

The West Wing Weekly  
0.19: John Wells

[Intro Music]

HRISHI: You're listening to The West Wing Weekly. I'm Hrishikesh Hirway.

JOSH: And I'm Joshua Malina.

HRISHI: And today we have a very special episode with John Wells.

JOSH: Huzzah! At long last we have with us, John Wells, legendary writer, director, executive producer, showrunner of hit series including *ER*, *Third Watch*, *Shameless*, and *Animal Kingdom*, among others. He's a former president of the Writers' Guild...

JOHN: Twice, actually...

JOSH: ... he's a double – he's a former former, he's a double agent, and a former president – twice

HRISHI: President/former president

JOSH: Well said

HRISHI: Please

JOSH: of the Writers' Guild, and a multi-multi Emmy winner in a variety of categories. He was with our beloved series from the beginning, please welcome John Wells. Hooray!

JOHN: Thanks for having me.

JOSH: Thanks for being here! You were tough to book; you're busy!

JOHN: We're still making television shows and some films, so that's exciting.

JOSH: Did you have any hesitation about joining us?

JOHN: I do, I actually have a lot of hesitation about talking about *West Wing* in our current political climate. I try to be very careful about it, because the show – as you know, and you spend a lot of time talking about – represented a certain kind of centrist politics, certainly Democratic in tenor, because of nature of the Bartlet administration, but things have become so polarized in the country that there's a tendency to want to idolize the show, and at the same time others to demonize the show. Which doesn't really reflect what it was, so I try to be very careful in talking about it, cause it was such a, for me, a seminal thing to be involved with, and I think that, Aaron and Tommy and I talked about it a lot of times – we get lots of requests to try and revive the show, and that's been the primary reason to not pursue it, and for the same reason I'm kinda careful about talking about it.

JOSH: As a podcast about the series, probably the number one interaction that we get from fans is pitches on how to reboot the show, and requests that somehow it happen. I don't, constantly explaining to people I'm not in a position of power nor am I going to communicate anybody's pitch to you or to Aaron. [John laughs] So other than fan requests, do you get requests from NBC or from other entities to...

JOHN: Yeah. We're regularly approached about restarting a number of the shows, but particularly *West Wing*.

JOSH: Yeah, I'll bet. So what is your ah...

JOHN: Well, my hesitation with it is that it was a wonderful experience for all of us who participated, and it represented a specific time. It was actually, it came out of a difficult time, the last time we were in an impeachment environment, and people tend to forget that we were in the midst of the Monica Lewinsky/Clinton years, when the show was first being made, and one of the reasons why it took us so long to get it on the air is that there was a hesitation because everyone who we talked to about the show said that they were concerned that people hate politicians, have a low opinion of politicians, and what Aaron continued to say that I tried to back up was that the people that we met, who were actually in public service in Washington DC were heroic. They were people who could have made ten times as much doing anything else; who devoted themselves to public service. We've seen it recently in the impeachment hearings, in front of the House Intelligence Committee, where you have, you know, dedicated career public servants who have made a great deal less money in unglamorous ways, working to protect and continue our democracy and so the worry in this polarized climate is that if we actually ever put it back on the air, it would be dismissed as a liberal, you know, screed, which it never was. In fact, there was a tremendous amount of effort that was put into the writing of the show, and producing of the show, to make certain that all sides were presented.

JOSH: And as we've learned again and again, the show was embraced by people on the entire political spectrum; fans.

HRISHI: But my question is, do you think there is ever a time politically when it doesn't feel like things are incredibly divisive?

JOHN: No, I think part of a democracy, and particularly a two-party democracy, is that you're constantly in conflict between those different ideas. The difference is that there wasn't nearly as much demonization, in the two sides, and that people could agree on a great many things, and right now everything seems to be blood sport. Part of what happened at the end of the series in the seventh year was, we were still debating whether to go on and try and continue to do a Santos administration. And then John died, you know at Christmas time, John Spencer died. And we had a number of shows that had to be rewritten, episodes that had to be rewritten, and more than that it felt like the center of the show had fallen out, and you were very much there for that, Josh, and it was just a feeling of "Let's see if we can tie this up." If I have any regrets, it's that I didn't kinda get past that moment of grief that we were all involved in to say, "No, we should continue on," so whenever I think back on the show, I wish we had actually... that I had gotten through that moment and we'd continued on.

JOSH: And do you imagine that the eighth season and on and into the Santos administration would have been a major transition into a largely new cast, and new life...

JOHN: I think we would have done what oftentimes happens in Democratic administrations, or Republican administrations that continue on to the same party in the next administration, is a number of people end up staying and other people end up leaving, and people will rotate back into other positions and jobs, because the central group of competent, intelligent, forward-thinking public servants is relatively small on either side of the aisle, and you want to continue to use those, the abilities. So we would have continued with a number of the characters, but in them taking on different roles.

JOSH: I'm trying to gauge how much I should regret. [John laughs] That the show did not continue.

JOHN: I think you would have continued.

JOSH: Balls!

