

## Screening Terror on *The West Wing*

### Introduction

As Laura Shepherd has reflected, *The West Wing* may appear a somewhat ‘esoteric choice of analytical vehicle’ (2009:1), but there are very good reasons for taking this groundbreaking television show seriously; not only for its contributions in the realm of popular culture, but also for its contributions in the ‘real world’ of American politics and public opinion. Messages in fiction matter in real and political ways, and *The West Wing* was particularly well suited to impacting real life politics (Gans-Boriskin and Tisinger 2005:100; Holland 2011). Because of this, *The West Wing* has already undergone academic analysis and dissection for its contribution to debates on gender (Shepherd 2009) and race (Wodak 2002), as well as foreign policy, terrorism and war (Gans-Boriskin and Tisinger 2005; Holland 2011). This chapter analyses the role *The West Wing* has played in screening terror, before, during and after the tumultuous moment that followed the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001.

This role should be taken seriously for a number of reasons (see e.g. Weber 2006; Weldes 2003). High viewing figures and a devoted audience, as well as the show’s tendency to confront topical issues head-on, made *The West Wing* an important medium of communicating terrorism to the American people as they were confronted with the shock of 9/11. This shock contributed to an immediate post 9/11 period characterised by the difficulty of making sense of events that seemingly fell beyond the expectations of normal life and were briefly resistant to attempts at their articulation. Yet, only three weeks after ‘9/11’ on October 3<sup>rd</sup> 2001, over twenty-eight million Americans tuned in to view a special one-off episode of *The West Wing* that stood alone, outside of ongoing storylines, in order to address the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> directly.

This chapter situates the special stand-alone episode, ‘Isaac and Ishmael’, within the broader context of the emerging ‘War on Terror’, arguing that the show played an important role in communicating terrorism for the American public and in narrowing the space for debate in the wake of 9/11. To make this argument, the episode is analysed through a discourse analysis as part of the evolving approach to the screening of terror adopted in *The West Wing*. It is argued that *The West Wing*’s approach to screening terror responded to the context of the moment before during and after the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. This response equated to a worrying reinforcement of dominant discourses. To demonstrate this reinforcement and its impact, the chapter is organised in three sections. First, the changing context of terror and American politics, in which *The West Wing* aired and evolved, is set out. Second, the chapter pivots around the date of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 to examine the portrayal of terrorism in *The West Wing* before, during and after the tumultuous moment of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. And third, the chapter reflects on the narrowing of debates performed by screenings of terror in *The West Wing* through a consideration of the role of television in the production of political (im)possibility.

## **The Context of Terror: Before, During and After 9/11**

First airing on American television in 1999, following the Lewinski Scandal and subsequent impeachment of the forty-third president, *The West Wing* offered an alternative and arguably more idealistic portrayal of American politics. However, the show frequently and notably took its cues from real life, including the foreign policy of the Clinton Administration. While Clinton's presidency is not primarily remembered for foreign policy, the Clinton Administration did inevitably engage with foreign policy issues and was forced to respond to several instances of international terrorism that would later be read as early warning signs of the threat posed by Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. The result of these responses, combined with Clinton's focus on domestic issues, was that Clinton's foreign policy was left to appear ad hoc and reactive.

As Republican nominee for the presidency, George W. Bush lamented Clinton's perceived lack of strategic vision: '[America's] temptation is drift – for our nation to move from crisis to crisis like a cork in a current. Unless a president sets his own priorities, his priorities will be set by others – by adversaries, or the crisis of the moment, live on CNN. American policy can become random and reactive – untethered to the interests of our country' (1999). Bush's criticism addressed Clinton's foreign policy in Kosovo, as well as his response to the 1998 US Embassy Bombings in Tanzania and Kenya. Linked to the terrorist group Egyptian Islamic Jihad, the bombings of American embassies in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi killed over two hundred people. Two weeks later, President Clinton launched Operation Infinite Reach, a series of missile strikes against terrorist training camps in Afghanistan, as well as a pharmaceutical factory in Sudan, believed (incorrectly) to be producing nerve gas. In total, due to the camps being almost completely empty, the strikes likely killed between six and thirty-five people; a relatively modest number. While opinion was divided, the strikes were generally supported in the western world as a proportional and legitimate response to the bombing of US embassies, targeted against specific terrorist sites. It was in the context of debates on the acceptability and appropriateness of responses to terror that *The West Wing* made its first foray into foreign policy debates in 1999. Ultimately, it was a context in which *The West Wing* would reaffirm prevalent understandings of the need for restraint and proportionality in foreign policy.

One year later, following the 2000 bombing of the American Navy Destroyer the USS Cole, the Clinton and Bush Administrations opted not to take military action in response. Despite evidence linking Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden to the attack, Bush was adamant that he did not wish to waste American resources on insignificant enemies. He told Condoleezza Rice that he 'was tired of swatting flies' (Bush, cited by Rice in NCTAUS 2004). The desire not to 'respond to Al Qaeda one attack at a time' fitted with Bush's broader disdain for reactive foreign policy, ill informed by a broader strategy to combat the terrorist threat. However, less than a year later and only eight months after taking office, the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 would shatter the status quo, force a response and accelerate efforts to develop a grand strategy for confronting terrorism.

