

Duty and *The West Wing*

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Introduction

Aaron Sorkin's television drama *The West Wing* premiered in the fall of 1999 and quickly became the most popular show in the country. For a program that focused on serious issues, had politics as its main subject, rarely left the workplace, promised no sex, and contained long sequences of character dialogue or monologue, this result was unexpected, to say the least. Critics credited it with bringing idealism, seriousness, and a sense of the civic back into the public sphere. Offering the opportunity to follow a fictional presidential staff through their work lives, its success seemed partially predicated on the voyeurism that makes all good drama run.

Such explanations cannot entirely explain this particular show's success. While creative staff of the show have acknowledged often that the show tapped into something more, they have been unwilling to say more than that it touched a "pop sensibility" in some way.¹ Beyond a glimpse into a world that Americans rarely see, *The West Wing* proffers a running discussion of the concept of "duty" as played out in the American ideological context. Indeed, duty's obligations and objects provide the *leitmotif* of the series, binding its episodes together into a more coherent whole. And it is *TWW*'s attention to duty that tapped into political narratives of how Americans want to see themselves and their relation to their polity.

This paper focuses on two primary ways that duty intersects with *The West Wing*. The first set of questions relating duty and the drama revolve around how the concept manifests in the context of the show. What does *TWW* say duty is? To whom do we owe it? How do we demonstrate a commitment to it? Does it offer us anything beneficial or detrimental? The second complex of questions occurs meta-narratively. Does this television show itself have any

¹ Waxman 2000, p. 206.

duties? What are they? Does it fulfill them? Before considering these two sets of questions, however, a brief discussion of the concept of duty in other arenas 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?² 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. Even as the republican polity aggregated from the individuals that composed it yet still exceeded simple summation to create a synergistic, new, separate political entity, this polity 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. As we will see, 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 person 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

² The origins of the word itself lay in the Latin *dēbēre*, which signifies obligation, debt, and service.

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 *TWW*.

We need look no further than early American rhetoric to confirm that duty, defined 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, 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 most important task of the new form of government was to perfect the polity, and accomplishing this required forming 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. In providing such, the implication (“secur[ing] the blessings of liberty...”) appears to be that the polity would best protect individual freedom through the common institutions.

Moreover, the preamble expands the objects of this duty: not only must the present figure prominently, but the future had equal claim upon the fulfillment of American duty.

Duty was not simply the special province of the American elite. As the United States developed beyond its republican roots into a democratic polity,³ 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.”⁴ 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, as one might infer from the works of the Founders; 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 the passage, this 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 the Civil War and the Second World War. As Union soldier Sullivan Ballou wrote to his wife a week before the Battle of Bull Run (Manassas),

3 Dahl 1978.

4 De Tocqueville 1969, p. 236.

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....⁵

Of course, perhaps the most famous of all calls to duty in American rhetoric comes from John F. Kennedy's inaugural speech in 1961, where he issued a challenge to all of 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 citizenship 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.⁶

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

Duty on *The West Wing*

American duty provides the driving force of action on *TWW*. 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.⁷

Virtually any viewer of the show would agree with Sorkin's statement about his creation, but the

5 Ballou 1861.

6 Shklar 1991, p.5.

7 Sorkin 2000.

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? The staff and the president 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 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 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 – it is the correct public action. Leo then meets with the staff and tells them that they have the free reign to pursue the liberal 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: I serve at the pleasure of the President of the United States.⁸

⁸ 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.

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

SAM: I serve at the pleasure of the President of the United States.

TOBY: I serve at the pleasure of the President of the United States.

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

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. And yet, fulfilling this duty requires the staff to play a game, an activity that may be serious or not, real or not, but that is still fun (otherwise it wouldn't be a game).