HRISHI: We just put out our episode on "Requiem", and we got a little taste of the exciting idea of people like Ainsley Hayes and Amy Gardner coming back and having positions in the Santos administration. I don't mind that we didn't actually get to see it, I'm really glad that you put the idea in before the show ended, though, that those people sort of have this long story still yet to be told.

JOHN: People don't go far from Washington, it's too addictive. So public servants as they leave an administration stay nearby, and then they're called upon to do more things in the future.

HRISHI: Yeah, as we've even seen with some of our guests ...

JOSH: That's right.

HRISHI: Like Gene Sperling, who both worked on the *West Wing* as well as in the White House, under two different administrations. Could we go back before all this, though, and could you tell us how you and Aaron and Tommy all first met?

JOHN: Yeah, you know, I think it's – one of the things that's happened over the years is some of this has become legend, rather than - so I will preface it by saying that this is \*my\* memory...

HRISHI: Sure.

JOSH: Diplomatic, yeah.

JOHN: I don't profess to say that this is actually necessarily factually true; it's what I remember – *ER* was kind of at its height, and someone at CAA called me, Tony Krantz at CAA called me, the agency, and said you should sit down with Aaron Sorkin and talk. So we had a lunch, and he showed up for it sort of famously and said, "I hope you don't expect me to pitch anything, 'cause I don't have any ideas."

HRISHI: And were you already aware of his work?

JOHN: Oh, very aware. Yeah, I'd come out of the theater. I was trained in the theater and so I knew him as a playwright; and knew of him and I'd admired his work, obviously admired a couple of his screenplays, so we had a lunch and realized we had no necessary agenda, and just started to say, "Well, what interests you; what's going on?" and he said, "Well, one thing that interests me is that when we did *The American President*, my first draft was," (and I'm gonna make up the number, but I remember it had a two in front of it) – "it was 270 pages long, or 260 pages long, and what got cut was a lot of the people who were in the West Wing." All the people that he had met and admired, and that he didn't feel that audiences were really aware of who runs the government on a day to day basis, how it all actually works. And I said, that sounds interesting, let's talk about doing something about that, and then we took it to NBC – I had a deal at NBC where everything I did had to go to NBC – and they said OK, and Aaron went and wrote it, and then they didn't want to do it. So during that period of time, there was about a year when he and Tommy left to do *Sports Night*, where the script was just languishing, and at the end of that about 18 month period, I

got the script back under my deal and told NBC that I was going to take it out someplace else, and they said that would be embarrassing, so let's just make it the pilot. [Josh laughs]

JOSH: That happens a lot, doesn't it? A pre-emptive move

JOHN: So and Tommy and I had worked together on *ER*. He had done the live episode of *ER* in our season 4, and then he and Aaron went off to do *Sports Night*, while we were still trying to get *West Wing* off the ground.

HRISHI: I just want to pause at one point in the middle of your story and slow down a little bit. So he comes in and says he doesn't have anything to pitch. But then he does have this idea, and you say, "Okay, let's go make that." But I feel like there are ingredients that need to be – you need to be assured of certain things, that's a huge endeavor to undertake. And so I was wondering, how did you get to the point between the two of you, meeting for the first time over lunch, to agree to actually make a show?

JOHN: Well, one of the great things about having a show like *ER*, which is doing so well, is that they give you the right to just do stuff that you feel like. And so I had the right, under my deal at Warner Brothers, and with NBC, to just say to a writer that I liked, "Go write something." And that's what we did.

HRISHI: Did your initial instincts tell you this would be a tough sell, or...

JOHN: No, it was a tough sell. [all laugh] Yeah, it always sounds a little ridiculous to talk about it, but *ER* was a very tough sell. Very tough sell. [crosstalk]

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Interesting!

JOHN: It was passed on by all four networks at the time, twice, and then only got picked up as a two-hour backdoor pilot once *Jurassic Park* became a hit. And they said, "It's Spielberg and Crichton, so we'll be able to make that work." So it was one of the great joys of it, because nobody thought it was anything that was going to happen, so we basically made the pilot with very little interruption, nobody really showed up, knew what we were doing.

JOSH: Now, in hindsight, it having inspired, I think, so many other [crosstalk] shows to

JOHN: [crosstalk] Yeah, it seems ridiculous

JOSH: Why was it originally a hard sell?

JOHN: Well, Michael Crichton, who had a medical school education, had gone to Harvard and then to Mass General for some of his residencies, was really just his experiences, it was a kind of dropping into a hospital, spending time with a bunch of different patients – we didn't finish stories, a lot of the patients you just come into brief contact with – so it was really just about the doctors, and the nurses, and the people who are trying to struggle and serve in a hospital. So it didn't have a through-line in thematic terms that were easy to understand... there was nobody who was easily saved that we got to care a lot about. It was really just about what it was like to be in that office. And so, it was very difficult to sell, and *West Wing* was a really difficult lift, and *Shameless* took seven years, and *Animal Kingdom* took almost three – these are not unusual stories. Anything that's a little different, which in hindsight always seems like, "Well, how come everybody didn't see it?" – it always takes a little bit more. So to answer your original question, I come out of the theater, I respect writers, I'm a writer myself, and so when I read writing that's good, I just want to know what that person wants to do. And that's been very successful for me, so if I read writing that I like, I try to find a way to get them some money to write something, and let's see what they do. I try not to

get too much in the way of that, because too much interference early on in anybody's creative process can stymie what actually excited you about it in the first place, which – there's myriad stories of being stymied, for that reason – too much input at the beginning. I just thought that Aaron had a strong feeling about what he wanted to do, and I was in a position to be able to say, "Go do it."