The events of September 11<sup>th</sup> were seen by most watching Americans to instantly and unquestionably herald a moment of temporal rupture (Holland 2009). Bush articulated this

rupture as ‘the day the world changed’ and ‘night fell on a different world’ (Bush 2001). However, beyond rupture, it was not clear to many viewers why and by whom the United States was attacked, nor how America should respond. To understand this confusion, it is necessary to re-locate the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> within the specific American context in which they occurred.

Conditioned by the truths of American security culture, US citizens did not expect or foresee large-scale, illegitimate violence taking place on American soil (e.g. Gaddis 2004). Coming as it did at the end of the 1990s further increased the perceived unlikelihood of such an attack. The decade of ‘New World Order’ that had followed the end of the Cold War was proclaimed to be America’s ‘unipolar moment’, in which the United States was now the ‘indispensable nation’ (e.g. Krauthammer 1990). September 11<sup>th</sup> was shocking precisely because Americans were unconditioned to viewing ‘foreign’ violence on home soil and it came at that moment the United States was seen to be at the zenith of its power. Correspondingly, spontaneous reactions from ordinary Americans frequently noted that they assumed the events were either news from some other country or from some previous time. Such reactions make sense when it is recalled that, for many Americans, 9/11 was seen to contradict triumphalist claims that history had ended with America’s ascension to sole superpower status (see Fukuyama 1992).

As events appeared to contradict these deeply ingrained beliefs of US security culture, ordinary Americans struggled to make sense of the unfolding events on September 11<sup>th</sup>. This disproving was compounded by the lack of authorised voices that came forward to explain the situation to a bewildered public. As I have argued elsewhere, the *wrong* (the disproving of perceived security truths) and the *lack* (the failure to narrate) were the twin arms of the void that held Americans in a stunned, silent embrace (Holland 2009; Holland 2011). On September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, language failed. Politicians, practitioners and media commentators initially struggled to place frameworks of intelligibility over the events. At first, the events were literally ‘unspeakable’ as the United States lacked an appropriate vocabulary to describe what they were seeing (Kleinfeld 2003; Steinert 2003). Unlike, for example, British, Spanish or Sri Lankan experiences, Americans lacked a language to describe and regulate the meaning of terrorism at home.

The lack of an appropriate language to make sense of 9/11 meant that cues were frequently taken from unofficial sources and ‘lower’ levels of cultural life. In contrast to the more commonplace intersubjective understandings that are produced through discursive regularities, religion and films were frequently drawn upon as American attempts to comprehend 9/11 initially took place at the level of the individual, often with recourse to popular culture. The resulting discursive void saw a plethora of competing and fragmentary understandings in place of more commonplace harmonised meaning (Holland 2009; Campbell 2001). In short, the cultural shock of 9/11 was compounded by the emptiness of the space usually occupied by assured ‘official’ voices. It was in this space that *The West Wing* delivered the one-off ‘Isaac and Ishmael’ episode, which would help to fill the uneasy void in meaning that plagued America in the days after September 11<sup>th</sup>.

Filling the void was an important process. The cultural shock experienced on September 11<sup>th</sup> was symptomatic of what Edkins has identified as ‘trauma’ (2002; 2004). Succinctly, having fallen outside of expected and predictable patterns everyday life, 9/11 was a traumatic event that was seen and felt to *demand* a response. The insistence on an exceptional response, outside of usual politics, reflected the reading and experience of 9/11 as an exceptional event. Given the difficulty politicians faced in communicating what had happened for the public, this demand to be communicated and to ‘reply’ generated an acute tension. It was in this tension that Aaron Sorkin wrote, directed and produced ‘Isaac and Ishmael’, outside of *The West Wing* continuity. The episode helped to fill the void in meaning for Americans, teaching them how to think about 9/11. Unfortunately, it did so by reinforcing the dominant narratives of the Bush Administration, further limiting the scope for different interpretations and alternative responses. This complicity in the framing of terror was continued as *The West Wing* returned to its normal and ongoing plotlines.

The ‘War on Terror’ was marked by a number of assumptions about the nature of the terrorist threat after September 11<sup>th</sup>. First, 9/11 was framed as an act of war and moment of transition from peacetime to wartime. This paradigm shift meant that the rule of law was seen to be replaced by the rules of war. Second, 9/11 was framed as heralding fundamentally new and dangerous times, in which the threat to the United States was unprecedented. To combat this unique threat, the Bush Administration advised that the rules of the game had changed and new strategies would be required. Third, 9/11 was framed as being an attack on fundamental American values, such as freedom, a hatred of which motivated the attacks. And fourth, new policies were introduced to combat the terrorist threat. Most notably, the metaphor of harbouring helped the Bush Administration to locate and localise the terror threat, by making no distinction between terrorists and their state sponsors. More broadly, however, sensitivities to local and cultural differences were now seen to be secondary to the need to advance ‘freedom’ abroad in order to defend it at home. It was in this context that *The West Wing*’s approach to foreign policy evolved to meet and match the perceived demands of the ‘War on Terror’. Again, in its approach to screening terror, as well as appropriate responses to it, *The West Wing* served to reconfirm dominant discourses, disseminating them for an American public and ultimately helping to silence dissent.

