

Virtue From Vice: Duty, Power, and *The West Wing*

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Introduction

Premiering in autumn 1999, Aaron Sorkin's television program *The West Wing* quickly became one of the most popular and critically acclaimed shows in the country. The weekly hour of drama follows a fictional President of the United States and his staff as they pursue their policy and political goals, charting the ups and downs of a Democratic administration in an America that, although not quite in the same universe as reality, looks quite close to reality. The show devotes a significant portion of its time to discussing the meat of political and policy issues – from the death penalty and the politics of Supreme Court nominations to the arcana of U.S. Census sampling and estate tax policy. It comes as little surprise that *The West Wing* has been called a “running civics lesson”; some commentators have even suggested that it has helped to make public service and civics more honorable and more interesting pursuits, not just for professionals but even for the average American citizen.

Whether or not one can actually credit *The West Wing* with making service sexy, a more fundamental question remains to be answered. How does *The West Wing* explain the motivations and rewards of its characters? What motivation animates and drives them to spend years of their lives in pursuit of so much uncertainty – policy battles they may or may not win; daily distractions from the core of their agenda; unexpected threats to the health, safety, and well-being of the nation and its citizens; or even the unrelenting boredom and slowness of creating public policy and pursuing politics in the American governmental system?

Against our most base expectation for the conduct of politics, “pursuit of power” does not provide *The West Wing's* answer to the above questions. For the characters on *The West Wing*, power's rewards rarely enter into the calculus of their service, and the pursuit of such for its own sake brings about discouragement or rebuke. Instead, *The West Wing* answers that duty

motivates and rewards the people in the universe of *The West Wing*. The program proffers a running discussion of the concept of duty as played out in the American political ideology and the contemporary political arena. Indeed, duty's obligations and objects provide the *leitmotif* of the series, binding its episodes together into a more coherent whole.

The West Wing does not offer a new political theory of what it means to be an American or to act as an American. The program does try to reinvigorate an old conversation in American political thought, asserting that duties exist that are incumbent upon all who would lead. And *The West Wing* does not ignore the role that the pursuit of power plays for most professional politicians. Instead, the show turns its attention to what happens when duty and power conjoin, and what results when one concept gets the better of the other. As regards duty, the show asks and attempts to answer a nexus of questions: What is duty? To whom is duty owed? How does one demonstrate a commitment to duty? Why should one follow one's sense of duty, as opposed to other more rewarding virtues or vices? The second nexus of questions that this paper addresses focus upon power and its combination with duty: Can those who pursue duty also pursue power? What is the relationship of duty to power? Can they co-exist? How is one dependent upon or prior to the other? What happens if this relationship is perverted? This essay will consider each of these two sets of questions in turn. However, before proceeding, a brief discussion of the concept of duty in other areas of American political ideology will prove instructive.

Duty in American Political Ideology

As often proves the case, the first questions are possibly the hardest to answer. What is

duty?¹ What role does duty play in the construction of American identity? Almost from the beginning of the American Republic, creators and leaders of the polity have sensed that they existed in a milieu where the highest form of social service lay not in the pursuit of meeting individual desires and goals but in work toward the good of the commons. The Founders were good children of the Enlightenment, and the teachings of Locke, Rousseau, and Montesquieu formed and informed their political opinions. For the Founders, the republican polity aggregated from the individuals that composed it, yet the polity exceeded simple summation to create a synergistic, new, separate political entity. This polity also demanded the highest loyalty of its members. The duty of the members of such a republic was to place service to the country above all other considerations. Such service ideally lay not in blind obedience to the political masters of America. Because the American Republic, even while exceeding individuals, flowed from its citizens, each citizen had to follow the dictates of conscience and personal belief regarding the best course of action for the polity, even should such dictates and beliefs contradict the reigning political ideology or current leadership. This understanding of American duty has survived relatively intact through more than two hundred years of American political and social history. It has not always been a defining characteristic of the actual conduct of American politics, but it serves as a popular and elite understanding of how American life *should* be conducted. By no means can this paper present a complete survey of “duty” in the progression of American political thought; a brief survey of how the concept plays out in the classic roots of the genre will prove instructive as we proceed to consideration of *The West Wing*.

One need look no further than early American rhetoric to confirm that duty, understood as tending to the business of the public over and even in controversion of individual interest, offered one of the founding ideals of the new polity. In declaring themselves a new nation,

¹ The origins of the word itself lay in the Latin *dēbēre*, which signifies obligation, debt, and service.

separated from the bonds of the mother country, the signers of the Declaration of Independence proclaimed, “And for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.” For the fifty-five signers, no individual characteristic or possession could prove as important as service to the common good; duty required the very real risk of impoverishment, imprisonment, and death.

Similarly, the other founding Scripture of the American political religion, the Constitution, emphasized that individuals must fulfill their duty to the common element. As the preamble proclaims,

We the people, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and to secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

The pattern in this list of tasks that the Constitution aspires to complete starts with the general, moves to the specific, and returns to the general. The first goal of the Constitutional order lay in the attempt to bring the union of the several states closer to perfection than the previous system allowed. To do this, the text argues, the people must form public institutions – institutions that might intrude upon the maximal freedom of the individual but that would provide the greatest freedom to the generality of the people. These institutions would perform the several requisite tasks of government – “establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, [and] promote the general welfare.” In the end, the move to perfect the political order through better institutions fell subsidiary to the most important motivation of all – “to secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.” The Constitutional preamble, then, sets out the duties of the American government – to safeguard freedom by the common life of government and politics. Moreover, it sets out the objects of that duty – not only must the present figure prominently but the future had claim also – by noting that the order was done “for ourselves and our posterity.”

Duty was not simply the special province of the American elite. As the United States developed beyond its republican roots into a democratic polity,² the form of duty became democratized. As Alexis de Tocqueville noted in *Democracy in America*, “A man understands the influence which his country’s well-being has on his own; he knows the law allows him to contribute to the production of this well-being, and he takes an interest in his country’s prosperity, first as a thing useful to him and then as something he has created.”³ Tocqueville implicitly recognizes that the motive of self-sacrifice in service may not be enough to motivate the mass of citizens in the American Republic, and self-interest must figure as part of the dynamic of creating the dutiful American. In this, it appears that duty does not need to occur as a work of altruism; duty may contain a selfish component. The apparent contradiction is striking: service to the good of the many may derive at least some of its initial force from individual motivation. As Tocqueville notes in the latter part of this passage, individual desire transforms into something more akin to duty, as the “interest” in the well-being of the country begins in utility but over time becomes pride in creation.

Democratic duty firmly planted itself within the soil of the American political ideology. Perhaps the best evidence for this phenomenon occurs in the letters and diaries of soldiers at war. For example, as Union soldier Sullivan Ballou wrote to his wife a week before the Battle of Bull Run (Manassas),

I know how strongly American Civilization now leans upon the triumph of the Government and how great a debt we owe to those who went before us through the blood and suffering of the Revolution, and I am willing, perfectly willing, to lay down all my joys in life to help maintain this Government and to pay that debt....⁴

Of course, perhaps the most famous of all calls to duty in American rhetoric comes from President John F. Kennedy’s inaugural speech in 1961, where he issued a challenge to all of

² Dahl 1978.

³ Tocqueville 1969, p. 236.

⁴ Ballou 1861.

