The West Wing as a Pedagogical Tool*

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When so many eligible adults fail to vote in presidential elections, why would the American viewing public want to occupy its entertainment hours with presidential politics? It would seem that a sharply written, intelligent political drama could never succeed in the face of modern political cynicism. Yet, *The West Wing* has provided both provocative political dialogue and strong ratings, not to mention such critical accolades as two consecutive Peabody Awards and 17 Emmys.[1]

Series creator, coproducer, and lead writer Aaron Sorkin serves as the driving force behind the series. Sorkin, who created ABC's critically praised but short-lived *Sports Night* and who wrote *A Few Good Men*, has created here a cast of smart, engaging characters led by President Josiah Bartlet (Martin Sheen), a liberal Democrat hailing from New Hampshire. Bartlet appears to share much of Bill Clinton's ideological sympathies, but his stable family life saves him from the embarrassments of Bill Clinton's personal baggage. His senior aides share his principles and a determination to work as a team to achieve Bartlet's progressive agenda.

For those who study and teach politics or history for a living, *The West Wing* unsheathes a double-edged sword. A great strength of the series is its ability to put a human face on engaging political discussions, demonstrating that politics can be accessible and enjoyable. However, this fictional White House also presents potential dangers. The purpose of *The West Wing* is to entertain rather than to educate, and the program deliberately plays the emotions of viewers through such techniques as background music and sophisticated camera work. Furthermore, if the Bartlet White House serves as a popular measure of what presidential politics should be, no doubt reality will frequently fall short of creator Sorkin's idealistic vision. When oversimplifications or inaccuracies prevail onscreen in the name of drama, will this lead viewers to build their perspectives and actions on flawed criteria? Could even greater cynicism result?

Careful use of clips from the show may illustrate particular concepts and stimulate classroom discussion and analysis of various topics. But attention to the series should also be structured to help students to develop the critical viewing skills necessary to engage in independent evaluations not only of television drama, but also of such visual media as films, documentaries, and TV news reports.

The Pedagogical Potential of *The West Wing*

No television or film representation of the presidency, whether fictional or documentary in nature, can "accurately" capture the essence or the complexity of the presidency. Martin Sheen has noted with respect to *The West Wing*, "It's not possible to have any clue what it's like to be president," and, "The only thing we can get into are the relationships that happen behind and away from public view—the personal moments, and [our conception of] the effects of policy and personalities on the staff."[2] While the series' purpose is for-profit entertainment, *The West Wing* presents great pedagogical potential.

Film and television clips may illustrate key points and spur students' interest in pursuing further information and insights for themselves. In our era of sound-bite politics, *The West Wing* addresses many contemporary domestic and foreign policies at least as cogently as do government officials—and at least one former official has echoed this sentiment. Former DEA official Robert Stutman stated, "The most intelligent discussion I've heard among politicians concerning the drug issue happened to be on TV about 6 weeks ago. Unfortunately, it was on *The West Wing* and it was President Josiah Bartlet."[3] Clips of such deliberations, with their fast-paced and focused dialogue, may help to jump-start students' own examinations of contemporary issues ranging from the methodology and import of presidential approval polling to slavery reparations for African Americans.

The real power of such discussions (unfortunately) is that *The West Wing* presents students with a more human face than our real-life leaders frequently do. Viewers cynically realize that actual candidates giving speeches and interviews have been carefully prepared and scripted for their own "performances," particularly when these candidates repeatedly parrot the same lines, as in recent presidential campaigns. The series' behind-the-scenes explorations of political decision making allow the characters to discuss such matters as the right to privacy and drug testing with more apparent passion than is frequently seen in real-life debates. While the series has been criticized for its left-leaning tendencies in such discussions, this liberal slant itself provides opportunities for students to exercise critical thinking skills in their analyses of particular clips.

The series moves beyond contemporary policy debates to explore more fundamental concepts of political power and relationships. The presidency came to dominate American politics and policy agendas in the twentieth century thanks in no small part to television news's focus on individual presidents. *The West Wing* helps demonstrate that "the presidency" is not so much about the single individual represented on television as it is a vast institution. The White House teems with advisers and assistants who handle issues on the president's behalf and sometimes even handle the president himself. In some of *The West Wing*'s early episodes, President Bartlet barely appears onscreen until the last few minutes, illustrating that much of the presidency's weight never even reaches his shoulders; many matters are addressed at lower levels. The various staff characters and even the extras trailing through the

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hallways of the set provide a view of the presidency as an institution made up of many individuals.