### **Screening Terror: Before, During and After 9/11**

First airing on NBC in September 1999, *The West Wing* went on to run for seven series. The show drew consistently high audiences, although they declined following Sorkin’s departure at the end of the fourth series. The finale of series two, for example, attracted over twenty million viewers in the United States. And the show was critically acclaimed, winning three Golden Globes and twenty seven Emmy Awards (Shamsie 2001). The show’s plotlines boasted numerous real world parallels, despite the show’s creators being adamant that they were creating a work of fiction. Referred to as ‘The Left Wing’ by the American Right, real world parallels were most evident in respect of the Clinton White House (Rollins and O’Connor 2003:3). Key characters were easily read as counterparts of Clinton Administration officials: Sam Seaborn as George Stephanopoulos; Josh Lyman as Paul Begala; and C.J. Cregg as Dee Dee Myers (Waxman 2000). And the election of George W. Bush did not hinder the show’s tendency to find inspiration in events taking place in the real life West Wing.

Mocked as, naively ‘Capra-esque’, ‘political pornography for liberals’, critics feared the politicised impact of the show (Podhoretz cited in Rollins and O’Connor 2003:4). Accusations included that *The West Wing* had a ‘tacit mission of the revival of lagging liberal spirits’ and that the show was no more than a ‘cultural platform for the revival of liberal politics in America’ (Lehmann cited in Rollins and O’Connor 2003:4). Before 9/11, as the ‘ultimate Hollywood fantasy: the Clinton White House without Clinton’, *The West Wing* broadly supported the president’s foreign policy, albeit with a cautious bipartisanship.

### ***A Proportional Response: Teaching Restraint Before 9/11***

On October 6<sup>th</sup>, 1999, the third episode of *The West Wing* was aired on NBC in the United States. The episode is titled ‘A Proportional Response’ and closely follows debates on the appropriateness of Clinton’s response to the 1998 Embassy Bombings. In *The West Wing*, the principal storyline revolves around the president’s struggle to formulate a proportional response to the shooting down of an American military plane by the Syrian Defence Ministry. The previous episode laid the groundwork for Bartlet’s turmoil, as the final scene closes with the fictional president promising to ‘blow them off the face of the earth with the fury of God’s own thunder’. It is this desire for vengeance through violent retribution that defines President Bartlet’s character for the majority of ‘A Proportional Response’:

Toby:           The President was ... barking at the Secretary of State, he’s scaring the hell out of [Admiral] Fitzwallace, which I didn’t think was possible. He’s snapping at the First Lady. He’s talking about blowing up half of North Africa ...

This desire to strike back does not subside as the episode progresses. Rather, President Bartlet’s frustration levels with those around him slowly increase, as they hinder his desire to strike back immediately and overwhelmingly.

Bartlet:        It’s been 72 hours Leo. That’s more than three days since they blew [it] out of the sky. And I’m tired of waiting dammit! This is candy ass! We are going to draw up a response scenario today, I’m going to give the order today, we’re going to strike back today ... Americans were on that plane.

The president’s desire to strike back as a deterrent to taking the lives of other Americans manifests itself clearly as the episode moves to the Situation Room where his Joint Chief of Staff, Admiral Fitzwallace, outlines ‘three retaliatory strike options’ that ‘meet the obligations of proportional response’.

Fitzwallace:   All three scenarios are comprehensive, meet the obligations of proportional response and pose minimal threat to U.S. personal and assets. To turn our attention to scenario one, or Pericles One, to use its code name...

Bartlet:        What is the virtue of a proportional response?

Fitzwallace:   I’m sorry.

Bartlet:        What is the virtue of a proportional response? Why is it good? They hit an airplane, so we hit a transmitter, right? That’s a proportional response ... They hit a barracks, so we hit two transmitters?

Fitzwallace: That's roughly it, sir.

*The West Wing* closely aligns itself with debates from the real life White House from the previous year, following Operation Infinite Reach, as Bartlet laments that intelligence has already shown the targets to be empty.

Barlet: But they know we're going to do that, they know we're going to do that. Those areas have been abandoned for four days. We know that from the satellites. We have the intelligence ... They did that, so we did this, it's the cost of doing business, it's been factored in, right? ... Am I right or am I missing something here?

Fitzwallace: No sir, you're right sir.

Bartlet: Then I ask again, what is the virtue of a proportional response?

Fitzwallace: It isn't virtuous, Mr. President. It's all there is, sir.

At this stage, Bartlet's anger and frustration is clearly expressed. When pressed by Admiral Fitzwallace on what other options might exist, the president is clear in outlining the kind of response and indeed retribution he would ideally like to see.

Bartlet: A disproportional response. Let the word ring forth from this time and this place, you kill an American, any American, we don't come back with a proportional response, we come back [bangs fist on table] with total disaster!

General: Are you suggesting we carpet-bomb Damascus?