America, at a time that seemed to promise new hope and opportunity. “Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.” The duty of an American was clear: place the good of the country above your own, give selflessly to the common weal, and acknowledge the necessity of sacrifice.

According to Judith Shklar, duty and American citizenship have become equivalent in some sense.

Good citizenship as political participation... concentrates on political practices, and it applies to the people of a community who are consistently engaged in public affairs. The good democratic citizen is a political agent who takes part regularly in politics locally and nationally, not just on primary and election day. [Good citizens] also openly support policies that they regard as just and prudent. Although they do not refrain from pursuing their own and their reference group's interests, they try to weigh the claims of other people impartially and listen carefully to arguments.⁵

Duty and this form of citizenship thus have a close, if not identical, relationship.

Duty on *The West Wing*

The pursuit of American duty provides the driving force of action on *The West Wing*.

Aaron Sorkin, the creator of the series, notes that the show offers a paean to public service:

[The characters] are fairly heroic.... That's unusual in American popular culture, by and large. Our leaders, government people, are portrayed either as dolts or as Machiavellian somehow. The characters in this show are neither.... All of them have set aside probably more lucrative lives for public service. They are dedicated not just to this president, but to doing good, rather than doing well. The show is kind of a valentine to public service.⁶

Virtually any viewer of the show would agree with Sorkin's statement about his creation, but the more interesting question remains, “Why do these characters engage in public service?” What motivation lies behind the choice to forsake lucrative individual pursuits, even if those could be construed as helping people, to pursue the life of public service? In short, the president and his staff understand that they bear the duty to devote their considerable talents to the service of the public life; not only do they bear this duty, but they bear it pleurably. While tough wins and

⁵ Shklar 1991, p.5.

⁶ Sorkin 2000.

dispiriting losses provoke anger, weariness, and even tragedy, the show emphasizes that duty is not an onerous burden but a fulfilling vocation.

Although demonstrated throughout the show, the pleasure of bearing duty finds its best demonstration in the first season episode “Let Bartlet Be Bartlet.” The staff of the administration expresses frustration not that they lose policy and political battles that they fight but that they do not even “suit up” for the conflict of modern democratic politics. President Bartlet (Martin Sheen), convinced by his chief of staff, Leo McGarry (John Spencer), to follow his conscience, decides that speaking his mind is more important than reelection. For Bartlet, his duty as the president is to do what he believes right, not what proves expedient. Following conscience does not merely serve a personal sense of comfort – in *The West Wing*, it is the correct public action. Leo then meets with the staff and tells them that they have the free reign to pursue the agenda they believe they were elected to serve.

LEO: We’re gonna lose a lot of these battles, and we might even lose the White House, but we’re not gonna be threatened by issues; we’re gonna put them front and center. We’re gonna raise the level of public debate in this country, and let that be our legacy. That sound all right to you, Josh?

JOSH: I serve at the pleasure of the President of the United States.⁷

LEO: [to C.J.] Yeah?

C.J.: I serve at the pleasure of the President.

Leo turns to Sam

SAM: I serve at the pleasure of President Bartlet.

LEO: Toby?

TOBY: I serve at the pleasure of the President.

Everyone smiles.

LEO: Good. Then let’s get in the game.

⁷ This echoes one of Leo’s lines earlier in the episode, where, in response to the President’s barb that Leo pulls the President to the political center, Leo responds, “I serve at the pleasure of the president.” Leo emphasizes that he understands his duty lies in implementing the president’s will and that responsibility for the administration’s direction lies with the president and no one else.

The duty to engage in public service proves both serious and pleasurable to these men and women. The statement, “I serve at the pleasure of the President of the United States,” invokes a vow for the staff, similar to that taken by their boss to preserve, defend, and protect the Constitution. So long as they (political appointees who may be hired and fired at will) work for the president, they share in the duty of working to preserve, defend, and protect not just the Constitution but the whole of the American way of life. Their vow is a subsidiary of the president’s constitutional oath.

In *The West Wing*, duty locates in two primary sites. First, the drama contends that the appropriate locus of American duty starts with service and assistance rendered to other people (individuals or groups), whether friend or adversary. From this place, duty expands to locate itself in the whole of the country, to the good of a polity that is more than the whole of its parts, and, in a reflection of the founding moment encapsulated in the constitution’s preamble, to the future *and* the past.

To others

American duty, by its very nature, requires that the person performing it look outward rather than inward, to the improvement of many rather than the gain of one or a few. In one sense, to focus on duty to others may seem tautological. However, the object of the duty – the “others” – reveals the range of *The West Wing*’s vision of who counts and why. Duty in Sorkin’s world requires that the drama’s characters act with tolerance and catholicity toward the people they meet, so long as those people act similarly; those who do not receive chastisement for violating their own obligation to American duty.

To those who disagree

The people of *The West Wing*, involved as they are in professional politics, must deal

constantly with those who disagree, even vehemently, with them. This, in some sense, marks them as different from the rest of Americans, who can structure their daily lives and work to avoid significant disagreement with other people on public matters, social and political. Even so, Americans generally know that the health of the Republic depends upon the cultivation of debate and disagreement, but they often leave the matter to politicians, talking heads, academics, and other members of the “chattering classes.” Every step of life in *The West Wing* brings the staffers and the president into regular contact with conflict. As fulfillers of their duty, to serve the public interest, what duty do these characters bear toward those who disagree with them?

This question has been answered in various fashions since the beginning of the series. In the pilot episode, many of the answers to the above question appear via a major subplot. As the episode opens, we learn that the deputy chief of staff, Josh Lyman (Bradley Whitford), has insulted a leader of the Christian right-wing on one of the Sunday morning talk shows that are a staple of the political game.

MARY MARSH: Well, I can tell you that you don’t believe in any God that *I* pray to, Mr. Lyman. *Not* any God that *I* pray to.

JOSH: Lady, the God you pray to is too busy being indicted for tax fraud.

For this comment and possibly angering a powerful constituency the president can ill-afford to cross at this point, Josh’s job is in danger. We learn in the meantime that the president is a “deeply religious man”⁸ who discourages young women from having abortions but who “does *not* believe that it’s the government’s place to legislate this issue.”⁹ White House Communications Director Toby Ziegler (Richard Schiff) arranges a meeting between the staff and the Christian conservatives angered by Josh’s remark. Josh apologizes for the tenor of his remark and notes that any person willing to debate ideas deserves better than glib insults. Mary

⁸ Sorkin 2002, p. 54.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Marsh speaks up, asking what her group will get in return for the insult, quickly demanding a presidential radio address in support of school vouchers or against pornography (with the implication that neither is a policy position the president would normally take). Finally, the president appears in the midst of heated argument, and asks the visitors why they have not denounced a fringe group called The Lambs of God. He explains that he is upset and extremely angry:

BARTLET: It seems my granddaughter, Annie, had given an interview in one of those teen magazines and somewhere between movie stars and makeup tips, she talked about her feelings on a woman's right to choose. Now Annie, all of 12, has always been precocious, but she's got a good head on her shoulders and I like it when she uses it, so I couldn't understand it when her mother called me in tears yesterday.... Now I love my family and I've read my Bible from cover to cover so I want you to tell me: From what part of Holy Scripture do you suppose the Lambs of God drew their divine inspiration when they sent my 12-year-old granddaughter a Raggedy Ann doll with a knife stuck in its throat? (pause) You'll denounce these people. You'll do it publicly. And until you do, you can all get your fat asses out of my White House. (Everyone is frozen.) C.J., show these people out.

