President who cannot always do everything he wants, however will intentioned. Consequently, the President seems more human. Finally, the process, in this instance, was decision-consultation-decision with the President considering his staff’s advice while maintaining his power to make the final decision.

The roles of chief legislator and chief executive are used to construct the president as a decision maker who seeks advice from informed others by engaging in discussion about policy issues. However, the President retains the authority to make decisions and clearly exercises that power. Domestic policy is the vehicle through which this process is defined. Foreign policy also allows the creators of *The West Wing* to focus on decision-

making, but this process is somewhat different from the one employed for domestic policy.

#### *Commander-in-Chief and Chief Diplomat*

Corwin (1957) suggests that the roles of commander-in-chief and chief diplomat are constitutionally prescribed for presidents when dealing with foreign policy. As with chief legislator and chief executive, the roles of commander-in-chief and chief diplomat are also blurred together. The process is again of significance, but it differs from the one employed for domestic policy decisions.

The foreign policy decision-making process has two steps: information-gathering and making a final decision. Information-gathering allows the President to become familiar with a given foreign policy situation. The final decision step is where the President commands the military, ambassadors, etc. to take action.

The information-gathering stage is first constructed nonverbally. In each instance of foreign policy that occurs in the episodes reviewed for this study, the information gathering stage takes place in the situation room (10/10/01, 10/17/01, 10/24/01, 10/31/01, 11/14/01, 11/28/01, 12/19/01, 12/26/01). The situation room is hidden away in the basement of the West Wing. Military advisors from the Army, Navy, and Air Force are present at the briefings. Nancy, the top military advisor, is usually responsible for controlling the briefing.

The process begins when the President enters the situation room. All advisors stand when the President enters and then are seated when he is seated. Nancy remains standing and begins the briefing process. For example, in “Gone Quiet” (11/14/01), an American submarine disappears in North Korean waters. The President goes to the

situation room to gather information about this problem. Nancy and her staff explain that submarines tend to go quiet, that is, not contact anyone on land, when in hostile waters. She then presents different scenarios that may occur. The President does not ask for advice as to what his final decision should be. This action marks a departure from the chief legislator/chief executive decision-making process. In that process, the President gathered information and asked for advice before making a decision. In this case, he gathers relevant facts and then simply moves on to the second stage of the foreign policy decision-making process, the final decision.

Foreign policy decision-making is often reactive as opposed to proactive. Decisions must be made to address a crisis that needs immediate attention. Opposing sides are easy to identify and the battle lines are clearly depicted. By contrast, domestic policy is less reactive and more proactive with a focus on anticipating future problems. In domestic policy, opposing sides are not always clear and therefore domestic policy requires more discussion to create the illusion of conflict.

The second step in foreign policy decision-making process requires the President to make a decision that appears tough, firm, and resolved. For example, in “On the Day Before” (10/31/01), a Palestinian suicide bomber kills two American students in Israel. After gathering information as described in stage one, the President calls the Palestinian leader. The President tells him to hand over the people responsible for the bombing or the United States will withhold money from them. In this case, the President makes the decision to resolve the crisis through diplomatic channels if possible. In addressing foreign policy crises in Haiti and North Korea (10/10/01, 10/17/01, 11/14/01), the President suggests military action. Again, he gathers information and makes a decision.

In “Manchester, Part I” (10/10/01), the President indicates he understands the urgency of foreign policy issues by asking, “How long do I have?”

The construction of President Bartlet as a leader in control of foreign policy is not done primarily by dialogue. Instead, this role is constructed through a recurring location, the situation room, and the President’s resolve when making decisions. He still relies on others to provide him with information to make sound decisions, but does not explicitly ask their opinions on the final outcome.

Policy decisions, then, are used to construct President Bartlet as a President willing to listen to others while retaining the final decision. Both domestic and foreign policy involve other characters on the show providing information to help the President make a more solid decision. The key difference is in the amount of advice the President seeks on policy matters. In domestic policy, the President spends time asking opinions of others. In foreign policy, he simply makes the decision. This difference may be as a result of the more immediate nature of foreign policy crises presented on *The West Wing*. There is not time to weigh options of others when a submarine is in North Korean waters and not communicating with headquarters, for example. Policy decisions are not the only way decision-making is influenced on *The West Wing*. The creators of this program also portray decisions being affected by history.