Bartlet: General, I am suggesting that you and Admiral Fitzwallace and Secretary Hutchinson and the rest of the national security team take the next sixty minutes and put together a U.S. response scenario that doesn't make me think we are just docking somebody's damn allowance!

After Operation Infinite Reach a number of criticisms were launched at the Clinton Administration's response to the US Embassy Bombings. The timing (only twelve days after impeachment), the (lack of) justification, and the targeting (of what turned out to be an innocent pharmaceutical plant and empty training sites) were all problematic. However, the single largest limiting factor in Operation Infinite Reach was the scale of the response. The limited operation failed to deter Al Qaeda or bin Laden, with so few terrorists killed and so little damage inflicted on terrorist infrastructure. Osama bin Laden himself joked that Al Qaeda had lost little other than a few 'camels and chickens' (cited in Temple-Raston 2007:119). In view of such concerns, *The West Wing* outlines what a disproportionate response might entail:

Fitzwallace: Mr. President we put together a scenario by which we attack Hassan airport. Its three main terminals and two runway. In addition to the civilian casualties, which could register in the thousands, the strike would temporally cripple the region's ability to receive medical supplies and bottled water. I think Mr. Cashmen and Secretary Hutchinson would each tell you what I'm sure you already know sir. That this strike would be seen at home and abroad as a staggering overreaction ... without the support of our allies, without a Western Coalition, without Great Britain and Japan and without Congress, you'll have doled out a five thousand dollar punishment for a fifty-buck crime, sir. Mr.

President, the proportional response doesn't empty the options box for the future, the way an all out assault [does].

Signalled to finish, Bartlet interrupts Fitzwallace before slowly and reluctantly accepting that the proportional response, which minimises the risk of civilian casualties and cripples 'both their intelligence network and their surface to air strike capabilities', is the best course of action. The choice is vindication of Clinton's own decision to strike back 'proportionally'. However, Bartlet is given a final opportunity to reflect on his frustrations and ultimate desire to secure a world Americans can live in free from the fear of harm.

Bartlet: Did you know that two thousand years ago a Roman citizen could walk across the face of the known world free of the fear of molestation? He could walk across the earth unharmed, cloaked only in the words 'Civis Romanis': I am a Roman citizen. So great was the retribution of Rome, universally understood as certain, should any harm befall even one of its citizens. Where was [the] protection [of those] on that plane? Where is the retribution for the families and where is the warning to the rest of the world that Americans shall walk this earth unharmed, lest the clenched fist of the most mighty military force in the history of mankind comes crashing down on your house?!

By linking a policy of disproportionate response to Rome, *The West Wing* effectively makes the point that securing total safety and freedom from harm would require the establishment of an American Empire. On this point, Bartlet's Chief of Staff, Leo McGarry, sets the president straight:

Leo: We are behaving the way a superpower ought to behave.

Bartlet: Well our behavior has produced some pretty crappy results. In fact, I'm not a hundred percent sure it hasn't induced them ... I'm talking about two hundred and eight-six American marines in Beirut, I'm talking about Somalia, I'm talking about Nairobi.

Leo: And you think racking up the body count's gonna act as a deterrent?

Bartlet: You're damn right.

Leo: Then you are just as dumb as these guys who think that capital punishment is going to be a deterrent for drug kingpins. As if drug kingpins didn't live their day-to-day lives under the possibility of execution. And their executions are a lot less dainty than ours and tend to take place without the bother and expense of due process. So my friend, if you want to start using American military strength as the arm of the Lord, you can do that, we're the only superpower left. You can conquer the world, like Charlemagne, but you better be prepared to kill everyone and you better start with me cause I will raise up an army against you and I will beat you!

To reinforce the point, the episode closes by admitting that the situation is not ideal, but that it is the best that can be achieved in the circumstances. *The West Wing* teaches its audience that the proportional response, while not virtuous, is correct, appropriate and moreover informed by the lessons of history from the Founding Fathers onwards.

Leo: It's not good, there is no good. It's what there is. It's how you behave if you're the most powerful nation in the world. It's proportional, it's reasonable, it's responsible, it's merciful. It's not nothing; four high rated military targets.

Bartlet: Which they'll rebuild again in six months.

Leo: So we'll blow 'em up again in six months! We're getting really good at it ... It's what our fathers taught us.

In its early stages, *The West Wing* set out a strong liberal position that frequently supported the policies of the Clinton Administration. On foreign policy, there was a recognition by the cast that a bipartisan dialogue was required, where liberal and conservative views on the need for a proportional response could come together. Actor Martin Sheen, who plays the fictional president, was often troubled that his character 'is often a vengeful president when it comes to the Arab world ... I'm always fighting for diplomacy rather than military intervention. This is a constant debate we have on the show. But we do have to satisfy the other side sometimes, give a voice to the right' (Dunphy 2000). This desire for a *cautious* balance to be found at the intersection of liberal and conservative responses to terrorism would be rapidly abandoned after the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. Instead, *The West Wing* would teach Americans that proportionality belonged to a now ended era. First, however, the show had to explain the nature of this new era, characterised by an unprecedented terror threat, to the American public.