MARY MARSH: I believe we can find the door.

BARTLET: Find it now.¹⁰

This president does not remain above menace and intimidation when he believes that the various peoples he must deal with have violated their own duties. As the statements above indicate, the president's duty includes a mutual respect for his adversaries, until they violate the compact of democratic deliberative discourse. Once they have done that, or people associated with them have done so (as the Lambs of God were loosely associated with but not part of the organizations the lobbyists represented), they are no longer worthy to participate in the public sphere that the president controls (a fairly significant portion).

The above dialogue also indicates that the president in *The West Wing* perceives part of his duty to be the control of the public discourse. If locking radicals out of the White House

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 73

proves to be his solution, he sets himself up as an arbiter of what and what is not acceptable for people to say to gain entry into the public sphere. No support for the actions of the fictional radicals is implied here, but the president indicates from the very beginning of the series that he will serve as a cop for republican conduct in American politics. One also wonders whether the president would have acted so forcefully on the (implied) right side had the victim of the radical act not been his granddaughter. Unfortunately, we are given no further clues as to the extent of the president's duty to act as republican policeman or whether he acts on a particular duty when it does not affect him in a personal way.

One of the criticisms of the show lies in the personalization of policy that often occurs. The *West Wing* leaves unanswered how duty's pursuit springs from the nexus of personal and public. Chris Lehmann commented on this theme in *Atlantic Monthly*,

...In the thickets of controversy that crop up in the Bartlet Administration, the strongest objection to a policy or a decision to overstep protocol is usually that it doesn't feel right. And when the members of Team Bartlet chart a new policy course, it is because they agree that it suits the perceived national mood or because it springs... from a profound personal experience.... If one of the sixties' most enduring — if dubious — notions is that the personal is political, *The West Wing* operates from the converse: the political is, above all, personal.¹¹

Lehmann's center-right critique indirectly poses another question. What are the sources of action, belief, and opinion when a public servant follows one's sense of duty? *The West Wing*, unfortunately, either does not answer or offers a vague notion like "love of country."

Benefits of Following Duty

Duty for the characters in *The West Wing* extends to helping all American citizens, whether they disagree, agree, or are uninvolved in the world of public service. The burden of public service does not weigh the White House staff or the president down. Quite to the contrary, the yoke is easy and the burden is light, because the staffers know that the joy of public

¹¹ Lehmann 2001, pp. 93-96.

service outweighs the bane of the moment's political storm. (As just noted, of course, the motivation often appears unclear.)

Moreover, not only does doing one's duty mean that the worries of the day are lifted away, but following the dutiful vocation lifts the other concerns of life from the characters, and the implication, of course, is that American duty in the form of public service becomes a salvific, redemptory act. When one does it, one receives the intangible satisfaction of knowing one is pursuing his or her life's vocation. Rather like a call to the priesthood, the characters, through struggle and service, receive satisfaction and transformation. *The West Wing* contends that the public servant may serve as the modern American "vocation," to use the old language for a calling to religious service. The season two premiere, "In the Shadow of Two Gunmen," makes this point most clear.

The season begins just as an apparent assassination attempt against the President has taken place. In the course of the episode, we learn that the true target was Charlie, President Bartlet's young African-American aide, whom white supremacists want to kill because he is dating the President's daughter. In the course of the confusion, Josh is hit seriously; the concern that all his friends show becomes the device by which one sees a series of flashbacks to the Bartlet campaign and learns how this group came together.¹²

Two flashbacks, in particular, merit attention, for they make clearest the transformative nature of doing one's duty to look beyond the merely self-interested to the good of the *res publica*. We learn through the course of these flashbacks that Josiah "Jed" Bartlet entered the race an underdog candidate, a two-time New Hampshire governor, a Nobel-Prize winning economist, and a plain-speaking liberal idealist, with a touch of pragmatism. Some future

¹² "In the Shadow of Two Gunmen."

staffers have their doubts about whether he'll make it.

JOSH: Leo, the Democrats aren't gonna nominate another liberal academic governor from New England. I mean, we're dumb, but we're not that dumb.

LEO: (smiles) Nah. I think we're exactly that dumb.¹³

Sam Seaborne (Rob Lowe) has risen to the highest rungs of the corporate legal ladder, about to be made a partner in the second-largest law firm in New York. A committed lover of the environment, he finds himself helping oil companies to buy sub-par tankers at cut-rate prices and under terms that will help them to escape virtually any legal liability if disaster strikes. Josh, doing a favor for Leo and checking out Bartlet, comes to ask Sam whether he will write speeches for Senator Hoynes, who is also running for the nomination. Sam turns the offer down, because he doesn't believe Hoynes is "the real thing." But should Josh see the real thing in New Hampshire, Sam asks, Josh should tell him. In the second part of the episode, Josh returns to Sam's firm as Sam works the final details of an oil tanker deal, trying to convince the businessmen to buy safer, more responsible, but more expensive, boats. After a frustrating attempt to persuade the oilmen to be more environmental, Sam looks up and sees Josh standing at the window. Realizing that, however unlikely, Josh has seen the real thing, Sam walks out of the meeting and the law firm. As he gets up out of his seat, his boss asks, "Sam, where are you going?" "New Hampshire," Sam replies.¹⁴

Similarly, we learn that three years ago, about a year before Bartlet's election, C.J. Cregg (Allison Janney) had just been fired from her job as a top-rated publicist for a Beverly Hills P.R. firm that seemed to specialize in entertainment-industry hand-holding. She walks into her backyard, finds Toby sitting there, and hears out his pitch to land her as the press secretary for the Bartlet campaign.

¹³ *The West Wing: The Official Companion* (hereafter *TOC*), p. 170.

¹⁴ Sorkin 2002, pp. 231-33.

C.J.: How much does it pay?

TOBY: What were you making before?

C.J.: Five hundred fifty thousand dollars a year.

TOBY: This pays six hundred dollars a week.

C.J.: So this is less.

TOBY: Yeah.

With the barest hint of a smile, C.J. notes that she has never worked national politics, just state-level. But she's in.

Both of these vignettes emphasize that the call to duty occurs suddenly, often out-of-the-blue, and that it presents a moment of choice, between acceptable self-interest and sanctified service to others. But the very sanctification of the process removes these characters from the realm of what most viewers can understand. These women and men who serve the president and the country have been washed clean, transformed into saints, and made more unattainable to the mass of Americans. Sorkin complained in a 2000 interview to PBS' *News Hour with Jim Lehrer* that public servants have been vilified and presented in a Machiavellian light. Perhaps, however, this is the case because the public at large can identify with the more venal impulses of the image of the selfish politician than *The West Wing's* selfless servants. We like these men and women, but we don't *understand* them. Their commitment to their duty is so clear that they forsake relationships, marriages, money, and perhaps even their lives in service of an ideal. For the viewer, such a commitment to duty can provoke admiration, but, in its inaccessibility, it is ignorable and finally ineffective.

Duty To Country

Almost *contra* Tocqueville's and Shklar's observations, the characters in *The West Wing* do not appear to act out of self-interested motivation, even in a partial sense. Their commitment

to the service of others and their country appears to come from a high prioritization of the “public.” They serve because they are needed – the overriding motif of the series is that to those whom much is given, much is also demanded. The characters know this and carry this, as we have noted many times before.