In *TWW*, 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, 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 *TWW*’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 *TWW* 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 of the series, 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: No. 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"⁹ who discourages young women from having abortions but who "does *not* believe that it's the government's place to legislate this issue."¹⁰ 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 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.¹¹

9 Sorkin 2002, p. 54.

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*, p. 73

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 the public sphere that the president controls (a fairly significant portion).

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

Chris Lehmann noted 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.¹²

More interesting for questions of political ideology than Lehmann's center-right critique is another question. What are the sources of action, belief, and opinion when a public servant follows one's sense of duty? *TWW*, unfortunately, either does not answer or offers a vague notion, such as "love of country."

Benefits of Following Duty

Duty for the characters in *TWW* 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 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. *TWW* 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

¹² Lehmann 2001, pp. 93-96.

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 the white supremacist shooters 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 the viewer sees a series of flashbacks to the Bartlet campaign and learns how this group came together.¹³

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 (think of a Paul Wellstone or Howard Dean idealism, with a touch of pragmatism). Some future 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.¹⁴

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

13 "In the Shadow of Two Gunmen."

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

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, he should tell Sam. 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 starts to put his papers together then leaves them. As he gets up out of his seat, his boss asks, "Sam, where are you going?" "New Hampshire," Sam replies.¹⁵

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 seems 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.

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.

¹⁵ Sorkin 2002, pp. 231-33.

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 Machiavellian¹⁶ light. Perhaps, however, this is the case because the public at large can identify with the more venal impulses of the selfish politician than *TWW*'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 *TWW* 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.

¹⁶ One must assume here he refers to the Machiavelli of *The Prince* rather than to the more republican version many commentators see in *The Discourses*.

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, the call to 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 *Capital Beat*. 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. 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.^{17,18}

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

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

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

duty.”¹⁹

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.) She can be a mouth for Republican views to the members of the White House staff, providing an empathetic voice for policies and people they might normally regard as enemies.²⁰

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.

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

¹⁹ *TOC*, p. 203.

²⁰ 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 to take a role on *CSI: Miami*, the fourth season introduced another Republican lawyer character (this time a 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.

TWW; 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 *TWW* 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 other models. Just because few other examples of the dutiful opposition appear does not mean they do not exist somewhere in *TWW*'s universe. The sin of omission does not make a sin of commission. Even so, political service in *TWW* 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. When Ainsley does agree to become part of the President's counsel 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 most of us to examine the Federal period, the Jacksonian epoch, the Progressive era, or

some other period belonging to history and not memory. Sorkin's *West Wing* calls us as Americans to move beyond our particular impulses, whether those be individual or group based. The show provides a call to fulfill duty once again, in the best spirit of American mythologies regarding the united nature of the United States; it 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. *TWW* 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"²¹ 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 *TWW*. 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

²¹ 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.

politicized understanding of gender and racial relations.”²² Even if most of the primary characters are male and white,²³ 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.”²⁴

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, *TWW* 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. Then the Dawes Act then forced them to sell three quarters of their land. Then 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

22 Lane 2003, p.33.

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

24 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

the Indians in the lobby a meeting with someone, anyone in the West Wing. None of the other 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?

INDIAN:²⁵ Six.

C.J.: How many have we revoked?

INDIAN: Six

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

INDIAN: Fighting in George Washington's Army.

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

INDIAN: 'Cause he marched us to Wisconsin.

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

INDIAN: 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?

INDIAN: What's the alternative?

C.J., in the world of *TWW*, 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 *TWW*'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

²⁵ This is not the character's name in the episode; the episode summary I consulted (<http://westwing.bewarne.com/third/51indians.html>) did not list the name, even though it was given in the characters' introductions to one another.

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 visions 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", Toby 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 pocket of the man's coat, 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 has 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.”²⁶

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), 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.²⁷ 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.

TWW 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

26 Smith 2003, p. 134.

27 Shklar 1991, pp. 13-23 *passim*.

contradiction. Smith argues that an episode like this provides the people of *TWW* the opportunity to reclaim patriotism as a value not just of the right but of the left and all Americans.²⁸ 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.