### ***The Klan, Gone Medieval and Global: Teaching 9/11***

In 2001, three weeks after the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, *The West Wing* aired the first episode of its third series in the United States. Attempting to confront the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> head on, the episode did not follow ongoing plotlines. This decision ensured that *The West Wing* helped to construct 9/11 as an exceptional event and a temporal rupture, by responding with its own exceptional episode and temporal rupture. '[S]crambling to meet a virtually unprecedented production schedule' and 'formidable logistical challenge', the speed of this televisual 'response' ensured that *The West Wing* 'was the first TV show to address the events and aftermath of 9/11' (Lowry 2001; Sorkin 2001; Kel 2001).

From the start, the 'Isaac and Ishmael' episode made viewers aware of its exceptional status and location outside of usual storylines. Addressing the audience as himself, not his character, Bradley Whitford informed Americans that the episode was 'a story-telling aberration'. However, it was far more than that. The episode was a lesson in terrorism for an American public that had struggled to make sense of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> in the three weeks after the twin towers fell. Moreover, the episode was screened only four days before Operation Enduring Freedom would commence and intervention in Afghanistan would begin. It is in this important context that 'Isaac and Ishmael' adopted an explicitly pedagogical theme to teach Americans how to think about terrorism and American responses to it. In both tasks, *The West Wing* would aid and abet the Bush Administration.

The format for the episode sees a group of school pupils, selected for the 'Presidential Classroom' scheme, stuck in the White House Mess Hall due to a lockdown caused by an unspecified threat. One-by-one join the show's main characters join the group to contribute to a question-and-answer based 'lesson' on terrorism. Affording the time to ask questions, the episode reflected and attempted to confront the confusion that characterised the post 9/11 void in meaning. Framing the episode around knowledgeable but scared and confused children asking questions reflected the voiceless-ness of the post 9/11 void, in which questions such as 'why do they hate us?' were commonplace (Crockatt 2003; Jackson 2005; Silberstein 2002). With the American public symbolised by the pupils, *The West Wing* actively reproduces the void in meaning, helping to fill it in particular and contingent ways. 'Isaac and Ishmael' perpetuates dominant constructions of both 9/11 and the appropriate response to terrorism through the (re)production of a number of dominant tropes that had already begun to define events. The contribution of 'Isaac and Ishmael' to the production of increasingly hegemonic meaning can be understood around the three principal questions the episode asks and answers: Who is attacking us? Why are they attacking us? And how should the United States respond?

#### (i) Who is Attacking us?

Answering the first question, 'who is attacking us?', *The West Wing* offered a series of related answers. Joshua Lyman, the fictional Deputy Chief-of-Staff, delivers the most notable answer:

Josh:                You're juniors and seniors. In honour of the SAT's you're about to take, answer the following question. Islamic... extremist... is to... Islamic... as... "blank" is... to Christianity.

*Josh writes this on the board for the students, before turning around, writing "KKK" and circling it.*

Josh:                That's what we're talking about. It's the Klan, gone medieval and global.

This contextualisation of the unnamed Al Qaeda helped to explain the terrorist network to the population in a way that the Bush Administration had been struggling to achieve (for discussion, see Holland 2011). It contributed to an over-lexicalisation of the enemy under way in official government narratives and picked up on by *The West Wing*:

Toby:                When you think of Afghanistan, think of Poland. When you think of the Taliban, think of the Nazis. When you think of the citizens of Afghanistan, think of the Jews in concentration camps.

Not only are the terrorists akin to a medieval KKK, moreover, as Communications Director Toby Ziegler asserts, when imagining their Taleban protectors Americans should think of Hitler's National Socialists. *The West Wing* teaches Americans that Al Qaeda are the KKK, the Taleban are the Nazis and both want to exterminate America and American freedoms, as they are already doing to ordinary Afghani citizens. Using these commonly understood reference points, 'Isaac and Ishmael' teaches Americans little that the Bush Administration had not already sanctioned for public consumption.

#### (ii) Why are they Attacking us?

On the second question, ‘why are they attacking us?’, ‘Isaac and Ishmael’ joins with the Bush Administration in arguing that terrorists target the United States because of American identity and values.

Girl 1: Why are Islamic Extremists trying to kill us?

Josh: That's a reasonable question if ever I heard one. Why are we targets of war?

Boy 2: Because we're Americans.

Josh: That's it?

Girl 3: Because of our freedom?

Josh: No other reasons?

Boy 3: Freedom and democracy.

Josh: I'll tell you, right or wrong-and I think they're wrong-it's probably a good idea to acknowledge that they do have specific complaints. I hear them every day-the people we support, troops in Saudi Arabia, sanctions against Iraq, support for Egypt. It's not just that they don't like Irving Berlin.

Donna: Yes, it is.

Josh: No, it's not.

Donna: No, not about Irving Berlin, but your ridiculous search for rational reasons why somebody straps a bomb to their chest is ridiculous.