The show also does a nice job of providing metaphorical representations of various political relationships. For example, the edgy relationship between White House Press Secretary C.J. Cregg (Allison Janney) and journalist Danny Concannon (Timothy Busfield) during the first two seasons provided an interesting perspective on the relationship between politicians and members of the press. Political commentator and one-time political operative Chris Matthews insists that for political figures, "The press is the enemy" (1999, 183). However, both the politicians and the members of the press desperately need each other for their mutual survival. That is an apt metaphor for the fictional press secretary and White House correspondent who had a hard time staying away from one another. Likewise, the show's depictions of the president's advisers (including pollsters and party operatives) as a multitude of interests frequently "battling for the president's soul"[4] in the crafting of proposals and priorities have been borne out in insider accounts of various presidential administrations. Any of these relationships could make for engaging classroom analysis.

In short, the series focuses attention on a variety of provocative topics that instructors and their students may explore in some detail. However, an instructor using *The West Wing* in the classroom should ensure that students view the show as engaging fictional TV drama rather than as a weekly civics lesson.

Critical Viewing Skills for Political Independence

Political analyst and commentator Curtis Gans has proclaimed television to be the "enemy" of the political process, "the technological innovation which [has] had the most deleterious effect on citizen involvement" (Gans 1993, 26). Numerous scholars have tried to link television's emphasis on individualism to both the decline of political parties and drops in voter turnout rates (see, for example, McBride and Toburen 1996).

We as yet have no evidence whether *The West Wing* has had any measurable impact on viewers' political opinions. Certainly one of the show's strengths is its sophisticated use of dramatic techniques to stir viewers' emotions. Many viewers no doubt feel a hint of a thrill at the show's opening credits, filled with powerful music and contemplative black-and-white shots of President Bartlet and his closest advisors. What viewers wouldn't get a "feel" for the hustle-and-bustle at the top echelons of political power when the lead characters frequently "walk-and-talk" through the White House's elegant hallways, which are constantly packed with busy staffers? Interestingly, this latter technique was itself made possible through some distortion regarding the West Wing as a workplace: set designer Ken Hardy has admitted that, while Jed Bartlet's Oval Office looks stunningly like Bill Clinton's, the rest of the actual West Wing is less elegant and imposing than what we see on Wednesday nights.[5] Some former White House employees have also pointed out that the actual West Wing is too cramped to accommodate the fast-paced "walk-and-talks" so crucial to the frantic tempo of the Bartlet White House.[6] Likewise, others have pointed out that many of the employees bustling through the hallways of the Bartlet White House (and thus intensifying the impact of the "walk-and-talks") should by rights be bustling instead through the hallways of the Old Executive Office Building.[7]

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In spite of the challenges television presents for individuals' independent thought processes—and thus our representative democracy as a whole—developing students' critical viewing skills has at best been a low priority among scholars and educators (see O'Connor 1974, "Introduction"). In its journals and academic conferences, political science gives only limited attention to the study of entertainment film and television. Though available film-related books by political scientists are of high caliber (for example, see Gianos 1998 or Giglio 2000), they are relatively few in number.

Given the amount of time many students likely already spend in front of their television sets, many educators would prefer to reduce rather than increase classroom attention to the medium. However, Lee addresses this particularly well:

> The question is not therefore whether film [and, no doubt, television] is going to appear in the classroom: it may do so directly; it will certainly do so indirectly through the experience and attitudes as well as the intellectual baggage students bring with them. Given these facts we have an obligation to help students learn to deal with this omnipresent and omnicompetent entity, and to encourage them to apply the same critical and discriminating judgment to the study of film that we expect them to use in evaluating more traditional sources. (Lee 1990, 96)

Lee's encouragement becomes even more pointed when one considers how television campaign ads influence viewers' (i.e., voters') emotions and perceptions through many of the same rhetorical techniques that come into play in dramatic productions for television and film (see Nelson and Boynton 1997 for a discussion of televised campaign ads).

Putting *The West Wing* to Use in the Classroom

The obvious task for any instructional use of film or video clips is to move students beyond the typical passivity of viewing and instead put the clips to work as interactive learning techniques that encourage critical thought while also conveying information (Frantzich 1998). One simple way to begin addressing *The West Wing* in the classroom may be to knock away any impressions that the series depicts the "truth" of the presidency.

Encouraging Skeptical Attention to The West Wing

An instructor could point out some simple fallacies regarding the White House as a workplace by showing a hallway "walk-and-talk" scene, then discussing various news/magazine interviews with actual White House employees who downplay the accuracy of the series' set. As Lee points out with respect to film, "In some cases, even defects can become positive resources for teaching" (Lee 1990, 104). Here, pointing out such seemingly minor

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inaccuracies may spur students to question what the show has to say about bigger issues, whether specific policy debates or the underlying power relationships portrayed within the series.