The dedication to country is such that even when a character receives the call to do something that she or he cannot fathom or bear, duty will override all consideration. The call is virtuous, but should it trump all other claims on the soul of the republican citizen?

In two back-to-back episodes, “In This White House” and “And It’s Surely to Their Credit,” we meet the lawyer Ainsley Hayes (Emily Procter), a Republican who opposes just about everything the White House stands for. She initially appears as one of the first talking heads to out-argue Sam on one of the Sunday morning political talk shows. Sensing intelligence and a sense of service, Leo calls her into the White House and offers her a job, explaining that the President likes smart people who disagree with him and that he is asking her to serve. Ainsley, noting that she has wanted to work in the White House since she was two, resists the call and decides not to take the job on account of her partisanship. But as she spends the day in the White House, she sees the staff and the President engage in acts both of partisan politics and of service to the country and the world. Meeting her friends late that evening, they ask her if she met anyone who “wasn’t worthless.” Suddenly shaken from her reflective reverie, she rebukes her friends:

Say they are smug and superior. Say their approach to public policy makes you want to tear your hair out. Say they like high taxes and spending your money. Say they want to take your guns and open your borders, but don't call them worthless. . . . The people I have met have been extraordinarily qualified. Their intent is good. Their commitment is true. They are righteous, and they are patriots. And I'm their lawyer.^{15,16}

¹⁵ “In This White House.” Summary in *TOC*, 44-49.

¹⁶ Quote from *The West Wing Continuity Guide*. <http://westwing.bewarne.com/second/26whitehouse.html>. Accessed 22 May 2003.

When the White House counsel finds out that a fire-breathing Republican has been hired into his office, his temper explodes. After making a scene with the president, the counsel traipses down to Ainsley's basement office and demands to know why she is working in this administration. "She sweetly professes that she's serving her country, she feels a sense of duty."¹⁷

What does Ainsley give up to become a member of the opposition in service to the Bartlet White House? Clearly, one of the actions she may never engage in while she follows her duty includes making public appearances on behalf of the causes that she believes in as Republican – no television, no forums, no place where her views may publicly contradict those of the administration or bring embarrassment upon it. (We are given to believe that she would never engage in the latter, her concept of duty, honor, and service being unimpeachable in this regard.) But she can become the premiere voice for Republican views to the members of the White House staff, providing an empathetic mouth for policies and people they might normally regard as enemies.¹⁸

Ainsley sacrifices her own good for what she perceives as the good of the country. As a rising Republican star, her friends assured her that she could become a power player on the Washington circuit and implied that she could make significant money also. But when the president calls on her, she realizes that she must follow the call to duty. Even as she tries to resist, at first refusing the job, she clearly has a road-to-Damascus moment: when her friends call the White House "worthless", her task becomes immediately clear. There is a sense of inevitability to her call and actions.

¹⁷ *TOC*, p. 203.

¹⁸ Many media critics contended that the introduction of the Ainsley character provided Sorkin a means to soften criticism that his show offered only liberal viewpoints and unfairly criticized the right wing. Sorkin denied that this was his motivation; Ainsley came about as a natural development of the entertaining story he wanted to tell. Interestingly, after Emily Procter left the show as a recurring character, the fourth season introduced another Republican lawyer (this time a white male played by Matthew Perry), who applied to work at the White House because he also wanted to serve and because he had been blacklisted by his party. He ended up with the same office as Ainsley and for two episodes fulfilled many of the roles the previous character had.

Duty thus contains a compulsory aspect. Once an American understands it and receives a clear directive, he or she *must* obey. One wonders if the aspect of choice retains any power in *The West Wing*; it would seem that it does, but in a very muted way. One can choose to serve or not, but duty may only have one path – the service of the President. What if Ainsley had chosen some other form of political engagement *and* she had played by the Bartlet ground rules of liberal democracy (speak only to issues, make no *ad hominem* or personal attacks, only involve the lives of those directly at work in the political arena, and so forth)? What if she had chosen to remain a commentator outside the administration? What if she had become an opposition party staffer? It's not clear, but *The West Wing* has not portrayed any extensive character (main, supporting, or recurring) doing any of these. One senses that the role of the member of the loyal opposition is to be subsumed; the evidence from the series, however, remains inconclusive, as we have not seen many other models. The sin of omission does not make a sin of commission. Even so, political service in *The West Wing* always occurs in the context of the White House.

And yet. A lofty and inspiring element exists in portraying such a person – a partisan who puts aside party difference with co-workers and boss for the good of the country. If this situation seems unbelievable to the viewer, it is just as implausible to the characters, which thereby increases its believability. When Ainsley does agree to become part of the counsel's staff and the counsel visits her, asking why she took the job, she says, "I feel a sense of duty.... Is it so hard to believe in this day and age that someone would roll up their sleeves, set aside partisanship and say, 'What can I do?'" The counsel responds, "Yes!"

Many cultural critics and academics have noted that the 1990s have proved one of the most rancorous eras of partisan conflict in recent memory; even to describe the level of animosity requires one to examine the Federal period, the Jacksonian epoch, the Progressive era, or some other period belonging to history and not to memory. Sorkin's *West Wing* calls us as

Americans to move beyond our particular impulses. Implying that we have moved away from our duty, *The West Wing* provides a call to fulfill duty once again, in the best spirit of American mythologies regarding the united nature of the United States. The drama says that the problems facing the America of the turn of the century are as great as any that have ever faced the Republic, and it argues that the great problems of our history have required more unified action than we see now. *The West Wing* asks that, in the name of duty, we Americans set aside the politics that we currently conduct, that we follow our consciences, and that we work for the good of the whole Republic, even if this is detrimental to our selfish interests. In the name of this, the show will even invoke traditional political theorists like John Rawls and his concept of the “original position.”¹⁹ Even as the introduction of the Ainsley character invokes our cynical reaction, Sorkin asks for the suspension of our disbelief (by having the characters themselves unable to suspend their own disbelief) and for us to be persuaded for a short time that duty may still impel us.

To those who have been forgotten or passed over

The duty to make amends for the victims of injustice plays a large role in the catalog of public obligations that duty entails on *The West Wing*. Although most of the characters are straight, white males, Christina Lane notes that the attention to matters around historically disadvantaged groups makes up a large portion of the *West Wing*'s political issue focus. “*The West Wing* takes not merely as its end point, but rather as its *point of departure*, a progressive, multifaceted, highly politicized understanding of gender and racial relations.”²⁰ Even if most of

¹⁹ A recent episode, “Red Haven’s On Fire”, explicitly used John Rawls’ veil of ignorance to explain why progressive rates provide a fair way to conduct tax policy. Woven into the story line, one character explains that the most just way to design such a policy is to, in supposed ignorance of one’s eventual status in life, create a system that is broadly just. Again, we see duty, in that the philosophical set-up asks us to leave aside particular interest and look to the best social good.

