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| **Feature Article - February 2000** | | | |
| **Chris Jackson is an Associate Professor at Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. She teaches writing, literature, and music history.**            **"**  *The West Wing* allows the country a quiet healing after the scandals of the Clinton administration. Its presentation of well-intended, intelligent professionals doing battle for **good** is a balm over our collective psyche.    **"**                      **"**  Dwellers of the West Wing are flawed, mostly **well-intended people**. In every encounter so far, their personal ambitions lie down before the majesty of the office, highly unexpected in these times of a supposed **cult of personality**.    **"** |  |  | **Picturing the President: *The West Wing***  By Chris Jackson     Ratings and Golden Globe nominations make it official. NBC’s *The West Wing* has the voters’ approval as THE SHOW to watch. And why not? Writer Aaron Sorkin has whipped up a show with razor sharp dialogue, engaging story lines, and carefully orchestrated ensemble acting.     Its fine dramatic quality aside, *The West Wing* commands our attention here in *Picturing Justice* for a number of reasons. The legal profession features prominently on the resume of many of the show’s characters. They struggle with ethical dilemmas and present diverse perspectives on thorny current issues. We’re also afforded an intriguing look at how ideas become policy and how a bill becomes law. We see research, planning, and compromise. We see close-up how people make laws and sometimes end up breaking lawmakers.     Most significantly, however, is the show’s inaugural one TV season before an election year. As popular culture, this portrait of President Josiah Bartlet (Martin Sheen) and his staff is clearly a Democrat’s wish fulfillment. Small screen images of "reality" unsettled us as a country: a young girl in a beret, a stammering President, impeachment hearings. It’s only natural that television should put Humpty back together again. *The West Wing* allows the country a quiet healing after the scandals of the Clinton administration. Its presentation of well-intended, intelligent professionals doing battle for good is a balm over our collective psyche.     Popular culture may have a better opportunity to shape political opinions than actual events. In *Why Americans Hate Politics* (1992), E. J. Dionne, Jr. illustrates the American public’s growing disenchantment with the political process. As one reason, Dionne cites the two-party penchant for misrepresenting policy issues. However, we also must consider how most of us learn about events Washingtonian.     TV and print news seems to pelt us with coverage, but ultimately our view of what’s really going on is limited. CSPAN affords another look at official Washington, but the tedium alone is a killer. All the drama and risk happens off the speaker’s dais. Nonfiction literature can present an in-depth view of events, but memoirs and biographies reach us long after the fact. They must. Revealing too much too soon incurs a high political risk. Films are better mirrors, even if they are funhouse mirrors, of what people think of Washington at the time they think it. Let’s take a peek.     Presidents in films range from being ruthless to charming and many degrees in between. *Seven Days in May* (1964) shows the President, played by Frederic March, fending off a military takeover. Although March’s character prevails, this film shows the vulnerability of the Presidency. Made during escalated fighting in Vietnam, the film reflects a public’s fear that a military coup was not beyond the realm of possibility.  *Dave* (1993)  *Dave* (1993) features Kevin Kline as a two-in-one President. He plays both a Machiavellian leader, then a flannel shirt wearing lookalike who fills in for the comatose Prez. Only First Lady Sigourney Weaver tips to the deception. What better way to capture for the public mind the transition from a Republican White House to one under Democrat rule?  Based on the Clancy novel, *Clear and Present Danger* (1994) revives the elder statesman Presidential image. Harrison Ford’s Jack Ryan reports to a corrupt President in bed with corporations and willing to authorize cover-ups. This film comes in the wake of Iran/Contra and other covert operations. These transgressions were never fully explained to the public satisfaction. "Mistakes were made."       The President dating? Okay, we can imagine it now, but five years ago, the idea felt new. *The American President* (1995) shows us widower Prez Michael Douglas and lobbyist Annette Bening in a convincing White House romance complete with conflicts of interest. Portraying a humanized leader, this film was an internship, so to speak, for screenwriter Aaron Sorkin.     