HRISHI: That's amazing. To me it sounds to me a little bit like before the first date's over, saying, "Well, let's go get married."

JOHN: Well, you don't have to go all the way to the altar, you know if the script doesn't work, or if the ... oftentimes the writers themselves will come back and say, "You know, this one's not quite it, I didn't quite get there" – that's okay, that's part of the creative process to making things that are interesting. Everything isn't perfect.

JOSH: You just make out a little bit, and go from there.

JOHN: Well, maybe not this one, but we had a great experience, so let's see if there's something else we can do, which also happens.

HRISHI: What was one of your favorite moments from those early days?

JOHN: My favorite moments had to do with the – oh, it sounds so egotistical – my favorite moments was in everybody who thought it wasn't going to work, having to come back and say, "Yeah, this is great" and pretend like [cross talk] they always thought it was great. And feeling superior by not actually saying, "I told you so" or taking advantage of it.

JOSH: [cross talk] Oh I get that.

HRISHI: Yeah. [Laughs]

JOHN: But that takes a while to get to, because the doing of it is so – the monumental task of actually making it, making 22 episodes of something is so difficult. It's great work – it's not tarring rooves, it's not laying concrete, but it's a challenge, and we were working very long days, and weeks and weeks, and that's just a huge undertaking.

HRISHI: In the first four seasons, we heard from Aaron and Tommy that oftentimes there would be an idea, an ambitious idea, and they knew that it would be impossible, and then they would turn to you, and then you would go and make it happen somehow.

JOHN: We'd figure it out.

HRISHI: Was that all really still on the basis of *ER*'s success that you were able to do that, or were you able to pull for *West Wing* for *West Wing*'s own sake?

JOHN: Yeah, once we got going, it was *West Wing* for *West Wing*'s own sake. And the scale of the show itself, because the presidency does not all take place just in the West Wing, and just in the Oval Office, and the Roosevelt Room, it has to take place in the world at large, it has to take place in Air Force One, and on the tarmacs, and once the network and the studio realized that the show was going to be successful, then I just had to be able to say to them, "We've agreed upon a financial number for what the entire series is going to cost this season. And you need to give us the flexibility to decide where we're going to spend that money." And that's a frightening thing for them, just because it feels out of control, because we would have one episode that was wildly over budget and then Aaron would write another episode that basically took place in the Residence, we're - gonna figure this out, cause we know what we're doing, you've gotta have to let us do it. Some of it was, I think Tommy and

Aaron both, wanted to use me as a little bit of a safety net, in the sense of: they had these ideas - sometimes Aaron would say, "I'm a little frightened to write this because it's so big, and I'm not sure," and I'd go, [crosstalk] "Oh, you should do it!"

JOSH: [crosstalk] Go ahead and do it!

JOHN: "Go ahead and do it! So that he couldn't say, "Oh, I didn't do that because [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] "John told me..."

JOHN: "John said I couldn't do it." It was a great production staff, we had a fantastic producing staff, and Tommy's contribution to the entire show can never be underestimated. Whenever I talk about it, I always talk about it as Tommy and Aaron.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOHN: Aaron's extraordinary writing, and everything that he brought to it, but Tommy – he made the thing run.

JOSH: Do you have any particular memories about assembling the Dream Team of a cast? What you guys did?

JOHN: It's always the most difficult and rewarding thing. You know, there is always a tremendous amount of pressure, particularly in something about politics or a subject that the network doesn't think is going to be easy to sell, to – and this is even more true now than it was then – to make certain that there's someone or someones who the audience knows who they're going to show up for that even if they don't know what that is. And there was a tremendous amount of pressure about that with Rob. And Rob, coming into the show was wonderful in the part, but he was also central to our being able to cast a number of the other members of the cast. Some people just walked in the door and proved it in the room, like Allison, who came in and was just fantastic from the first bit; Martin took a lot of convincing to come in. He didn't really want to be doing a television series; I think he was very admiring of Aaron's work, but the whole show was crafted - I'm sure people talked about this before - but the show was crafted for him to only be in about 25% of the episodes. The idea was always the Peggy Noonan story of seeing Ronald Reagan's foot through the other side of the door. But once we showed the pilot, the network came back and said, one of them called Phil Collins called and said, "Well, Martin has to be in all the episodes if we're going to do it." So, not the best negotiating strategy, as a producer, to go back to someone you don't have a deal with and say, "We need you in all the episodes," but it was more than well worth the money. And Bradley in the mix – it was kind of getting the mix together and getting it right? John Spencer and I had just done another show, together, that had not worked on NBC the year before, and so it was very... [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] What was that?