²⁰ Lane 2003, p.33.

the primary characters are male and white,²¹ Lane notes that the series continually privileges viewpoints from the margins, by allowing the viewer to see the action from the viewpoint of one of the main characters in a marginal group or from the view of supporting characters (many of whom are women or minorities or both). “Indeed, the series continually articulates the philosophy that its male characters can redefine their personal relation to patriarchal structures in ways that might advance the cause of feminists, people of color, and the working classes.”²²

Even more interesting than the (possible) trope of seeing a white male power structure easily, consciously, and conscientiously giving itself to the dutiful service of the marginalized, *The West Wing* has also demonstrated how the marginalized can be brought into the service of one another. In the Thanksgiving episode from the third season, “The Indians in the Lobby”, C.J. gets word that there are two Indians from the Stockbridge-Munsee tribe waiting in the lobby. They had an appointment in the West Wing, but when it was cancelled, they decided to stay in the lobby in silent protest. If the White House police are called, there will be a press scene. As press secretary, she must deal with the episode. The Indians clarify their problem for her. When the government moved them to Wisconsin, they signed a treaty that was supposed to guarantee their sovereignty, but the Dawes Act then forced them to sell three quarters of their land. A 1934 law allowed them to buy the land back and guaranteed that this time it would not be forfeit, so long as they placed it in trust with the federal government. But they have been unable to do this, because their application with the Interior Department has been delayed for fifteen years.

Much of the rest of C.J.’s character action in this episode revolves around trying to get the Indians in the lobby a meeting with someone, anyone in the West Wing. None of the other

²¹ Of the series’ nine regular characters, three are female and one is an African-American male.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 38.

staffers will do this, and we watch C.J. become more and more personally invested in helping these Indians. She returns to talk with them several times, and on her final visit learns the following.

C.J.: How many treaties have we signed with the Munsee Indians?

MAGGIE MORNINGSTAR-CHARLES: Six.

C.J.: How many have we revoked?

MAGGIE: Six

C.J.: What were the Munsees doing in 1778?

MAGGIE: Fighting in George Washington's Army.

C.J.: And why aren't you in New York anymore?

MAGGIE: 'Cause he marched us to Wisconsin.

C.J.: And whose land was it in the first place?

MAGGIE: Ours.

She then tells the Indians that she has been able to get them a meeting to hear their concerns and to set up a further meeting for action. We can tell she admires and respects their tenacity, and she asks a final question before the episode ends.

C.J.: How do you keep fighting these smaller injustices when they are all from the mother of all injustices?

MAGGIE: What's the alternative?

C.J., in the world of *The West Wing*, takes on the duty of assisting the Indians because it is within the purview of her job's responsibilities. There is also power and poignancy in having the most influential woman staffer take up the burden of the Indians. We viewers often see *The West Wing*'s political world through C.J.'s eyes (on more than one occasion, e-mails that she writes to her father serve as the narrative basis for an episode). C.J.'s status as a member of a marginalized group (even if she as an individual does not experience real marginalization) provides her the empathy and access to carry and convey the Indians to a power that will ultimately sympathize with them. In a sense, C.J., because she is a woman, is one of the very few in power who can shoulder this.

Minorities and women are not the only forgotten people the Bartlet White House has dedicated itself to bringing into its vision of America. Veterans of the armed forces receive recognition for the marginalized place many of them occupy in today's society. In the first season Christmas show, "In Excelsis Deo", Communications Director Toby Ziegler receives a call from the D.C. police asking him to come identify the body of a homeless man; he discovers that he received the call because the police found his business card in the man's coat pocket, a coat Toby had donated to charity. Toby recognizes that the man as a Korean War veteran, but since he's homeless, his body gets little attention or respect. Toby feels connected to the man because of the coat and because he served in Korea himself (in the '70s or '80s, we are led to believe). He begins to make arrangements and discovers that the bureaucratic obstacles are significant. Using his power to cut through the barriers, he arranges for a full-honors military funeral at Arlington cemetery. The President is not happy:

TOBY: He went and fought a war 'cause that's what he was asked to do. Our veterans are treated badly. And that's something history'll never forgive us for.

BARTLET: (pause) Toby, if we start pulling strings like this, don't you think every homeless veteran's gonna come out of the woodwork?

TOBY: I can only hope, sir.

While a boys' choir sings "The Little Drummer Boy" as part of the White House's Christmas festivities, the episode comes to its conclusion and climax simultaneously.

The montage is jam-packed with gloriously patriotic brief shots (the visual equivalent of the verbal snippet) of the veteran's interment at Arlington National Cemetery. The young voices sing in harmony back at the White House, serving as a reminder of a similarly orchestrated effort of young manhood during wartime. Director Alex Graves intercuts the precision honor guard reverently folding an American flag with a shot of the West Wing staff falling into line formation to listen to the carolers. The intercutting makes the formal point that both groups are soldiers serving the same higher good: the nation.²³

Judith Shklar, in a series of essays considering the qualifications and implications of certain institutions for the idea of citizenship (especially the franchise and the right to labor),

²³ Smith 2003, p. 134.

notes that there has been a powerful connection in American thought between military service and full “citizenship.” Those who fight for the country should have the full exercise of the franchise and opportunity to labor – the willingness to make ultimate sacrifice by the person requires concordant willingness by the nation.²⁴ Certainly this point has been recognized throughout American socio-political history, from the demands for enfranchisement by black soldiers of the Civil War to the criticisms raised by World War II Japanese-American soldiers whose families were interred in concentration camps in the United States.

The West Wing makes the further point that duty to veterans, like to other forgotten American groups, extends beyond simply assuring them voting rights or other of the most basic political rights. Responsible action with regard to veterans means that *the nation must take care of them*. This is not to say that paternalism must be involved; duty in this case recognizes that although the veterans of American wars have little more claim to political or social rights than the rest of the country’s groups, veterans’ special willingness to sacrifice requires fuller attention to making sure that they are not left behind in the pursuit of their lives in America than the government might give to the “average citizen.” It is hard to square this notion with the generally egalitarian impulses of Sorkin and his characters, and one wonders what may lie beneath the surface of this contradiction. Smith argues that an episode like this provides the people of *The West Wing* the opportunity to reclaim patriotism as a value not just of the right but of the left and all Americans.²⁵ Whatever the case may be, the point about duty remains broadly the same: the government and the dutiful American must remember and assist those Americans who have been “left behind” or who cannot help themselves.

²⁴ Shklar 1991, pp. 13-23 *passim*.

²⁵ Smith 2003.

Power and Duty

Americans have been of at least two minds, so far as the pursuit and use of power are concerned. On the one hand, we distrust those who seek after power, and our political ideology reflects a continuing project to limit power's accrual and (ab)use (for the fear seems to be that the use of power will lead almost inevitably to its abuse). On the other, we acknowledge that going after power and the rewards that it can bring have played and do play a fundamental role in the construction and maintenance of our political life and that we could not really exist as a polity without the desire by at least some of our members for having and holding power.

Until now, a reading of this paper may have left the impression that the characters portrayed in *The West Wing* pursue careers of near-pure altruism. In other words, they perform careers of public service entirely from their senses of duty. Although Aaron Sorkin has indicated that show is a "valentine to public service," hagiography hardly seems to be the point. Whether or not the cast and crew of the show consciously appreciate it, this weekly drama portrays the delicate dance of pursuing duty and power in the American presidency.

Power and duty highly intertwine in the American political context, and it is the combination of power with duty that allows power to exist in an American context of distrust for power. Duty cannot be fulfilled without some measure of power, for power gives the obligation of duty its sinews and strength. Similarly, duty should temper power, providing limits on its exercise, serving as the stopgap to prevent power from fulfilling the old prophecy and corrupting. In short and as we shall see, *The West Wing* supports this line of argument, showing by example how various configurations of duty and power can either edify the American Republic or provide a glimpse of the seeds of its destruction.