While this remains one of the more critical readings that ‘Isaac and Ishmael’ offers, allowing space for the counter-discourse, the show ultimately concludes that terrorists are motivated purely by hatred. The strategy is repeated later in the episode to represent two competing discourses that emerged in the post 9/11 void: ‘imperial blowback’ and ‘they hate our freedoms’. The conclusion, again, is that while terrorists may have legitimate political grievances, they attack the United States because of American identity, not what the United States has done. This is an important political move as it renders introspection unnecessary and naturalises a militaristic response. Since American identity and values are portrayed as fundamental, timeless and unchanging, terrorist violence motivated by a pure and unyielding hatred of them will not end without the elimination of the threat itself.

### (iii) How Should the United States Respond?

Answering the third question, ‘how should the United States respond?’, *The West Wing* answers in both the terms of a generalised strategic mission and the specific tactical considerations that are required. Firstly, on the mission, since terrorists are motivated to attack the United States by a hatred of fundamental American values, ‘Isaac and Ishmael’ correspondingly teaches Americans that fighting terrorists is always about ensuring freedom.

Toby: Well, what would you say the point of fighting terrorism is?

C.J.: It's to insure freedom, Pokey. I don't need the brochure.

This is a significant framing that reduces the space to oppose official policy and limits opportunities for proposing alternatives. Framed as the defence of freedom, fighting terror abroad becomes a dominant and coercive foreign policy. To challenge this framing is to risk being seen to lack patriotism, as evidenced by a lack of willingness to defend values such as

freedom that are seen to be fundamental to America and American national identity (e.g. Krebs and Jackson 2007; Krebs and Lobasz 2007; Krebs and Lobasz 2009).

Secondly, answering the question of response around the more specific issue of tactics, the cast offer three important and increasingly commonplace tropes. First, Josh re-assures the pupils and the watching public that killing terrorists is acceptable:

Pupil: Do you favor the death penalty?

Josh: No.

Pupil: But you think we should kill these people?

Josh: You don't have the choices in a war that you do in a jury room. But I wish we didn't have to. I think death is too simple.

*The West Wing's* liberal response then regrets having to kill America's enemies, but acknowledges that 9/11 has changed the rules of the game. The rule of law has been replaced with the laws of war, and America must adapt accordingly in order to survive. For Josh, following these acts of war, it is necessary to switch to a 'war paradigm' in order to fight back and protect America. White House Press Secretary, CJ Cregg, delivers an impassioned defence of this position in a discussion on the balance between civil liberties and security:

C.J.: Look, I talk civil liberties as seriously as anybody, okay? I've been to the dinners and we haven't even talked about free speech yet and somebody getting lynched by the patriotism police for voicing a minority opinion. That said, Tobus, we're going to have to do some stuff. We're going to have to tap some phones and we're going to have to partner with some people who are the lesser of evils. I'm sorry but terrorists don't have armies and navies. They don't have capitals. Some of these guys we're going to have to walk up to them and shoot them. Yeah, we can root terrorist nests but some of these guys aren't going to be taken by the 105th armoured tank division. Some of these guys are going to be taken by a busboy with a silencer. So it's time to give the intelligence agencies the money and the manpower they need. We don't hear about their successes. Guess what? The Soviets never crossed the Elbe. The North Koreans stayed behind the 38th parallel. During the Millennium? Not one incident. Do you think that's because the terrorists decided that'd be a good day to take off? Not much action that day?

For CJ, faced with an existential terrorist threat, the liberty-security debate is a 'no brainer'; it is imperative that the United States increases defence spending and provides intelligence officers the widest possible scope to act. Second, CJ goes on to reassure the pupils that the United States need not fight alone. In a new era defined by dangerous enemies, the children are reassured that the United States still has friends and that coalition-building is quintessentially American.

C.J.: There's nothing more American than coalition-building. The first thing John Wayne always did was put together a posse.

Third, reassured that fighting terrorists to defend freedom will be done shoulder-to-shoulder with America's allies, the pupils are told where the US is going to have to take action. Replacing Bush's harbouring metaphor with that of 'incubator', intervention in Afghanistan

is naturalised, by contextualising American foreign policy through widely understood pre-existing conflicts.

Boy 1: Where do terrorists come from?

Josh: Where do they come from?

Sam: Everywhere. Mostly they come from exactly where you'd expect: places of abject poverty and despair. Horribly impoverished places are an incubator for the worst kind of crime.

As Charlie explains, it is no different from the gangs of 'South Central L.A., Detroit, the South Bronx' and 'Southeast D.C.'. By linking the present threat to wars – gang wars, and the war on drugs – that Americans were already familiar with and understood, *The West Wing* emphasised the necessity of fighting and killing terrorists, helping to naturalise an assertive, interventionist American response to 9/11. This was an analogy that resonated with viewers, with one noting that 'while all the characters gave amazing performances, there were a few standouts. Charlie's comparison of terrorist camps and gangs was really well written' (Kickdoor 2010). This resonance, and the feeling that the show was accurately articulating the political moment, would be continued as the emerging 'War on Terror' took shape.