HRISHI: Michael Hissrich told us about that...

JOSH: Oh, yeah.

JOHN: ...called *Trinity* that we'd done in New York; he hadn't really wanted to come to Los Angeles but I kinda leaned on him, and then he read the script. As everybody began reading the script, it was interesting - the network and the studio didn't really get the script. I mean, Josh – you're very familiar with Aaron's scripts – if you're not an actor or writer or director, they don't pop off the page in a way. But if you actually are someone who writes, directs,

acts, you read it and you know what it is immediately, and it's got a thing that kinda pops up off the page.

JOSH: Certainly, yeah.

JOHN: But for standard network notes and reading, they didn't get it.

JOSH: Was that because they're not looking for great dialogue, they're looking for explosions? And things like that?

JOHN: For plot, certainly. Or a more defined emotional line or something to happen, that they can identify? And in their defense, cause I'm not one of those who likes to pick on executives, they have to go into large meetings, and they have to pitch what it is. And sending somebody into a large meeting and somebody in this large meeting asking what's the next *West Wing* about, and they say "a block of cheese" [all laugh]

JOSH: No, literally! A block of cheese...

JOHN: Literally, a block of cheese, is not great for your career prospects when you're in the room with your bosses. So as we were casting, as people read the script, as actors read the script – and Aaron and I were, and Tommy, we were all very interested in because of the complexity of the dialogue, and the difficulty with the language that's inherent in all of Aaron's work, we knew we needed theatrically trained actors who were gonna be able to do it. It's really like putting together a Shakespearian company. You just don't go out [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] Absolutely.

JOHN: and get people who don't do Elizabethan dialogue. And so there was a lot of that, which is, well could - and names coming forward, like could this person do it, and John Levy our casting director [cross talk]

JOSH: [cross talk] We've talked to him too.

JOHN: You know, we had done a lot of things before, he understood he was a dramaturg down at the Mark Taper Forum for years, and so he knew what we were talking about. I said, you know, we need people who can actually do this, and we're going to have to do it in a hurry, and so we had a lot of people – actors who were suggested for different roles, where my response was – and Tommy's and Aaron's – was just, "They're lovely, they're talented, they can't do this. They can't step into this ensemble," where you've got John and Brad and Richard and Allison [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] Heavy hitters!

JOHN: And we cannot put somebody in there – they will collapse, they'll freeze, they'll feel way in over their heads, so...

HRISHI: The first four seasons didn't have a traditional writers' room. What was your vantage point on the writers' room in the first four seasons?

JOHN: Well I think part of it was, the writers' room at the beginning was Aaron figuring out how the writers could actually be useful to his process. Everybody writes differently, and Aaron, I think, writes and hears and performs as he writes; that's my take on it, I mean you know it [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] Oh, clearly. He does in fact pace around.

JOHN: And so, he needs to take everything in that anybody else has written, and get it into what he understands doing, that's not the way that all shows work, but it's what he needed, and since he was clearly the creative center of the show, it was about putting together a room that was going to give him material in a way that he was going to be able to synthesize it and use it through his process. Every writer's room for every show is a little different; for that reason you gotta take a look at who it is who's going to be the central creative force on the show and in the writing of the show, and make certain that they're properly supported.

HRISHI: And did you feel that it was easy for you to figure out how you fit into that room?

JOHN: Well I wasn't in the ... I produced the show in the beginning.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOHN: Because I was clear that for me it was very clear that I wanted Aaron to be doing it. I did not have Aaron's voice, and particularly at the beginning, when you're just trying to figure out what the voice of the show is, and so I did not want to insert myself in that – what we tried to do was, I tried to put writers around him who could feed what his process was and was necessary for him to do the show effectively. Some of the writers that we brought in at the beginning, very talented writers, wanted to have more individual ownership of their work; they weren't as comfortable with their stuff getting taken over and put through what Aaron wanted to put it through. When he left, at the end of the fourth season, and then I was coming in to run the writers' room, I needed to figure out who was there that could participate in the way that I work, and get us to the point where we could try and uphold at least a modicum of the quality and standard that Aaron had set for the show. But those things change year to year on every show, based on who you have and don't have.

HRISHI: I think there was one question that I'd always wondered about; because I know that you weren't a writer in those first four seasons, and certainly in the process of doing the podcast we've talked to so many people who were – you were a very successful, celebrated TV screenwriter and showrunner at that point already, is there a world where you would have seen that you would have liked to have been a part of that, but knowing that Aaron operates the way that he operates, you felt like, 'This town isn't big enough [John laughs] for the two of us to be in here,' and have it be conflict-free.