### *Sense of History*

The decision-making processes enacted for policy decisions allow the President to seek advice from others before making a final decision. A sense of history affects President Bartlet’s decision-making by allowing him to learn from the past. In addition to learning from the past, President Bartlet also transmits his knowledge of history to the

next generation through interactions with his intern, Charlie. History, then, as portrayed on *The West Wing*, is cyclical because it influences both the President's decisions and symbolically, offers perspective to future generations.

Decision-making is influenced by history because the Presidency comes complete with years of tradition to the man who inherits it. He has two choices. He may embrace the past and draw upon its strengths while learning from its weaknesses. Or, the President may ignore the past and risk making mistakes that have already been made. Hughes (1973) suggests that a sense of history, therefore, is a key part to being a successful president. He says, “[t]he forces of history and mythology, beloved tradition and cherished folklore, attend and exalt the White House...no merchants or bankers...must test their sobriety, every day, by savoring so much heady wine,” (p. 13). Therefore, the attention to history portrayed on *The West Wing* is another way the creators of this show strengthen this fictional president as embodying roles of real presidents.

In one-third of the episodes collected for this study, history is discussed in some detail. Often this discussion centers on former presidents such as Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and others. The discussion of former presidents suggests that this fictional president is drawing upon history in his decision-making process. Specific policies and decisions of former presidents are not referenced, but rather the institution of Presidency is focused on. As described by Hughes (1973), the creators of *The West Wing* understand learning from the past is important in such a tradition-rich position.

For example, in “Manchester, Part II” (10/17/01), the President is speaking to his staff before making his reelection announcement. He references Franklin D. Roosevelt in

this interchange by framing him as a “serious man using big words for a big purpose.” He then talks about his own “big purpose” of reelection, allowing the viewer to draw a parallel with Roosevelt. Therefore, the mention of this former president implies that President Bartlet is drawing upon the past to inform his decisions in the present.

The second function of history in the creation of President Bartlet is his sharing of knowledge with the next generation. This action further develops the idea that history is important in decision-making because the President suggests that Charlie should use it to inform his life as well. The President and Charlie portray a father-son relationship throughout most episodes, so the passing on of history from one generation to the next seems a natural role for the President to embody. Furthermore, by his interactions with Charlie, the President displays an understanding of how the past can influence the present, both in policy and in life. Three examples illustrate the sense of history that is passed from the President to Charlie.

First, in “Gone Quiet” (11/14/01), the President is set to file his papers in New Hampshire for reelection. The President likes to file his papers in person, rather than sending an aide. He tells Charlie that filing in person is a “profound statement about democracy.” The President is unable to file the papers himself in this episode because of a foreign policy crisis. At the end of this episode, the President tells Charlie that when the Romans ran for office they wore white togas as an act of personal commitment to running for office. This reference to the past suggests that the President’s act of filing represents a similar commitment to office and implies that such a commitment should be part of future presidencies.

Second, “The Woman of Qumar” (11/28/01), Charlie is studying for a history midterm for a college course he is taking. The President asks him what he is studying and says, “Modern American history sucks...history cannot be reduced to dates and names.” This statement focuses attention on history, but this time, qualifies what is useful. The President chooses what he considers important for Charlie to know such as ancient leaders and founding of nations, rather than memorizing names and dates. The underlying meaning behind this dialogue is that while history is important, the President is still in charge, even when assigning relevance to a subject.

Third, in “H. Con-172” (1/09/02), Charlie buys the President a map of the Holy Land in the 1600s. The President is very excited by this gift and discusses it with his other staff. His staff tells him that he cannot put it up because there is no Israel on it. The President counters that Israel did not exist at the time. He then tells Charlie that everyone is plotting against them. While the President eventually concedes and does not put up the map of Israel, this interchange is still significant. The lesson for Charlie, and by extension, the viewers, is that understanding the big picture of history is more important than focusing on small details for both individual citizens and the President.