Can political Americans pursue power?

A distrust of power's use shoots through the political landscape – our ideology, from the *Federalist Papers* and the Constitution to our contemporary debates about the appropriate size and role of the government, shows it; and our institutions – federalism, separated powers, checks and balances, even our written constitution – reflect a continuing attempt to limit power's accrual and (ab)use.

Alexis de Tocqueville noted that democratic people, like Americans, resent the use of power by one person over another.

Let us suppose that all the citizens take a part in the government and that each of them has an equal right to do so. Then no man is different from his fellows, and nobody can wield tyrannical power; men will be perfectly free because they are entirely equal, and they will be perfectly equal because they are entirely free. Democratic people are tending toward that ideal.²⁶

For Tocqueville, the desire to prevent another from gaining power over oneself manifested in a drive for equality, a drive so strong as to be called “ardent, insatiable, eternal, and invincible.”²⁷

Americans have built their institutions, especially the federal government, in such a way as to reflect their ideological distrust of power. The Constitution's provisions for federalism, separated powers, checks and balances, and the very fact that the constitution was a written one all belie a distrust of power and especially power's concentration. In introductory classes on American politics, it is almost a cliché to explain to students that the Founders' goal in establishing the Constitutional system was neither efficiency nor ease of action. For the Founding generation, the distrust was rooted in their particular conception of human nature: men grasped after personal advantage and selfish gain, and the goal of government was to turn native human impulses toward the management of collective affairs and to blunt men's worst impulses. As James Madison famously remarked in *Federalist No. 51*:

²⁶ Tocqueville 1969, p. 503.

²⁷ Tocqueville 1969, p. 506.

“Ambition must be made to counteract ambition. The interest of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place. It may be a reflection on human nature, that such devices should be necessary to controul the abuses of government.... If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither internal nor external controuls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: You must first enable the government to controul the governed; and in the next place, oblige it to control itself.²⁸

The overall gist of Hamilton, Madison, and Jay’s argument was that although the new government would have larger powers than the Articles of Confederation government, these powers were the absolute minimum necessary for effective governance and were filled with plenty of provision to prevent their usurpation or abuse.

Even more saliently, Tocqueville noted that Americans fundamentally distrusted people who pursue power because it seemed an assault upon the equality they valued more highly than almost anything else. For Americans, those who seek power set themselves up over their equals in a democratic society, and the power seekers’ perceived attempt at inequality rankles their fellow citizens.²⁹ Not only that, but Tocqueville warned that overwhelming ambition threatened democratic citizens:

In democratic countries [ambition’s] field of action is usually very narrow, but once these narrow bounds are passed, there is nothing left to stop it.... As a result, when ambitious men have seized power, they think they can dare to do anything. When power slips from their grasp, their thoughts at once turn to overthrowing the state in order to get it again.³⁰

Duty Through Power, Power Through Duty

The pursuit of power intrigues and attracts Americans no less than any other peoples. Even our greatest, most dutiful leaders have admitted that power pulls on them, but they have been fairly reticent to admit such in public. As Abraham Lincoln scholar Michael Johnson noted, “The excitement [about being suggested as a possible nominee in the 1860 presidential

²⁸ Hamilton et al. 1982, p. 263.

²⁹ Tocqueville 1969, p. 671-73.

³⁰ Tocqueville 1969, p. 631.

contest] caused Lincoln to confess to a Republican friend who asked if he intended to compete for the nomination, ‘I will be entirely frank. The taste is in my mouth a little.’”³¹ Even when confronted with a general who publicly questioned his leadership, Lincoln was loath to back away from his idea that pursuing power was by necessity a negative quality. In an 1863 letter to Joseph Hooker appointing him the General of the Army of the Potomac, Lincoln wrote,

You have confidence in yourself, which is a valuable, if not indispensable quality. You are ambitious, which, within reasonable bounds, does good rather than harm.... I have heard, in such a way as to believe it, of your recently saying that both the Army and Government needed a Dictator. Of course it was not *for* this, but in spite of it, that I have given you the command. Only those generals who gain successes, can set up dictators. What I now ask of you is military success, and I will risk the dictatorship....³²

Lincoln knew that men (and later, women) find power attractive, and the combination of the pursuit of power along with duty (i.e., wanting to gain power while concurrently wanting to do one’s duty to the country) did not cheapen the fulfillment of duty, as long as duty remains one of the primary motivations of political actors.

The West Wing argues throughout its five seasons that power and duty must be firmly tied to one another and that power must be subordinate to duty. Without duty to guide power, to give sinews and skeleton to power’s muscles, power becomes dangerous, in the way that Tocqueville notes above. Supported by a frame of duty, however, power mobilizes duty and makes its desires attainable. *The West Wing*’s concept of appropriate American power relies upon duty driving the uses of power, either the seeking of it or the abdication of it.

Most often, it is through stories of partisan conflict that *The West Wing* addresses duty and power in combination. Two sets of stories about elections – Bartlet’s two campaigns for the presidency – and the fourth and fifth season storyline about the President’s temporary abdication of office under the 25th Amendment offer some clear insights into how Sorkin and the rest of *The West Wing*’s cast and crew conceptualize the appropriate use of power in American politics.

³¹ Johnson 2001, p.82.

³² Johnson 2001, p.232.

In the two-part episode “In the Shadow of Two Gunmen,” the flashback motif mentioned above serves as the device to examine the interplay of duty and power in a contentious election. The election device allows the show’s creative minds to present the characters as they appear under contest pressure; we see the characters’ mettle when tested, and the contention of the electoral process acts as a refiner’s fire, separating the pure from the impure (or the dutiful from the undutiful, in this case).

In particularly telling flashback, we see Senator John Hoynes (the future Vice President) arguing with Josh Lyman, his aide at the time, about Social Security. Hoynes is the presumptive Democratic nominee, and he wants to avoid talking about Social Security in the New Hampshire primary because “Social Security is the black hole of American politics.... It is the third rail. You step on it and you die.”³³ After Josh and Hoynes conclude this public argument, Hoynes has a private conversation with Josh in the hall

HOYNES: You don’t seem to be having a very good time lately.

JOSH: I don’t think the point of this is for me to have –

HOYNES: I’m saying you’ve been pissed off at every meeting for a month.

JOSH: Senator, you’re the presumptive favorite to be the Democratic Party’s nominee for President. You have \$58 million in a war chest with no end in sight, and I don’t know what we’re for.

HOYNES: Josh—

JOSH: I don’t know what we’re for, I don’t know what we’re against. Except we seem to be for winning and against somebody else winning.

HOYNES: It’s a start.

JOSH: Senator—

HOYNES: Josh, we’re gonna run a good campaign. You’re gonna be proud of it. And when we get to the White House, you’re gonna play a big role. In the meantime, cheer up. And get off my ass about Social Security.³⁴

³³ Sorkin 2002, p.173-74.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 175-76.

As we know, Josh will eventually leave his work for Hoynes to join the Bartlet campaign, where it is clear what everyone *is* for.