JOHN: That's an excellent question, and you didn't have to be nearly so sensitive. I'm very aware that when I'm meeting with other writers and what we're trying to figure out something to do together, there are points at which I know I'm going to be central to the writing of it, that that writer may want me to be central to that, and there are times when I shouldn't be. And in working with Aaron, I would have never presumed to try and play his instrument, you know? It's different once the tone of the show has been established, and the actors are all very comfortable in what it is they're doing, and kind of know who their characters are, over a few years, it's very different – you're gonna then be able to step in and to write for that. But I was really just interested as a producer, and I always felt very clear with Aaron from the beginning. From the first time we started talking, I wanted him to write a show that I would produce and then that Tommy ended up coming in and directing and being the artistic director of everything that was going on visually. That that's what that position was going to be. So I never felt left out of the process, and Aaron and I had an excellent working relationship where I would read scripts, and outlines, and try and be helpful, and then I had to, on occasions, because things did get very expensive or difficult and work controlling the budget our way, I'd have to go in and say, "All right, I want to be supportive with everything I can support... this ain't gonna happen, so what can I do, is there anything else I can be helpful?" And then also try to determine who else was helpful who was working with him?



Who on the writing staff was really helping the way that he wanted to work? Which always takes a couple of years on every show to try to and kinda get ...

JOSH: Did you know from the get-go that Aaron would want to essentially write every script or have everything pass through his typewriter, as it were?

JOHN: You know, he said to me that he wanted to write every script, and in my experience I kinda wanted to say, "Of course you do!" and then we'd try to get enough people around, enough other talented people around him that when that was impossible, that he would have some support, so we wouldn't grind to a halt. We ended up somewhere between. The reality is he wrote or rewrote everything the first seasons, particularly the first season, but he used a tremendous amount of material that came in from other writers – I mean, he's always been very prepared to admit that this other material came in that was really useful to him, but it was his voice, always his voice.

JOSH: You alluded to – I'm sure some writers would bristle under that kind of setup, and some undoubtedly did, was it then more trauma or more satisfying and joyous to be able to take over and give voice not only to yourself but to some of the other writers...

JOHN: Oh, the taking over itself was nothing but trauma.

JOSH: If it happened somewhat unexpectedly, we've heard varying points of view about what exactly happened.

HRISHI: Yeah, I'd love to get [crosstalk] your take on ...

JOSH: [crosstalk] We're curious.

HRISHI: what happened at the end of season 4 or maybe even before the end of season 4. How did all this go down?

JOHN: Well, there's a- and again this is really my point of view [crosstalk]

HRISHI: Yes, exactly.

JOHN: And it's been a while. Once a show becomes established and successful, there is a point after three-ish years – things are changing, now with streaming in the way everything works, but there's a point, after about three years, where your partners – your financing partners – you know, in this case Warner Brothers and NBC – have enough of a model of what the show's gonna get in international, what it's gonna get in syndication, how's it doing for them in advertising that they can sell on an ad supporting service like NBC, how much they're getting from the awards, and sort of critical acclaim, and they start to make financial judgments about what it's worth. And they say, "We've been putting a lot of money into this, for a long time, now we want to make some profit it needs to operate like this." So starting in the third year, they began to be much more – I don't want to say 'intrusive' because they were still supportive, but NBC in particular was like, "We need it to operate in a more regimented fashion." And Tommy and Aaron and I spoke about it a number of times, and I said, "You know, guys, there's only – there's a point to which I can protect this process that we're engaged in, and a point at which I can't." That I can only be so helpful, because everybody's sort of figured out what the show is now. And that became, I think, difficult for Aaron at the same time that he was actually just getting tired. And he'll admit it – he was working, like, ungodly hours and he had written or rewritten, you know, every single episode, and I think that when the pressure came from the studio and the network to make certain changes that they wanted to have made, which really had to do primarily with money, with the finances; I think he kinda looked around and said, "I may be done." You know, I'm not

sure – I haven't talked to him about it in a long time – that's what he was saying at the time; I'm not sure if now [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] Whether he meant it or not?

JOHN: he meant it or not is another thing? But that's definitely what he said, and we had a meeting at which Tommy and Aaron's agent and I all sort of said to Aaron, "I think we're gonna have this meeting at Warner Brothers, and they're gonna say it's changing to this kind of way that we're gonna do it, or we're gonna not do it with you anymore." I don't know if he really believed it, because the show was so great, and he was doing such great work – I understand why he would have been a little reluctant to say, "Like, really?" but then that's what they said. They said "Enough." I really didn't want it to happen, and I was as shocked by it as Aaron. And just to put it in perspective, you know, the end of (season) four someone had been kidnapped, the Speaker of the House was in the White House, ...

JOSH: This is what he left you with ...

JOHN: and after it all happened, I called him up and said, "Can I get together with you for a couple of minutes and tell me what you were gonna do next?" And Aaron said, like "I have no idea."

JOSH: Remember that first lunch? Again, I dunno.

JOHN: He was lovely about it. He said, "Well, we can pitch some stuff, but I didn't actually know what I was gonna do next." And so [crosstalk]

JOSH: Thanks

JOHN: – that was a little terrifying. [all laugh]

HRISHI: Apart from the cliffhanger of the actual story – given how much this was Aaron's voice and Tommy's work and, you know, the product of the three of you – you've shared but you've given so much credit to what they brought into it – when they left, did you think, "Okay, well, that's the end of the show"?