The young guy as Prez continues with Bill Paxton’s turn as Commander in Chief for *Independence Day* (1996). A skilled fighter pilot, he and Will Smith send those evil extraterrestrials packing. In *Air Force One* (1997), Harrison Ford doesn’t report to the President; he is the Big Guy himself. Ford is lithe and impressive as an action hero who saves his family and staff from terrorists. Both movies may reflect a public disappointment in Clinton’s missing military background. Otherwise, these presidential portraits are a liberal’s dream.     But the dream fades. Joe Klein’s *Primary Colors* was one book that didn’t wait long enough to tell-all about mud on the campaign trail. The film based on Klein’s book (1998) was released a week after Clinton’s deposition on the Paula Jones case. It gives us John Travolta as Southern-inflected candidate Jack Stanton. He is soft and gooey, like the donuts he mashes into his face. In 1997-1998, *Murder at* *1600, Absolute Power,* and *Wag the Dog* follow in quick succession. All three reek with scandal and wrongdoing at the Top.     Unlike film, the small screen is overwhelmed with Presidential reality, press conferences, sound bites, photo ops. Before *The West Wing*, presidential parody was the best TV could offer. Nixon appeared on *Laugh-In* and every President since then showed up some way or other on *Saturday Night Live*. *Benson* was a long-running sitcom during a time of growing political influence for minorities. *Hearts Afire,* written by MFOBs (Major Friends of Bill) Harry Thomason and Linda Bloodworth, lasted only a season or two. Showing the daily struggles of a Washington staff, the show is closest in spirit to Sorkin’s *The West Wing*.     From the outset*, The West Wing* sets a disclaimer: We are fiction. Opening credits show a filmy flag waving across an image of the White House. The theme music is by W.G. Snuffy Walden. Stirring, stately, with lots of brass, I thought the tune vaguely Copland-esque the first time I heard it. Now it seems more like the theme from *Wagon Train*. "Westward ho! Round up those dogies." We’re supposed to be in mythic territory here.     I don’t buy this little ruse for a second. When *Primary Colors* first came out, all Washington had fun aligning fiction with fact. We can play a similar game here. Analogies to the Clinton White House are inescapable.     The Big Two are Josiah, called Jed, Bartlet (Sheen) and wife Abigail (Stockard Channing). They are both personally charming, but consummate, hardheaded politicians. They know how to work the room and the system. Sound familiar?     Bartlet, or POTUS (President of the United States), is brilliant and capable, a Nobel Prize Winner in Economics, but we see his flaws. Great in the role, Sheen played Chief of Staff in Sorkin’s *The American President.* Like Harrison Ford, he earned a promotion.     The First Lady is a professional in her own right, an MD. She is media-savvy, sophisticated, and often on the road. She also rules him. "Uh oh," he says about her imminent return. Their daughter Zoey is a freshman at Georgetown. There could even be a Monica parallel. We hear in passing about a young intern moved from one office to another because of a crush on the Vice-President.     Chief of Staff Leo McGarry (John Spencer) will go to the mat for long-time friend Jed. He also has personal problems, a broken marriage and past treatment in a Betty Ford-like center. Before his wife leaves for the Watergate, he pleads for her to understand. "This job is the most important thing I will ever do." She asks, "More important than your marriage?" she asks. His answer is unequivocal: "Yes."     Do not confuse the fictional McGarry with the real former Chief of Staff Dick Morris. Was Morris separated? Did Morris have to deal with a personal scandal? (There was a certain hotel balcony video.)     Head Speechwriter Sam Seaborn (Rob Lowe) is a Princeton lawyer, brilliant, with high standards. Now who among the Clinton crew (George) might that be (Stephanopolis)?     C.J. Cregg (Allison Janney) is White House Press Secretary. She knows her stuff and is one of the guys, joking with the reporters. The fact that she goes by her initials does not link her at all to any former women Press Secretaries. (Did we mention that Dee Dee Myers is a consultant for the show?)     We may see these parallels, but the more we watch, don’t confuse us with the facts. We care about these TV people more than we ever cared about Dick Morris. The ensemble acting is terrific. *The West Wing* uses a *Mary Tyler Moore Show* strategy. People enmeshed at work become a type of family. Characters fit into family archetypes.     Dad, of course, is Sheen. We’ve already seen him taking real life wayward son Charlie to task. The Mom of this crew is not The First Lady. She’s too young and busy to mother anyone, even daughter Zoey. The mother is Jed’s secretary, Mrs. Landingham.     Jed whines to her. "Where are my reading glasses?" Another encounter runs like this: "I’d like a banana now," he says to her. "I don’t think so," she replies. "I wanted to give you one before, but you were quite snippy, sir." Jed is a modern Dad, vulnerable.     