The sense of history embraced by President Bartlet on *The West Wing* is created in two ways. First, the President references past presidents and second, he discusses history with Charlie. While the references to history take different forms, they fulfill the same purpose of informing decision-making. The Presidency is an institution built on traditions and stories from the past. In order to be successful in the present, the President must understand the stories. Decision-making is influenced by history and developed

through policy discussions. A focus on moral choice also plays a role in decisions made by President Bartlet on *The West Wing*.

### *Moral Decision-Making*

Morality influences decision-making on *The West Wing* by highlighting the human side of the character of the president. In several instances, a decision is made not based on policy or facts, but rather on values and ethics. The overarching story line in this season is that President Bartlet has multiple sclerosis. He never lied about his health problems, but did not disclose them either. This topic allows the creators of *The West Wing* to focus on morality as a factor in decision-making.

Early in this season, the President's staff discusses what actions he should take concerning the disclosure of his multiple sclerosis. In "Manchester, Part II" (10/17/01), the President's staff is preparing for his reelection announcement. Doug, a member of the campaign team, and Toby are discussing whether the President should apologize for not disclosing his multiple sclerosis sooner. Toby says he is not going to apologize and Doug says if he does not, he will spend the next five months explaining why not. At least two other discussions between staff members center around whether or not the President should apologize (10/10/01, 10/17/01). These third-person discussions of the President's apology (or lack thereof) are significant because he is not directly involved. The staff is struggling with whether the President's status exempts him from apologizing. This moral dilemma continues throughout the season both between staffers and within the President himself.

A second interchange regarding the President's multiple sclerosis disclosure and subsequent actions occur between Toby and Doug in "Manchester, Part II" (10/17/01).

Doug tells Toby that “you guys are so pissed at him...you don’t even know it...more than the press, more than the party.” This interchange illustrates the moral struggle the staff is going through trying to understand the President’s actions. After portraying the staff’s feelings about the President’s multiple sclerosis, the focus shifts to how the President addresses their concerns. At the end of “Manchester, Part II” (10/17/01), the President gathers his staff and says, “I never said I’m sorry...I am.” His apology to his staff sets the stage for future moral interactions on this television show. Two episodes later, in “On the Day Before” (10/31/01), the President discusses Yom Kippur saying, “You can’t ask forgiveness of God until you ask forgiveness of people.” President Bartlet asks forgiveness of his staff. This action portrays the result of the President’s own moral struggle. He recognizes the stress he has put his staff under and is prompted by a discussion with Abby to make things right with them. She says, “Talk to them...you’ll feel better and so will they,” (“Manchester, Part II,” 10/17/01).

The creators of *The West Wing* not only portray President Bartlet making moral choices during his time in the White House, but also use flashbacks to portray decisions the President made about his health at the beginning of his campaign. “Bartlet for America” (12/12/01) and “H-Con. 172” (1/09/02) center on Leo’s congressional hearings regarding President Bartlet’s multiple sclerosis. In “Bartlet for America,” Leo is asked repeatedly if the President lied about his health and he repeatedly answers no. The creators of *The West Wing* use the hearings as a way to flashback to when the original Bartlet campaign first began. One such flashback is between Abby and the President in New Hampshire. The President tells Abby that he has been asked to take a physical. He says he is going to take it and that he is not going to lie to anybody [about the multiple

sclerosis]. This flashback encourages the audience to infer that President Bartlet has told the truth from the beginning and that morality played a role in his decision to do so. It also foreshadows the decision he will make at the end of “H-Con. 172.”

President Bartlet decides to accept a censure from Congress to end the multiple sclerosis investigation. He tells Leo of his decision and says, “I was wrong...no one takes responsibility any more...they live in a moral safe house. Everyone’s to blame...no one’s guilty. I’m to blame.” (“H-Con.172,” 1/09/02). This dialogue refers to the moral struggle the President has faced over his multiple sclerosis, while focusing on the outcome, his decision to accept a censure. While this struggle is not explicitly portrayed on screen, the outcome gives the audience an idea of the thought process behind it.