JOHN: I certainly – you know, I had known that Aaron was getting tired, and I think he would be fine with me saying he was getting a little burned out, it's natural - but Tommy was a shock. And I've told Tommy that since then, it's like – "Yo, dude, hey where are you going?"

JOSH: You think that was his decision to leave as well, was a reflection of personal dynamics with Aaron? That it was sort of...

JOHN: You know, I don't know. Perhaps, but I think also 'get out while the getting's good,' maybe, a little bit?

JOSH: Because I also remember that carrying over into a meeting with the cast, where we all one by one people tearily got up and questioned whether or not the show should continue, and I remember my saying, "I haven't been here that long; [John laughs] I vote strongly for continue." So it was almost this feeling of loyalty, that ultimately, you know [crosstalk]

JOHN: [crosstalk] No, I had that conversation with Aaron and Tommy, and they were both, "No, keep making the show!" I mean, the show wasn't done.

HRISHI: Ultimately it was your decision, right? To keep it going?

JOHN: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Because I thought that the show wasn't done, I thought that we still had things to say. That what the show had begun to function as – not just as a success creatively or a success for NBC or for Warner Brothers, but it had moved into a place over the first couple of years of the show where it was part of a zeitgeist. Where we were actually talking about things that needed to be talked about - you don't have that many opportunities in your life to find yourself in a place where you can write and talk about things that need talking about. That need to be – not in an earnest or preachy way – but a way in which you have engaged, a certain - we're talking about millions of people watching something – you don't get that soapbox very often. And I thought that it was worth a shot. I was not convinced that we would get three more years; honestly I thought maybe we'll be able to do this, and maybe we won't, and in the writer's room when we sat down and looked at who was there and who we had, who were some remarkably talented people who stayed with the show. I thought, "Okay, we can take a shot at this." But I would be the last person to say that we came out of the gate in year five doing that particularly well. Part of it's – you're trying to follow someone who, at this point we can all agree, is one of the great writers in the history of American television, film, theater... Aaron is an extraordinarily talented artist. So you're kinda saying, "Well, do I really want to continue to write at the old Globe after Shakespeare left?" [laughs] Is there any place to go but down? And I think any of those early episodes of the fifth season when we started out, a number of which I wrote, I think the cast carried us quite a bit in the sense that there's a 'You all knew what you are doing, you know it rhythmically, so I think to the audience who was watching the show, they weren't as conscious [crosstalk] as we were.

JOSH: [crosstalk] It was still *The West Wing* right away, I mean palpably so.

JOHN: We have a lot to have watched and so we're picking up that mantle. We were trying to pick up the mantle of what Aaron had been doing.

JOSH: However it exactly worked out, Aaron left as a result of not wanting to work, or refusing to work, under certain parameters. Did you find it difficult to rein in the show, into the new structure about what the network wanted?

JOHN: No, it was not about the storytelling, it was about the financial...

JOSH: Right but was that difficult?

JOHN: No. Because once we'd get back into the system that I'm comfortable with, I'm sort of irritatingly organized and anal and ...

JOSH: Yeah, so I would assume that one of the things was

JOHN: I could control the financial

JOSH: Right. The last-minute nature of some of the material handed over to all these different departments causes things to go over budget, and you came from an approach that had things I guess banked more regularly.

JOHN: Yeah, we were also, and part of what was frightening, and I'm not looking for sympathy, but at that point we were doing somewhere between on the various shows I was doing 66 to 75 episodes of television a year, so I had to have it operating [crosstalk] in a different way.

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Systematized.

JOSH: That keeps occurring to me, that you keep crediting Aaron for the hours he worked, and the prolific nature, but you were doing the same thing in your own way, on multiple [crosstalk] shows.

JOHN: [crosstalk] Multiples. Yep.

HRISHI: When it was clear that Aaron was leaving, and there was going to be a regime change no matter what, was there any question whether or not you would be the one to step in and run the writers' room, and take over [crosstalk] the writing?

JOHN: [crosstalk] No. I wouldn't - I felt like, given the difficulty of ... that I wouldn't have wanted to ask that of anybody else. Honestly, I felt that it was fairly likely that there would be a public - frankly in the press, and everything else - once we went onto the air - that there would be a "Well, it's not the same *West Wing*." Everybody's going to take a look at it, and say, "What's the diminution of the quality of the show?" Like, automatically, that's the perfect story. And I didn't feel comfortable asking anybody else to take that heat.

JOSH: Bold of you!

JOHN: I loved the show, loved the cast, loved everybody that we were working with; you know, we had the great advantage of having - as Tommy stepped away, he had several people that he had mentored through their careers remaining as directors on the show,

JOSH: Alex and Chris...