### ***They'll like us when we win: Teaching Interventionism After 9/11***

On January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2002, George W. Bush gave his first State of the Union Address since the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. At this stage, it appeared that major combat operations in Afghanistan were coming to a close, with the Taliban toppled and the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force about to step into the vacuum to stabilise the country. In the same month, Guantanamo had received its first detainees, described as 'illegal, enemy combatants' and the 'worst of a very bad bunch' by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and arguably the most influential Vice-President in American history, Dick Cheney. Bush's speech seized upon the apparent success to open out the logic of the 'War on Terror'. He identified the now infamous 'axis of evil' in the modern world, comprising initially of Iran, Iraq and North Korea. Over the course of the coming year it would be Saddam's Republic upon which attentions would be refocused. This was the context in which the fifty-seventh episode of *The West Wing* would air. Coming thirteen weeks after 'Isaac and Ishmael', this episode was one of the first to be written around the new context of the 'War on Terror'. And *The West Wing's* approach to the screening of terror, as well as American foreign policy responses to it, were adapted accordingly, standing in stark contrast to the calls for proportionality in the show's early days.

Early in the episode, 'Night Five', Toby Ziegler remarks on the latest draft of his speech for the president's address at the United Nations that it was inspired by being 'tired of reading about the President's scattershot foreign policy'. And Donna confirms that 'we're at the U.N. on Monday giving a new foreign policy speech that's going to stir some things up'. On reading the draft, the speechwriters are quizzed about 'want[ing] to be responsible for starting World War III'. Reading the draft aloud, it becomes clear that *The West Wing* is mirroring the Bush Administration's attempts to place 'freedom' at the centre of a foreign policy doctrine:

Andy: "Freedom must run deeper than the free flow of capital. Freedom must mean

more than the free trade of goods and services. The world will be free when we have freedom of speech for every nation ... The world will be free when there is freedom to worship for everyone. The world will be free ... When we finally shake off the rusted chains of tyranny ... Whether in the guise of fascist dictatorships ... Or economic slavery, or ethnic hostility” ... Or, wait for it, “the crushing yoke of Islamic fanaticism”. Gentlemen, start your engines.

The speech is significant, coming as it does in such stark contrast to the previous discursive work the show afforded to a foreign policy of proportionality and humility, in keeping with Bush’s own election platform. In the changed post 9/11 era, *The West Wing* confirmed Bush’s assertions that freedom and fear are now at war. The discussion of the speech continues, tellingly:

Andy: America doesn't have a monopoly on what's right. And even if we did, I think you're gonna have a tough time convincing the Arab world ... The U.S. Constitution defends religious pluralism. It doesn't reduce all of Islam to fanaticism.

Toby: It's fanaticism whether we call it that or not, so were going to call it that. We respect all religions, all cultures ... to a point. Grotesque oppression isn't okay just because it's been institutionalised. If you ask me, I think we should have gotten into the game three, four decades ago, but they're coming after us now, so it's time to saddle up ... We do know what's right.

Andy: This is why they hate us.

Toby: There's a lot of reasons why they hate us. You know when they're gonna like us? When we win.

A renewed confidence in American values and a heightened belief in American exceptionalism were important features of the ‘War on Terror’ at the start of 2002, as the United States attempted to re-establish its confidence in world affairs. Previous toleration of cultural differences was seen to be inappropriate in an era when they might lead to a hatred that ultimately fuels terrorism. In this context, liberal and conservative views on foreign policy no longer met at their *cautious* intersection, but rather favoured a muscular defence of treasured values through overwhelming military might. This formulation was central to the emerging neoconservative orthodoxy adopted within the Bush Administration. And with soaring, unprecedented approval ratings, President Bush was succeeding in selling this argument to the American public. It was a simple message to sell, in the War on Terror, fanaticism was to be rooted out to make way for freedom. It was a message *The West Wing* delivered with aplomb.

Toby: Our goal *is* to proclaim American values ... the reality is, the United States of America no longer sucks up to reactionaries, and our staunch allies will know what we mean ...

Andy: What's Egypt going to think? Or Pakistan?

Toby: That freedom and democracy are coming soon to a theatre near them, so get dressed.

Andy: Toby... you guys are on a thing right now. And I'm behind you. You know I'm behind you; a lot of House Democrats are ... And plenty of Republicans. But this one moment in time, you have to get off your horse and just, simply put - be nice to the Arab world.

Toby: Be nice? Well... How about when we, instead of blowing Iraq back to the seventh century for harbouring terrorists and trying to develop nuclear weapons, we just imposed economic sanctions and were reviled by the Arab world for not giving them a global charge card and a free trade treaty? How about when we pushed Israel to give up land for peace? How about when we sent American soldiers to protect Saudi Arabia, and the Arab world told us we were desecrating their holy land? We'll ignore the fact that we were invited. How about two weeks ago, in the State of the Union when the President praised the Islamic people as faithful and hardworking only to be denounced in the Arab press as knowing nothing about Islam? But none of that is the point.

Andy: What's the point?

Toby: I don't remember having to explain to Italians that our problem wasn't with them, but with Mussolini! Why does the U.S. have to take every Arab country out for an ice cream cone? They'll like us when we win! Thousands of madrassahs teaching children nothing, nothing, nothing but the Koran and to hate America. Who do we see about that? Do I want to preach America? Judeo-Christianity? No. If their religion forbids them from playing the trumpet, so be it. But I want those kids to look at a globe, be exposed to social sciences, history, some literature. They'll like us when we win.

