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| **Feature Article** | | | |
| ***[click on photo]***  ***by  Rob Waring***  **"**  A broadcast of the NBC show, *The West Wing*, on the Wednesday preceding the November 2000 election, seemed an **unprecedented, indirect effort** to use a dramatic television series to **influence** the vote.  **"**    **"**  While more **women** are aligned with Gore on issues such as child care, health coverage, abortion and others, many are still angry at Clinton for **the Monica Lewinsky scandal** and paint Gore with the same brush of dishonesty.  **"** |  |  | **Will The West Wing Cause The Left Swing?**  by Rob Waring  There has been much talk, legislation and litigation intended to control corporate campaign and soft money contributions. Absent a constitutional amendment or a dramatic change in the makeup of the Supreme Court, it appears very unlikely that there will be any effective limitation on campaign spending. The candidate and party with the most money will continue to dominate of the airwaves.  The tangled web of soft money groups that influence voters’ perceptions about candidates and issues just got thicker. A broadcast of the NBC show, *The West Wing*, on the Wednesday preceding the November 2000 election, seemed an unprecedented, indirect effort to use a dramatic television series to influence the vote. As background, *The West Wing* is about a Democratic President and his staff who have backbone and principles. It presents an idealized view of what the Clinton Presidency could have been (or the promise of Gore).  A number of political observers have said that middle class women are the most volatile and critical group in this election. (Certainly, that group made the difference for Clinton when he ran against the elder Bush in 1992.) While more women are aligned with Gore on issues such as child care, health coverage, abortion and others, many are still angry at Clinton for the Monica Lewinsky scandal and paint Gore with the same brush of dishonesty. The Democrats have responded by emphasizing their policy differences with Bush and by repeated efforts to show the level of passion that still burns in the Gore marriage. (He won’t cheat on his wife!)  Along comes *The West Wing* with its November 1, 2000 broadcast. (The night before, the actor playing the President, Martin Sheen, appeared with Al Gore on NBC’s *The Tonight Show* and at a subsequent campaign rally.) In the episode, the President, who has been told not to have sex by his doctors due to a heart condition, has just been released from that order due to improving health. He and the First Lady frantically rearrange their schedules so that they can heat up the marital bed. They make numerous references to lingerie ("special garment") that the First Lady is going to wear in order to fan the flames of passion. Did this episode titillate some of its viewers with the notion that lusty Commander in Chief Gore would set a great example for lovelorn marriages across America? Perhaps we’ll know on election day.  Governor George W. Bush has adopted a frequently invoked theme that he is a uniter who can end the partisan bickering in Washington that has characterized most of the Clinton tenure. While some may scoff at this notion, given the scorched-earth politics of Newt and his cronies, it is a message that Gore desperately needs to rebut. In the same *The West Wing* episode, the President hires a Republican newspaper columnist to work on his staff. When she attempts to stop the divisive tactics of a pair of executive branch staffers who are polarizing Congress, they respond by leaving a misogynist "decoration" in her office. Male members of the White House staff who had earlier doubted the skill and sincerity of this defector from the opposing party now rally around her and the two harassers are fired. The inner-circle staffers thus join her in strong bi-partisan opposition to gender-based workplace harassment (not to mention a rousing chorus from *HMS Pinafore*).  Bush has also been making a lot of noise about the sorry state of readiness of the U.S. military, another contention disputed by the Gore camp. *The West Wing* responded by depicting a confrontation between a retiring general (presumably a Bush supporter) and the White House Press secretary, in which she appears to get the better of him in an argument over the validity of the Pentagon’s definition of military readiness. The President ultimately gets the last word by forcing her to back off from her threat of retaliation if the General publicly speaks his mind, thereby proving that this President, at least, can take the heat.  I raise my observations not because I am upset by its present manipulation of public sentiment. I am a Gore supporter and grateful for any help he can get. But, fast forward four years. Let’s say George W. is elected and is running for a second term in a close race. His administration has fallen far short of its initial promise, but there is a convenient television show running about a progressive and compassionate Republican President that shows the American public how things could be if they just have faith. You can see the problem.  I don’t yet know how we sort through this newest, thorny problem of corporate (owners of the networks) influence on elections, but I do know that it isn’t going to go away. Given the show’s popularity, we will likely see more *West Wings* in our future.  *Posted November 4, 2000*  **Would you like to comment on this article? Please submit your comments** [**here.**](http://docs.google.com/newsnviews.htm#Submit%20your%20own%20comments) |
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