Moral struggle and moral decision-making are used to make President Bartlet seem more human. The creators of *The West Wing* imply that perhaps the President made a mistake by not telling his staff about his multiple sclerosis sooner and now he must address the consequences. Conversations between staff members illustrate the turmoil they feel. The President’s dialogue represents the final outcome of his decision-making process. Steps are not clearly defined as in the other roles, such as chief legislator or commander-in-chief, but rather, a pattern is created in the outcomes. The President’s actions ultimately represent a moral high ground in the episodes reviewed for this study.

The roles President Bartlet embodies on *The West Wing* portray different aspects of the character of president. Chief executive and chief legislator highlight a leader who both seeks advice from others and is capable of making a decision on his own. Chief diplomat and commander-in-chief also focus on the decision process, but the key to these roles is the President’s resolve. He does not ask for the advice of others when deciding

how to handle a foreign policy crisis. Foreign policy gives the President a chance to appear tough and firm. A sense of history is important in constructing this character because it implies that this fictional president relies on the past for advice. Furthermore, he considers history important enough to pass it on to the next generation. Finally, an emphasis on moral decision-making is used to give the President a human side. Morality is not an abstract concept on *The West Wing*, but a concrete part of decision-making. The outcome of many decisions portrayed on *The West Wing* is influenced by a sense of right and wrong. The influence of moral decision-making is present in both discussions between staff and the President's own dialogue. The creators of *The West Wing* use the roles discussed here to create a multidimensional character that represents a fictional President of the United States.

## Chapter Three

### *Conclusions and Future Directions*

Bumbling idiots and corrupt criminals characterize politicians, including Presidents, in most instances on entertainment television (Gladstone-Sovell, 2000). *The West Wing* defies this norm by portraying a President who is more realistic and less of a parody than the typical fictional President (Jackson, 2000). President Bartlet is constructed as a credible President through the use of routine and consistency. Real life politics are marked by the day-to-day routine of governing the nation and this television program uses routine to help viewers anticipate and understand the President's actions. This routine is established through the use of setting, decision-making processes, and personality characteristics.

The importance of routine to the construction of President Bartlet in terms of setting is exemplified through the characteristic of formality. Each time the President enters a room, staff and visitors alike stand as a sign of respect. Verbal interactions with the President always end with a "sir" or "Mr. President." The routine highlighted by setting helps to construct President Bartlet as a man worthy of respect and capable of making decisions for the country.

Routine in decision-making adds strength to the character of President Bartlet by focusing on the behind the scenes political processes that the general public does not get to see in real life. In real life, domestic and foreign policy issues are announced to the public after a decision has been made. The outcome, then, is all we get to see of real life Presidential decisions. By contrast, the process involved in making such decisions is portrayed on *The West Wing*. This process adds strength to President Bartlet's character

because it shows the great thought that goes into making decisions that affect the country on this television show.

The behind the scenes processes portrayed on *The West Wing* can be as simple as the President talking to Leo about a domestic policy issue or as complex as a situation room briefing on a submarine that is lost in North Korea. The use of these processes allows viewers to be on the inside of decisions. At the end of an episode, viewers are able to understand why and how a decision was reached and more importantly, appreciate the strength and resolve of the President who made it.

If President Bartlet simply delivered edicts about what should be done on *The West Wing*, much of the realistic nature to this character would be lost. The steps of consultation, information-gathering, and making a final decision, as well as the act of embracing the past, help create the multidimensionality of this character. These steps are consistently used throughout the episodes reviewed for this study. President Bartlet consults others, while still maintaining control of the situation, whatever it may be. Almost always, this fictional President is portrayed as being at least as well informed as his staff about the issues at hand. Crises, both domestic and foreign, are the vehicles used to highlight what goes on behind the scenes of the Bartlet White House. The strength President Bartlet enacts through the behind the scenes processes on *The West Wing* complements the humanness embodied through the emphasis on personal qualities.

The behind the scenes processes portrayed on *The West Wing* suggest questions for future research. One study might aim to determine how realistic these processes seem to television viewers watching this television show. In order to find out how an audience feels, an audience survey could be conducted. This survey would create a baseline

measurement of attitudes of *The West Wing* watchers and allow for future research on specific questions such as the one discussed above and the impact the show may be having on real life political perceptions. A focus on personal qualities of President Bartlet balances the more official roles highlighted by the decision-making processes.