Duty of *The West Wing*

So far, we have considered the role of duty *in* the television show, *The West Wing*. A correspondingly interesting and vital question, however, now presents itself. What duty does the show itself have? *TWW* creates a forum in the entertainment world where questions from American political ideology crop up all the time, and as such, it provides more than entertainment to viewers – it provides a window to a particular conception of American political practice.

Does a television show such as this have a duty? What is that duty?

Aaron Sorkin and the other members of *TWW* team (production staff and actors) generally argue that there is no obligation incumbent on the series. As Sorkin said in an interview with Terence Smith, of PBS' *NewsHour*,

TERENCE SMITH: ...You tackle some very heavy issues, important national and international issues. Why so issue heavy?

AARON SORKIN: It's important to remember that, first and foremost, if not only, this is entertainment. "The West Wing" isn't meant to be good for you. We're not telling anyone to eat their vegetables, and we do not consider it important in the sense that you're

28 Smith 2003.

saying.²⁹

(Other interviews from this *NewsHour* special, with cast and production staff of the show find reiterations of this sentiment.) *TWW*, however, addresses fundamentally different issues that a situation comedy, for example; members of the cast of “Friends” do not campaign for particular political issues and candidates as *West Wing* cast members do (Sheen and Whitford proved especially prominent in campaigning for Democrats and Al Gore in 2000), and teachers use few other shows on a regular basis to educate their students about contemporary American politics.³⁰

Some of the same people who contend that *TWW* merely offers entertainment belie the same with other statements. There is an awareness among the creators and producers of the show that the show taps into a *zeitgeist*, that it has an effect greater than as mere entertainment. As executive producer John Wells noted in an article for *George* magazine, the public knows that not all officials choose politics for the purposes of self-aggrandizement and financial gain. “The public wants to believe in the political process, wants to believe in politicians. Wants to believe that the people who are leading us are doing so – even if there are ideological differences – to make the country better.”³¹ This statement might imply that Wells, Sorkin, and all the rest are taking advantage of a desire Americans have for the shape of their politicians. But, writing in November 2000, Waxman notes that *TWW* staff and the larger society realize that “slowly, subtly, *The West Wing* has become as much of a reflection of the current White House as a reflection on it.” This has become even more true in the George W. Bush era, as the show’s focus has turned to international terrorism and a focus on a presidential campaign that pits real intelligence and integrity against the lowest common denominator of self-interested pandering.

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

30 Beavers 2003, pp. 175-86.

31 Waxman 2000, p. 207.

(In case there was any doubt, intelligence and integrity win.) On a variety of levels, *TWW* engages the political questions of the day, and to that extent, it transforms from mere entertainment into a work of political ideology and education.

One episode that Sorkin and several of the cast members point to as being one of which they are particularly proud discussed the nuances and pros and cons of the debate over the use of direct statistics versus statistical sampling in the U.S. Census. As a legislative game of chicken develops in “Mr. Willis of Ohio”, staffers talk with one another about the faults of the census as currently conducted (it undercounts inner city residents, recent immigrants, and the homeless). They also explain why the Democrats of the Bartlet administration support the use of statistical sampling: it’s not just because it is just but because there are political advantages for Democrats in counting these constituencies. The problem, of course, is that it may be unconstitutional to use sampling. *NewsHour* noted after that episode that none of the major news outlets devoted much coverage to the census while *TWW* gave the issue a full hour of prime-time drama.³² In a supplemental interview with Allison Janney, who plays press secretary C.J. Cregg, we learn the following:

TERENCE SMITH: You dealt with a subject in the first season, the census, and the idea of undercounting the census that most news organizations don't touch.