JOHN: Alex and Chris, Alex Graves and Chris Misiano, and we had the same production staff, and so there was a whole group of people who were going to be able to maintain all the qualitative levels of the show, and I knew I was gonna have to be dealing with any chaos in the physical production of the shows. So it was all about, can we step in and get something approaching the quality of what Aaron had been doing. And look, you're stepping into a world-class orchestra, basically. And you're just trying to conduct it. But you've got - everybody there knows what it's supposed to sound like, and I'd been reading and giving notes, and seeing and participating in the editing of all the previous 88 episodes, so rhythmically, we knew - but I didn't think it was right to ask somebody else to step in. I was also afraid that if I'd asked somebody else to step in, I hadn't thought about this in a long time - but if I asked somebody else to step in, they would feel the need to put their own mark on it.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOHN: And I thought the last thing the show really needed was somebody else to put their own mark on it.

HRISHI: Were there concrete lessons that you learned from those early days in season five to the end of the season that helped you understand this orchestra a little bit better as its conductor?

JOHN: Yes. The thing that Aaron does so extraordinarily well, and I know I just keep talking about how great Aaron is, because he's really talented - but what he does remarkably well is how to handle earnest subject matter in a way that doesn't feel earnest. And that's a massive talent; that's a trick, that's hard. And so I think some of those early episodes were still - had an earnest quality to them, that we began to kinda get our comedy licks in [laughs] slowly. And that's where the cast was really helpful, because there would be lines that I thought like, "Oof, boy, I don't know what that line should be" and then one of you would step in, Josh, or somebody would step in and put a spin on it, and I'd go, "Oh, thank God."

JOSH: I've said it before on the podcast and I may as well say it now that you're here – you were a really wonderful boss to work for. You did things that, in the rest of my career, I've not really experienced – things like when Aaron did leave, you asked to meet with me, and I remember thinking, "Oh, I'm about to get fired." [John laughs] And you said, "Hey, listen, I think this is what we're gonna do with Will Bailey – I think we've shown him as a young, new guy in the White House, seeing it through his eyes, and I think that's kinda played out. Here's what we think with Bob Russell," and I really appreciated that. I'm not used to anyone running by me – I'm used to seeing the next script; and that's when I know what's happening to my character. I appreciated that approach.

JOHN: Oh, thanks. I mean I wanted to make certain, at least in that circumstance, that everybody knew we were thinking about it, cause I think the fear was that it was going to be chaotic, and would I get scripts that didn't feel like what I'm used to [crosstalk] doing?

JOSH: [crosstalk] So did you meet with each person and kinda say here's what... That's really great. There's not a lot of extra time to do things like that.

JOHN: Oh, but boy, it pays off. And then I also heard from other people, what their concerns were. Martin was very concerned, and he's such a lovely man, that he was going around the bush about it. I said, "Martin, just..." He goes, "Yeah, I'm just afraid it'll suck!"

JOSH: Yeah, I was about to ask – not as a specific concern, more as a general – are we going to be able to continue...

JOHN: I'm not sure he used the word "suck" [crosstalk] since that doesn't sound like Martin..

JOSH: [crosstalk] Probably not. But that was the bottom line.

JOHN: Are we going to be able to maintain the quality going forward. And I said, "Well, I think we're going to really try, and I believe that the things that we can talk about continue to be essential in kind of the national conversation.

HRISHI: So what about when you're starting season 6? At that point you've made it through this [crosstalk] gauntlet...

JOHN: [crosstalk] We're alive...

HRISHI: and you have another season, you're gonna go again – did your approach to the show change, did you feel more confident in your ability to...

JOHN: Sure, sure. Absolutely. And the other writers felt more confident. I think one of the things was that the way that Aaron worked, he pitched a lot with the other writers - they pitched to him, they gave him ideas, and then they waited for him to tell them which ideas he wanted them to work more on. So I think the writer's role, not certain that they knew how to write the show, and so the big difference by halfway through season five was everybody started to kind of get their feet underneath them, and you could see who felt confident enough in moving forward, and so by the beginning of six what we're really talking about was – at the beginning, Aaron had set a rhythm to the administration, which every year of the show was another year of the administration. And so we could all add – and that meant, are we going to extend the Bartlet administration, or are we going to try to stay with this rhythm, which means we'll be moving into the jockeying for primary seasons and conversations about the legacy, and that that really had to start in season six; we couldn't just start that in seven. So that was the big decision over the summer -

HRISHI: That time jump.

JOHN: That time - are we gonna continue to do years at a time, or are we going to try and just [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] Slow things down...

JOHN: ...three months at a time going forward? And decided we're gonna stick with what had worked, and that that was interesting, and we'd always have lots of meetings with – and I'm sure other people have talked about this – strategists about who would be likely to be the next kind of candidates, and heard some very disturbing things, like – cause we really wanted it to be a female candidate that got the nomination. And every single political consultant who came in told us, “Oh yeah, we'll have an African American or a Hispanic president before we'll have a woman.”

HRISHI: So here's what I'm a little curious about – maybe you got this far in that thinking, or maybe not, but who would have been the first female president on *The West Wing*? [John laughs] Who would have played that character?

JOHN: We would have had to find somebody...

HRISHI: You didn't have anyone in mind. There wasn't anyone.