The inclusion of a humanitarian argument, appealing to education and notions of universal human rights, within a particularly muscular liberalism or neoconservative argument is also indicative of real world debates. The two principal military interventions of the 'War on Terror', in Afghanistan and Iraq, were both justified with partial recourse to humanitarian concerns. A lack of access to education for women in Afghanistan, as well as young boys in madrassas was a frequent feature of attempts to sell intervention to those most sceptical of the use of military force. However, the primary message that *The West Wing* communicated to viewers was that winning, above all else, was all that really mattered and the ultimate determinant of American safety and future popularity.

### **Television and (Im)possibility**

The evolution of *The West Wing's* approach to screening terror, as well as foreign policy responses to it, closely followed the context in which episodes were written, produced and aired. From advocating a proportional response to terrorism, the show altered its stance to reflect the new 'realities' of the 'War on Terror' from autumn of 2001. And these new realities would continue to shape *The West Wing's* political message as the 'War on Terror' progressed (see also Gans-Boriskin and Tisinger 2005:106). It was a message that supported

official foreign policy and frequently expressed views even more hawkish than those of the Bush Administration.

*The West Wing*, through episodes such as ‘Isaac and Ishmael’ and ‘Night Five’, actively shut down the scope for debate in American politics and society after 9/11. Alternative voices were silenced by the amplification of official narratives. *The West Wing*, of course, did not perform this narrowing in isolation. In the news media, for example, ‘Bush administration officials were the most frequently quoted sources, the voices of anti-war groups and opposition Democrats were barely audible, and the overall thrust of coverage favoured a pro-war perspective’ (Hayes and Guardino 2010:59). What makes *The West Wing* noteworthy then is that the show is explicitly written from a liberal perspective, which, after 9/11, nonetheless reinforced the position of a Republican presidency and neoconservative foreign policy. Just as in 1999, when ‘A Proportional Response’ effectively helped to silence criticism of President Clinton’s ill-received Operation Infinite Reach, in 2001 *The West Wing* again defended the Administration of the day, albeit this time by promoting a muscular, militaristic and interventionist foreign policy.

Responding to September 11<sup>th</sup> before any other entertainment television show of a similar nature, *The West Wing* episode ‘Isaac and Ishmael’ should be read as an important contribution to the tumultuous 9/11 moment. The episode facilitated the transition from the post 9/11 void in meaning to full-blown American response to terrorism. ‘Isaac and Ishmael’ aided the process of confirming the meaning of 9/11, which slowly harmonised across American society. And it aided the Bush Administration in establishing a hegemonic foreign policy discourse that would come to underpin the subsequent ‘War on Terror’. This task was continued as the show progressed and returned to ongoing plotlines. Presenting a hawkish, neoconservative policy in concert with the Bush Administration, *The West Wing* contributed to the conditions of possibility that enabled the ‘War on Terror’. Through its particular approach and turnaround to screening terror, *The West Wing* helped to make the ‘War on Terror’ possible, simultaneously narrowing the space to think and argue otherwise. First, as a popular, intelligent and liberal show, *The West Wing* served to foster the appearance that militaristic interventionism in the ‘War on Terror’ was a bipartisan policy. And second, by mimicking the Bush Administration’s invocations of ‘freedom’, *The West Wing* made speaking out particularly challenging as it came with the added risk of being labelled unpatriotic. And that was a cardinal sin in post 9/11 America.

## **Conclusion**

*The West Wing* continues to influence and provide an analytical lens to examine American politics. For instance, the rhetoric of Martin Luther King has recently been invoked in Bartlet and Obama’s White Houses in light of the extra-judicial killing of terrorists. Having ordered the covert assassination of a terrorist suspect, President Bartlet quotes Dr King to reflect that the ‘ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral. Returning violence with violence only multiplies violence adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars ... I’m part of that darkness now’. The same quotation was shared virally, online around the world, in the days following the extra-judicial shooting of Osama bin Laden in May 2011. In the fictional *West Wing*, Leo was left to reassure President Bartlet that ‘Dr King wasn’t

wrong, he just didn't have your job', once again reaffirming the policies of the actual President of the United States. And once again *The West Wing* reinforces dominant understandings that extra-judicial killing is required in the battle against terror, despite questions on the legality and morality of such actions.

Finally, this analysis contributes to a body of work, exemplified in this volume, which shows that disciplines such as Political Science, International Relations and Terrorism Studies, frequently resistant to analysing popular culture, should take fictional dramas seriously. Television shows such as *The West Wing* possess considerable power to shape and guide public opinion, to support or challenge official policies, and to open up or close down the space for debate in American politics. Most generally this chapter has shown that popular culture plays an important role in contributing to political (im)possibility. More specifically, the chapter has shown that politics, terrorism and television are intimately linked. And most concretely, the chapter has shown that, in its evolving approach to screening terror, *The West Wing* served to reinforce existing official policies before, during and after the tumultuous moment of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001.

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