Likewise, when clips are used to jumpstart policy discussions in the classroom, students quickly become aware that in Jed Bartlet's White House, the more liberal arguments usually carry the day. This is true in part because most characters espousing conservative views are less than sympathetic. Characters representing the Christian right are often portrayed as ignorant, self-serving bigots who know less Scripture than President Bartlet himself. Instructors should address such representations in follow-up discussions of the clips and should encourage students' skepticism of any ideological conclusions reached in the show's policy debates.

Other potentially useful clips address relations among top officials. The episode "Enemies" depicted a rare Bartlet Cabinet meeting in which President Bartlet expressed his distaste for both cabinet meetings and his vice president, John Hoynes (Tim Matheson). Obviously, Vice President Hoynes is not a key player in the Bartlet White House—so what, if anything, might this suggest about the institution of the vice presidency? As will often be the case, determining the "accuracy" of the scene's representation is a complex matter. Here, such a determination requires a broader discussion of the precarious nature of the vice president's job description, which depends almost entirely on the disposition of the president and his relationship with the vice president. The very brief but tense interaction between the Bartlet and Hoynes characters in this scene could be compared to written accounts of the vice presidencies of Lyndon Johnson and Al Gore, who had very different experiences in the office as a result of the very different relationships they shared with their respective bosses.

A separate episode could provide excellent fodder for an independent research project. From the episode "He Shall from Time to Time," we learn that President Bartlet suffers from multiple sclerosis. The episode raises crucial questions regarding a president's ability to withhold key medical information from the American public. At first glance the episode seems too implausible to countenance—after all, the president's physical health is now frequently discussed on television, and presidential candidates frequently disclose their medical records during their campaigns. Even President George W. Bush's embarrassing pretzel-and-fainting incident, witnessed only by his two dogs, was made public and discussed in the news for days! Further reflection, though, may lead to a different take on the matter. For example, three days after becoming vice president in 1965, Hubert H. Humphrey was kept almost totally in the dark about President Lyndon Johnson's condition after Johnson was rushed to Bethesda Naval Hospital with what at first appeared to be a heart attack (Humphrey 1976, 314). Here, on Johnson's own orders, the nation's second highest officer was kept ignorant. More recently, it is now widely believed that President Ronald Reagan came much closer to death in John Hinckley Jr.'s 1981 assassination attempt than the public was then allowed to realize. This fictional TV episode's suggestion that a president could keep such an important secret could make for an intriguing student research project into both the ethical and practical considerations of a zone of privacy for presidents. The extent to which the public has historically been kept in the dark regarding the health of our presidents, including President Franklin Roosevelt's paralysis and declining health in World War II, may indeed surprise many students who have grown up watching television clips of their presidents strolling across stages or the White House lawn.



Good TV? While *West Wing* President Josiah Bartlett brings in strong ratings, no evidence exists as to whether the show has any measurable impact on voters' political opinions. Photo: West Wing/NBC.

Encouraging the Development of Critical Viewing Skills

Correcting specific misconceptions and encouraging students to put the series into a broader perspective provides an incomplete approach to working with television or film clips in the classroom. Historian John E. O'Connor (1987) asserts, "Teachers should be less concerned with identifying factual mistakes on the screen and more with alerting students to the characteristic ways popular film and television productions often manipulate and trivialize historical [and political] issues" (4). O'Connor argues that instructors should invest some classroom time in "help[ing] keep students aware that the feelings they get from watching a film [or television] are not coincidental" (43). At least some attention to the techniques and terminology of critical viewing, including such concepts as camera shots and lighting, is necessary.

As I previously noted, many political scientists are themselves not particularly well equipped for the charge of teaching students how to analyze such concepts as camera angles. The goal is not to teach students to become film critics but rather to familiarize them with basic film/television terminology so that they recognize attempts to move them either emotionally or ideologically. The aforementioned Gianos and Giglio books would help with this task. O'Connor's work in history (see especially his 1990 publication) and Nelson and Boynton's discussion of TV ads (1997) would also prove invaluable resources.