JANNEY: No. And I thought Aaron was crazy. I read that, and I was like, "Well, this is going to be the most boring thing ever." And then as we did it, we had such a good time, and I learned, right along with C.J., as did my friends who watched the show. And now I can guarantee you everyone who saw that show is going to fill out their census because they saw how, and they learned how important it actually was and what it means.³³

John Spencer, who plays chief of staff Leo McGarry, noted in his interview that one of Sorkin’s

32 Sorkin 2000.

33 Janney 2000.

intentional messages for the show was to create characters who were “worldly but not cynical about public service.”³⁴

In the transformation into education, *TWW* fails to live up to its promise and its possible responsibilities. “In our era of sound-bite politics, *The West Wing* addresses many contemporary domestic and foreign policies at least as sensibly as do many government officials.” Beavers documents several occasions on which current government officials have noticed a more thorough, nuanced exegesis of public policy in the television show than among politicians.³⁵ The fact that a television show has become, in a large sense, more engaged and perhaps more real than the actual politics of the nation means that it has attained a position where its every move has a potential ramification upon the way in which Americans see themselves. Because all Americans have potential access to the basic signs of political membership and community (such as voting)³⁶ and are actively called by this television show to find their duty and go further than the minimum and the basics, the drama has come to occupy a larger public space than as mere entertainment. Many Americans appear find their interaction in the public sphere via *TWW*.³⁷

Does TWW fulfill it?

Member of *The West Wing*'s cast perform acts of political engagement outside the

34 Spencer 2000.

35 Beavers 2003, p. 176-77.

36 This is dissimilar to the other current standard fare of television drama, law enforcement and detective shows. While it is true that all Americans cannot be high level staffers in the White House, we all have the opportunity (whether exercised or not) to engage issues, to vote, to work on campaigns, to provide community service, to be active members of a polity. Similar venues do not exist in the venue of law enforcement.

37 I base this upon the fact that the show has garnered massive critical acclaim, won more Emmys in its first season than any other show in history (for a single season), and consistently rated in the top ten television shows overall for its first three season (often as the top-rated show). In the 2000 election cycle, bumper stickers “campaigning” for “Jed Bartlet for President” proved popular throughout the country. NBC even trumpeted *TWW*'s second season with the tag line, “A president we can *all* agree on,” as George W. Bush and Al Gore chased each other in a dead heat for months.

confines of their dramatic roles. Marin Sheen has been a regular protester against nuclear testing, for the problems of migrant workers, and for stricter gun control, positions that he derives from his devout observance of his Roman Catholic faith. His *TWW* contract even allows him time off for rallies and protests. He has been arrested more than sixty times for civil disobedience. Bradley Whitford (who plays Josh Lyman, the deputy chief of staff) and Spencer both actively campaigned for Al Gore in the 2000 election. The actors and creative team visit Washington regularly and enjoy access to decision-makers. And yet, Sorkin has continued to maintain that the drama offers entertainment and has no purpose beyond that.

In the final analysis, this analyst agrees. We could ask *TWW* to take on a responsibility higher than providing a pleasant hour on a Wednesday night, but a request to such a duty would be unenforceable and even undesirable. *The West Wing* gives us a politics we want but do not have and are not even sure that we *could* have in such a rarefied form. The politics proffered springs from one or several creative minds. Even as it attracts a highly educated and high-earning audience and engages both this elite and the larger American public in ideas vital to the present Republic, it cannot substitute for actual participation. The politicians and theorists with whom we opened this essay believed that real *engagement* by *all* the people was the necessary ingredient for democratic vitality.

To have the politics that the popularity of *TWW* indicates we desire, a democratic people must create and nourish it for themselves. This drama displays an inverse mirror, reflecting one vision of what we might want but not assisting us in making the choice. *The West Wing*, for all its strengths as drama and as a vision, does not and cannot succeed as a politic for today, for it does not ask action and duty of its audience. We the people, as an *actual* polity, must become

whatever change we want to see. Until we do that, we should not expect television shows to provide us a politics, absolving us of a responsibility to fulfill our own duties.

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