And Hoynes will lose the nomination to the plucky Bartlet campaign, forcing Hoynes to accept the Vice Presidential nomination in the knowledge that he must occupy the Republic's potentially most boring job if he is to ever have a shot at the top. In the world of *The West Wing*, Hoynes' loss seems to occur for two reasons, and neither of them has much to do with the strategy we see Bartlet's staff devising later in the episode. First, in a mechanical and ideological sense, Bartlet will win because his liberal populism will resonate with voters and because they'll sense his honesty, compassion, and forthrightness, and they will reward this man who plays politics as if it actually matters rather than as a game of business as usual. (We see these qualities later in the same episode, as Bartlet explains to a dairy farmer why the candidate voted to cut milk subsidies: "I voted against that bill 'cause I didn't want to make it harder for people to buy milk. I stopped some money from flowing into your pocket. If that angers you, if you resent me, I completely respect that. But if you expect anything different from the President of the United States, you should vote for someone else."³⁵) True virtuous duty, in the form of Bartlet, will be present in this set of primaries, and since the American voter often complains (on television drama and in real life) of being fed up with insincere politicians, the voters will reward that virtue when it appears.

Second, the metaphysics of *The West Wing* demands that the reward take place. Since, as I have argued, *The West Wing* is a drama about duty, its moral universe rewards duty, giving it a chance to operate, to make successes and mistakes, and to offer an example of what an American politics of duty *could* be. None of these can happen without a grant of power. Thus, the dutiful American politician, who operates according to the virtue as outlined above, *must* be granted

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.210.

power so that we viewers can see duty in action. Such a moral universe is almost Olympian or Calvinist, in the sense that the larger forces “out there” reward those who share their ideals and values. Some set of gods or larger metaphysical powers ensures that duty receives power as a reward, for without power duty is an impracticable virtue. We viewers recognize that these are not gods in the sense of some set of real forces or entities that have material and spiritual effects in people and societies. These gods are actually the forces of narrative convention, stories following certain patterns, letting us know that we will not have to worry at the end of the day because everything has to work out all right, so that we can have further episodes and seasons. In the story world of *The West Wing*, this effect operates as if deities of duty punish the selfish and reward the dutiful, doling out power and political patronage to the Bartletistas and denying it to those who desire it most of all and above all.

To be sure, the staffers of *The West Wing* and the President seek after power, but their power is attained through following one’s duty. Duty, thus, become both means and end for power – means in the sense that the show’s cosmology rewards the dutiful with power and denies the greatest prize to those who are not fully given over to duty, and end in the sense that power allows the characters to do their duty. In other words, doing one’s duty allows one to attain power, and power used allows one to complete one’s duty.

It is less this circular logic that offends the philosopher and more that the quality lauded as a supreme virtue (duty) and an end after which Americans should seek has also been made into a means. The larger metaphysical forces on *The West Wing* reward the dutiful Bartlet and his staff over and over again. Whenever they forget that the pursuit of power must not be done for its own sake but to serve the good of the whole nation, they encounter frustration and difficulty in achieving their day-to-day and long-term goals. Several examples make this point clearer.

In season four of the series, the Bartlet administration embarks upon its campaign to retain the White House in the face of a Republican competitor widely portrayed as an intellectual lightweight, who seems to want to be President for no discernibly thought-out reasons. This Florida Republican presents a campaign based upon the repetition of palliative sound bites and catch phrases without elaboration of any substance behind them.³⁶ Throughout the several episodes devoted to the campaign (and the concurrent running of the country), the staff struggles to understand how to present Bartlet not as the know-it-all, smartest (and thus most resented) kid in the class, but as the only one of the two candidates able to deal with the challenges of the presidency. As Toby notes in the episode “20 Hours in America,” “If our job teaches us anything, it's that we don't know what the next President's going to face.... If we choose someone to inspire us, then we'll be able to face what comes our way.... Instead of telling people who's the most qualified, instead of telling people who's got the better ideas, let's make it obvious. (pause) It's going to be hard.”³⁷

The continuing struggle to act in integrity with oneself and one's duty – to be the presidential candidate who won't insult the voters by assuming they neither can nor want to hear the complexities of policy – returns over and over in the episodes devoted to Bartlet's re-election. In “Game On,” the President and his staff struggle with how they can present the complexity, depth, and nuance of the political and policy decisions that the president must make every day. The morning of the final presidential debate, the staff is still trying to come up with “ten words” for several vital issues – sound bites for each of the major issues that he might be asked about in the debate. When the time of the debate comes, the President runs with it from the first minute, challenging the simplicity and simple-mindedness of his competitor's canned

³⁶ The parallels between the campaigns of Bartlet's competitor and the George W. Bush campaign of 2000 are not subtle, and they do not seem to be designed to be such.

³⁷ Warne 2003, accessed 28 October 2003.

responses. Finally, when one moderator asks the challenger about a plan to cut taxes, even in the face of information suggesting that such will damage the economy, Governor Ritchie responds with another pre-digested bit of policy.

RITCHIE: We need to cut taxes for one reason. The American people know how to spend their money better than the federal government.

BARTLET: (*calmly*) There it is.

(*Intercut of a reporter watching on a video monitor and asking, "What the hell?" C.J. Cregg, the press secretary, says almost to no one in particular, "He's got it."*)

BARTLET: (*continuing*) That's the ten-word answer that my staff's been looking for for two weeks. There it is. Ten word answers can kill you in political campaigns. They're the tip of the sword. Here's my question [back to Ritchie]. What are the next ten words of your answer? Your taxes are too high? So are mine. Gimme the next ten words. *How* are we gonna do it? Gimme ten after that, I'll drop out of the race right now.³⁸

Every once in a while, every once in a while, there's a day with an absolute right and an absolute wrong, but those days usually involve body counts. Other than that, there aren't too many un-nuanced moments in leading a country. That's way too big for ten words.

I'm the President of the United States, not the President of the people who agree with me. And by the way, if the Left has a problem with that, they should vote for somebody else.

C.J. then takes the gloves off in her "spin room" offstage; there's no reason to force experts who can elaborate administration positions to keep it simple in the name of winning. "The President just reminded us that complexity isn't a vice." In the next episode, where the actual election takes place, President Bartlet ends up winning by a very comfortable margin of several percentage points.

Again, *The West Wing* emphasizes the dual, intertwined nature of duty and power. President Bartlet's duty to his constituents appears to be to remind them that politics is a complex, difficult undertaking and that the promise of programs and agendas that seem too good

³⁸ At this point, we see intercut shots of the challenger, played by James Brolin, looking alternately befuddled and enticed by the possibility that the President might somehow drop out.

to be true are probably exactly that – too good to be true.³⁹ Duty in this situation requires that Bartlet be honestly who he is, put the voters’ right to know that politics and government require hard work with the expectation that not much will come out of it, and that he will work for the good⁴⁰ of *all* the people. And when Bartlet, in this most public forum, commits himself to doing his best for all, not just for reelection, not just for political vindication, not just to prove that smart should beat simplistic, he receives his reward. The narratological gods of *The West Wing*’s world make sure he wins election, in spite of his perceived arrogance, in spite of his covering up a significant and possibly serious health condition, and in spite of any past sins.

When power is put before duty

What happens when power’s pursuit or retention comes between the characters and their duties? What occurs when the White House forgets to place the good of the whole nation above that to self, friends, family, or party? In brief, chastisement of some sort occurs, and the people involved are called back to the pursuit of duty, with the pursuit of power no longer serving as end but as means. Placing power ahead of duty results in a disequilibrium in *The West Wing*’s universe, and the show’s politics (both inside and outside the story line) move to correct the imbalance.