Character representations are often pivotal to *The West Wing's* attempts to convey and emphasize particular ideas. These may be presented for student analysis. For example, what is the dramatic effect of consistently having conservative viewpoints espoused by unsympathetic characters? Even Democratic characters promoting conservative viewpoints are often set up for ignominy. In the episode "Twenty Hours in L.A.," Democratic pollster Al Kiefer (John DeLancie) suggests an issue position that he could "sell" to the electorate and thus (in his view) guarantee President Bartlet's reelection. His

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suggestion is for President Bartlet to promote a flag-burning amendment. Before the viewers even meet him, Kiefer is undermined by the clear disdain with which key staffers view him, by the insults they speak to him, and finally by his being positioned as a potential romantic rival to senior staffer Josh Lyman (Bradley Whitford).

Specific attention to camera work would also be crucial to evaluating the series' ability to affect viewers. Our impressions of the heady frenzy of West Wing life are not accidental: the nearly constant motion and fast-paced dialogue require viewers to stay on their toes just to keep up with the plotlines. Even when the characters are still, the camera often pans around the actors to maintain the impression of constant motion and intrigue, thus intensifying the discussions taking place among characters. Mike McCurry, former press secretary to President Clinton, has stated, "Ninety percent of what happens at the White House is pure boredom. Believe me."[8] One would never know that from the way the cameras of *The West Wing* help build and maintain dramatic intensity where, in reality, there often might be none.

Further, how might students assess their responses to the panoramic shots of official Washington, particularly the powerful establishing shots from outside the White House (frequently shot so that the Washington Monument, signifying the strength and power of the presidency, is clearly evident)? How might these shots affect viewers' perceptions of what happens once we jump inside the building's walls? As many of these establishing shots are nighttime shots, they clearly imply that service to president and country never stops for those fortunate enough to win jobs inside the White House. The sense of constant activity is sustained even into the hours when most of the nation is either home watching television or asleep.

Low-key lighting is also frequently used to good effect. Characters are frequently shown with much of their faces in shadow, suggesting at least a hint of conflicting emotions, or perhaps moral ambiguity. Further, it is probably not coincidental that the Oval Office is often well lit, in contrast to the much darker offices of several key aides, who handle much of the "dirtier" work of political strategizing on the president's behalf. The episode "Six Meetings before Lunch" made particularly interesting use of contrasting light patterns in illustrating vastly different meetings taking place simultaneously within the White House's walls. Director Clark Johnson staged a frivolous conversation regarding an attempt to secure a panda bear for the National Zoo in a well-lit room. A much more intense, dramatic debate took place between senior advisor Josh Lyman and Jeff Breckenridge (Carl Lumbly), the president's brilliant but controversial nominee for assistant attorney general for civil rights. The serious debate over slavery reparations took place in near darkness, with tight close-ups of the characters intensifying the tenor of the discussion. The contrasting lighting in the two separate discussions effectively enhanced the intensity of the latter discussion.

Conclusion

O'Connor (1987) reminds us that film or television clips should be used in the classroom only stringently and only when they help to achieve specific pedagogical goals. Unflinching analytical attention to *The West Wing* may spur students both to greater thought about our political system and to critical viewing of politically or historically oriented television and film.

Notes

*An earlier version of this paper was presented at the American Presidency on Film Conference, Los Angeles, November 2000.

1. The West Wing tied for twenty-seventh place in the 1999–2000 Nielsen ratings with ABC's Spin City, a comedy also set against a political backdrop ("Nielsen Ratings for 1999–2000," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 26 May 2000, sec. C). Its numbers have only improved since then. For the 2000–2001 season, The West Wing finished in thirteenth place ("Television's Top 50," *Houston Chronicle*, 20 May 2001, 26 [2 STAR edition]), and it stood in seventh place in the fall of 2001 (Snierson 2002, 7).

2. Kiesewetter, John, "The 'Acting' White House: From Hallways to Scripts, NBC's 'The West Wing' Stays Entertainingly Correct," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 26 January 2000, sec. E.

3. Sepinwall, Alan, "'West Wing' Won't Bask in Glory as Season Opens with Two-Parter," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 31 July 2000, sec. E.

4. Feinberg, Richard, "West Wing: TV's New Political Realism," *The Straits Times*, 20 November 1999, 85.

5. Weintraub, Joanne, "Winging It," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 9 March 2000, sec. E.

6. "TV's 'West Wing' Is Not a Good Replica of the Real Thing," *Detroit News*, 29 September 1999, sec. E.

7. Anderson, Roger, "'The West Wing' Is a Hit–Even if It's Not Always True to Life," *Detroit News*, 19 April 2000, sec. O.

8. Miga, Andrew, "White House Drama More Colorful than the Real White House," *Boston Herald*, 23 September 1999, 3 (Al edition).

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