Leo is the slightly shady, black sheep uncle who comes through when seas turn rough. He calms Dad down with raucous humor before the State of the Union. Sam, Deputy Chief of Staff Josh (Bradley Whitford), and Communications Director Toby (Richard Schiff) are the sons willing to defend their Dad, no matter the cost. Josh and Sam go to The Hill to wrangle with a Senator sporting a Barney Frank-like accent. "This is what happens when we let kids into the White House," the Senator huffs. C.J. is the boys’ spinsterish older sister, brainy, with a stunted social life.     These folks share a major calling—duty. They eat and sleep in their offices and don’t have time to fetch clothes from the cleaners. "Isn’t that the same suit you wore yesterday?" one asks. "Yup."     Because they are so busy romancing Congress, no one on the West Wing has time for a relationship. The first episode showed Sam in bed with a woman. The writers perhaps didn’t trust us to feel the sex appeal of power so soon in the story arc. Sam has to rush off because POTUS had a bicycle accident. He later discovers his paramour is a high-priced call girl. He has to drop her. Josh and Mandy (Moira Kelly) were a couple, but he finds a picture of them with his face scribbled out. No hope there.     For a possible affair, watch C.J. and Danny, a White House reporter (Timothy Busfield). Their courtship is hot, yet business-like—direct soulful stares, rushed kisses. Pillow talk between them could get conflict of interesting.     The claustrophobic sets differ from the Early Corporate of most TV dramas. We’re almost in a different century, despite trilling cell phones and clackety copiers. The staffers work out of cubbyholes that barely contain their energy. Hand-held cams follow them around corners of narrow halls, down elegant staircases. The dim lighting comes from garish sconces. This constraining, museum-like backdrop reflects the show’s major tension: human foibles held in check by the tradition of the presidency.     This includes POTUS himself. To retaliate for a terrorist attack, Bartlet wants to bomb a small but aggressive country into submission. The Joint Chiefs recommend a "Proportional Response." He angrily questions their advice. Despite some tight moments, he responds as they suggest. No imperial Presidency here.     Dwellers of the West Wing are flawed, mostly well-intended people. In every encounter so far, their personal ambitions lie down before the majesty of the office, highly unexpected in these times of a supposed cult of personality. Sure, they admire Bartlet, but the Presidency, with a capital *P*, keeps them on point.     The Staff presses hard on issues ripped from the headlines: sex education, hate crimes, capital punishment, Supreme Court nominee confirmation, gun control. Always, they face the line between compromise and sell-out.     "There are two things in the world you never want people to see how you made them: laws and sausages." Leo McGarry, Chief of Staff.     Call this backstage high school Civics. The episode *Five Votes Down* shows us the sometimes unsavory trade-offs needed to pass a Bill, in this case gun control.     Bartlet stays above this arm-twisting for votes. He is cuddly in a sweatshirt and mentally fuzzy from pain pills. He hugs people like a sappy drunk. The staff humors him. "President Bartlet doesn’t hold a grudge. That’s what he pays me for," Leo says.     Josh also tries to win back votes before the official tally. He meets with a former fraternity buddy, now a Congressman. The camera swirls around the two pugilists. Josh knows the Bill cold, whereas his counterpart only wants to win re-election. In many shows, members of Congress come across either as charming snakes or thugs in expensive suits. When Josh says, "I am so sick of Congress, I could vomit," we may share the sentiment.     The West Wingers have perfected deal-making and the art of the cover-up. They might, for instance, "take out the trash." This strategy unveils an explosive story on Friday night, because Saturday has slow news coverage. C.J. wants to tip White House reporter Danny to a real story in the trash. He says, "Don’t tell me; I’ll find it." She responds, "I’m not sure you will, because we’ve gotten so good at this."     The Staff usually wins, ultimately, but victory feels like flat champagne. Their unethical ways and means take a personal toll.     Our political landscape has shifting sands, and much can happen between now and November. Still, *The West Wing* speaks to voters in a strong voice. That voice says, Despite everything, vote for another Democrat.    *My thanks to PJ Webitor Paul Joseph, Lynn Wolf, and Lauren Bray’s "An Unofficial Tribute to the West Wing" website for help as I prepared this article.*  *Posted February 14, 2000*  **Would you like to comment on this article? 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