Finally, President Bartlet displays consistency in personal characteristics, such as likeability and integrity, and these characteristics are central to the construction of President Bartlet on *The West Wing*. He is shown struggling with day-to-day life, much like everyone else. A humorous example of this everyday struggle is found on the Thanksgiving episode. The President spends most of the hour trying to find out whether to cook the oysters he puts in his stuffing before baking the turkey itself. He finally resorts to calling the Butterball Hotline for help. This example could just as easily have been someone's kooky uncle or grandfather, the relative everyone cannot help but like. President Bartlet's emphasis on integrity is portrayed in moments of turmoil.

A key storyline surrounding President Bartlet this season is the moral struggle he faces when dealing with his multiple sclerosis. He is portrayed consistently as a man of integrity, beginning with his first campaign and continuing to the present. Flashbacks show the President and the First Lady discussing his disease years earlier when the Bartlet campaign first began. The current season focuses on the President's disclosure and the effect it has on his staff. For several episodes, senior staff members discuss whether the President should apologize to the public for keeping his multiple sclerosis secret for so long. An undercurrent to the public apology is ascertaining if the President will apologize to his staff. The President eventually apologizes to his staff, after much thought and consideration. The process of moral struggle is not shown, but the outcomes

are highlighted throughout the episodes collected for this study. President Bartlet is portrayed as a fallible character that makes mistakes and struggles with how to move past them.

Several questions for future research arise from human side of the President highlighted on *The West Wing*. First, does the emphasis of personal characteristics as central to the role of President affect how people view real Presidents? Is the standard being set that a President should be just as comfortable having a cup of coffee at a local coffee shop as he is dealing with foreign leaders? Furthermore, are role expectations being redefined as a result of *The West Wing*? The emphasis on moral decision-making that is highlighted as a key characteristic of President Bartlet is not found in current presidential literature. Does this predict a shift in what is important to people today or as Aaron Sorkin suggests, is *The West Wing* Hollywood plain and simple, (NBC.com, 2001)? These questions all rest on the assumption that television does affect our conceptions of reality as suggested in the literature (Nimmo & Combs, 2001; Medhurst, 1993; Giglio, 2000; Gladstone-Sovell, 2000). Therefore, the first study to undertake may be to see if *The West Wing* is even affecting perceptions of real life at all?

An emphasis on routine allows the audience to see the balance of humanness and strength that are key to this construction of President. Previous portrayals of politicians and presidents on television and in film have generally possessed one quality or the other, both not both. *The West Wing* overcomes this dichotomy by encompassing both humanness and strength. In doing so, the creators of this television show construct a portrait of President that is realistic. Normal people have strengths and weaknesses, and by extension, the leader of our country does as well. President Bartlet, then, is “a

president we can all agree on” because he is simultaneously someone who we could imagine having a cup of coffee with and someone who we could be comfortable leading us into war.

## Appendix 1: Episode Guide

10/03/01:	Isaac and Ishmael
10/10/01:	Manchester, Part I
10/17/01:	Manchester, Part II
10/24/01:	Ways and Means
10/31/01:	On the Day Before
11/07/01:	War Crimes
11/14/01:	Gone Quiet
11/21/01:	The Indians in the Lobby
11/28/01:	Women of Qumar
12/12/01:	Bartlet for America
12/19/01:	Noel
12/26/01:	Bad Moon Rising
01/02/02:	Manchester, Parts I and II
01/09/02:	H. Con - 172
01/16/02:	100,000 Airplanes
01/23/02:	Ways and Means
01/30/02:	The Two Bartlets

## **Appendix 2: Relevant Cast List**

President Bartlet:	Martin Sheen
Abby Bartlet:	Stockard Channing
Vice President Hoynes:	Tim Matheson
Sam Seaborn:	Rob Lowe
Josh Lyman:	Bradley Whitford
Toby Zeigler:	Richard Schiff
CJ Cregg:	Allison Janney
Leo McGarry:	John Spencer
Charlie Young:	Dule Hill

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