In the opening of the fifth season of the series,⁴¹ President Bartlet, due to the kidnapping of his daughter and his realization that he is unable to make rational, thoughtful decisions, decides to avail himself of the 25th Amendment’s provision that allows the President to

³⁹ The show itself also seems to enter into a call to the viewers and thus the American people (which may be largely synonymous in the creators’ minds) to stop settling for a politics of the simple and the selfish and demand more of themselves and their leaders. Even if voters seem to reward those politicians who appeal to the lowest common denominator, *TWW* production staff and crew imply with these episodes about the Bartlet reelection that the American people have a duty to ask more not just of their politicians but also of themselves.

⁴⁰ As he sees it, of course. *TWW* never seems to consider the possibility that Bartlet and his staff may not be *able* to see the good of all, because of some blinder of partisanship, temporality, or other consideration.

⁴¹ This story line involved two episodes, “7A WF 83429” and “The Dogs of War,” and I treat them as one.

temporarily step aside.⁴² As a result of the Vice President's recent resignation, the Speaker of the House – the leader of the Republican opposition – takes over as Acting President. The staff takes this as a particularly hard state of affairs, but Deputy Chief of Staff Josh Lyman takes the new reality even more threateningly than most.

As Deputy COS, Josh has the job of playing the hardball side of politics more than most of the characters (although they all play the political game, Josh plays the hardest version of it). It's he who most often must hammer recalcitrant, balking Democrats into line and peel off weak Republicans with threats and bribes. Josh does not lack a moral center, but his role requires him to always regard and use the political ramifications of every situation in pursuit of the President's agenda. For Josh, his duty to the country often becomes tangled and confused with his duty and loyalty to his party and to Bartlet.

Josh immediately considers the political aspects of this radical change. One staff member says, "The President has handed over power to his political enemy. It's a fairly stunning act of patriotism...." Josh worries that the President looks weak to the nation: "It's gonna say we're not handling [the crisis]. We're gonna lose the [next] election." Josh decides that the President's temporary abdication of his powers is a mistake and that the Bartlet administration needs to find out how the crisis is playing to the public.

Leo McGarry, the chief of staff, appears to have no such hesitations. In a meeting with senior Democratic leaders who accuse him of failing to consult them, of putting his friendship with the President ahead of the good of the country, and of elevating the opposition, Leo responds. "I didn't elevate them – the Presidential Succession Act of 1947 did. And I'm not

⁴² Section Three of the Amendment reads, "Whenever the President transmits to the President pro tempore of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives his written declaration that he is unable to discharge the powers and duties of his office, and until he transmits to them a written declaration to the contrary, such powers and duties shall be discharged by the Vice President as Acting President."

prepared to think about politics while we are under terrorist attack. The Republic comes first.” After the meeting, in a private conversation with Leo, Josh pushes him to think about the politics, even suggesting that the White House do polling on the crisis. Leo emphatically refuses.

Josh becomes more and more convinced that the Republicans are planning some form of political *coup d'état*, using the presidential crisis as an excuse to carry out their “radical right” agenda, to “start legislating with their guy in the Oval” Office, and to get everything they want. Josh confronts the Acting President’s chief aide in the bathroom.

JOSH: You're campaigning in the middle of a national tragedy!

STEVE ATWOOD: You don't get it, do you? The Republicans are in awe of Bartlet. He recused himself in the only way he could. In the way envisioned by the Constitution. The whole notion of the 25th Amendment is that the institution matters more than the man. Bartlet's decision was even more self-sacrificing because he willingly gave power to his opposition.

JOSH: The institution may matter more, but it's your guy protecting it, not ours.

ATWOOD: A truly self-sacrificing act usually involves some sacrifice.

JOSH: So, now you're going to nail us to the cross.

ATWOOD: No. You beat the terrorists at their own game. We're not stupid, Josh. We try to use this to our advantage, it will blow up in our faces. We'd seem callous and unfeeling. In contrast to Bartlet's extraordinary gesture of courage and patriotism. (pause) And anyone who thinks otherwise has a particularly craven way of looking at politics.

Atwood leaves the scene, and Josh looks particularly chastened. For the rest of the episode, Josh’s paranoia and suspicion are considerably lowered, and after President Bartlet’s daughter is found and the Acting President leaves office, Josh and Atwood are even able to share a (relatively) genial farewell.

It is “the enemy” who must remind Josh to what he owes allegiance. The above indicates that duty is recognized by opposites in *The West Wing*’s universe, and those most committed to their duty know that power must be brought in line with the service of duty. When power

overwhelms duty and escapes its control, all dutiful men and women must bring the violator back into the fold. Atwood reminds Josh that the Republicans, enemies of the Bartlet administration that they might be, are doing what the good of the nation requires of all people. They won't take partisan advantage of the situation. Even if they wanted to, there exists a check upon such behavior: "...It would blow up in our faces." The media, other politicians, and presumably the citizenry would punish the Republicans for their temerity, by doing that which will most control a democratic politician – denying victory at the ballot box.

Furthermore, the understanding that "it would blow up in our faces" serves as a reminder to Josh that there also exist checks upon his behavior, his pursuit of power, his amnesia about the dictates and requirements that duty imposes. The episode does not draw out the consequences explicitly, but we can surmise what might happen if Josh followed through on his plan to leak the information that the GOP leadership meets regularly in the White House and plans to foment its own agenda under cover of national crisis. Quite likely, Josh's leaks would have the intended effect. However, the leaks might also paint Josh as a partisan infighter, willing to use national emergency to disable and crush Republicans, resulting in press, political, and public disapprobation for the Democratic party. In wounding his enemy, Josh may wound his allies as badly, leaving the national political mood much worse with no real or apparent gain.

Power must be treated carefully, we learn. Power and its pursuit are morally neutral forces in human life; moral color comes depending upon whether one uses power as means or end. *The West Wing* appeals to viewers because it depicts the insides of the halls of power, but the show argues that power's animating force must not be itself, or it will turn in upon itself, cancerously eating away the body politic. No, duty must attenuate and animate power, checking power while simultaneously making it greater through putting it in service to others.

Conclusion

The West Wing does not create new political theory, nor does it attempt to do such. As entertainers, the creative team of the show has indicated that education is not one of its real functions.⁴³ The drama does, however, engage with some of the classic questions of the American ideology of governance, and it poses these questions in a fairly unique way – by positing that American leaders have a discernable call to duty and that they can best serve the problems and challenges of the Republic with reference to the demands of duty. This emphasis on duty provides perhaps the most distinctive aspect of *The West Wing*'s project and the one of most interest to those who study politics and political theory. For in framing the solution to the challenges of American common life in terms of duty, subsuming the pursuit of power to something more ennobling, *The West Wing*'s creative team suggest a way out of our perceived miasma of partisanship and posturing. Plenty of work in this regard that may still be done – work that a television program does not (and perhaps cannot) do. We must critically consider the further development of our understanding of duty, the specific goals that duty might pursue, and the ways that this political value might sustain democratic republican institutions. Only then will the opportunity come to make virtue from vice.

⁴³ Sorkin 2000, (http://www.pbs.org/newshour/media/west_wing/sorkin.html) accessed 22 May 2003

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