JOSH: It wasn't going to be C.J.

JOHN: It wasn't going to be C.J. No, we would have made a plaintive plea to Annette Bening or [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] I was gonna ask about [all three talking at once!]

JOHN: Or Meryl or somebody – say, like, “Hey, want to come be the first female president?” Someone we thought who could ...

JOSH: I think you would have gotten a yes, I mean you had the ability, I've wondered at - even in small supporting roles to get really, really significant, fantastic actors was incredible.

JOHN: I think because people wanted to be a part of the show. That's always one of the great things about these shows when they really work.

HRISHI: So once you've got that feedback, how quickly were you able to arrive at Jimmy Smits as your guy?

JOHN: Well, we said, well, who would that kind of person be? Give us who it would be. And amazingly enough, and I swear it's true, they came back and said, “Well, there's this guy – junior senator from Illinois who's kinda that guy – charismatic, smart, his name's Barack Obama.” To which I remember distinctly saying, “Nobody named Barack Obama is ever going to get nominated, much less win the presidency of the United States.” Thank God I was completely wrong. And they came back and laid out what a campaign – how that campaign would work. And then very fortuitously as we were doing that, and watching what was starting to happen with the Obama campaign, since it followed it – which is a little terrifying – which means that some of the stuff you read from political consultants, they actually do know what they're talking about, so when I read things about the likelihood of a second Trump presidency I can't just dismiss it as easily, cause I heard a lot of those...

HRISHI: On a related topic – one of the things that felt like it changed in the last three seasons is the overall diversity of the people that we saw on screen. You know, both in terms of gender and race, and was that something that you were consciously thinking about, or was that just sort of a by-product of the times? I'm curious if you were making a shift in the kind of people we were gonna see.

JOHN: Well, we had had a tremendous amount of success on *ER* with a more diverse cast. Shows have to reflect the audience that watches the shows. And our audience in America is a remarkably diverse audience. And so they want to see what they see when they go to their own workplace, or when they go to work, or when they actually turn on the television. And a Democratic administration's in the pressures of that time period, and in what was happening actually on television, we felt very strongly that it needed to begin to really reflect even more what was happening. 'Cause those changes were happening. And we're in the midst of this right now, in our current political environment, because there are people who are really frightened by these changes. And the one place we can make a little bit of a difference on television – I never want to overstate the value to changing very much of anything – but the familiarity of seeing people and liking them, and coming to understand that they're just people, and have all the exact same qualities good and bad, and particularly in *The West Wing* – intelligence, foresight – that doing that is something we can do on television is powerful. It's getting more complicated now, in the streaming era, because the audiences are so much smaller, so you actually are in the situation where you have all these – people can now pick their shows based a little bit more on what they [crosstalk] want to see

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Want to see.

JOHN: ...represented to them. When there are really only three or four places that you were going to go to get your entertainment, you didn't have as many options to opt out of seeing what our world really looks like.

HRISHI: Did you feel like, at that time, trying to have that responsibility was still a new attitude in the world of TV?

JOHN: I would say that, sadly, there were many conversations had with our partners where there was scepticism about the willingness of the country to accept some of the casting choices or romantic choices.

JOSH: [crosstalk] So you found resistance from the network level?

JOHN: Sure. I think it's mostly gone now, but it's always presented in that, "You know, people in the Midwest..." which – I'm from Colorado, so I'm like, "Well, I dunno, guys, where are you from? Manhattan?" I haven't gotten it much lately, which is great. But for a long time, until maybe the last six or seven years, it was a constant.

JOSH: As was with politics, I think change is glacial in the media as well.

JOHN: It's like the old ocean liner analogy. You know, it just takes a long time to turn...

JOSH: That's right.

HRISHI: So now, when you're going to season seven – I think the biggest revelation already of this conversation for me is the idea that you were definitely planning on the possibility of seasons beyond season seven.

JOHN: We made deals with Jimmy and with others to continue beyond year seven.

HRISHI: Wow.

JOHN: Because in television, when you bring on actors as regulars, somebody who's going to appear in every episode, the network wants there to be additional years, should there be success, they don't want to be renegotiating every year or so. Those characters are brought on with multi-year [crosstalk] deals.

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Right. So you must have felt pretty good about how things were going, on the show, from the trauma of season five, as you're going into season seven. Did you feel like this is a well-oiled machine once again?

JOHN: No television show is ever a fully well-oiled machine, because there are so many variables every week, and things that can happen. But I felt like we definitely had the writing staff, and the directorial staff, wonderful cast together to continue to make the show.

HRISHI: Where we are at in the series, we are just a couple of episodes past the point where Alex Graves is suddenly no longer an executive producer. Did that feel like a big shift?

JOHN: Well, Alex was – and is – an extraordinarily talented director, and he was a huge part of the continuity of the show, but again by that point we had any number of directors who would have been capable of kinda continuing on – Chris Misiano was still there, and we had a lot of wonderful – Mimi Leder, Lesli Glatter, and people who now have their own shows and been doing things for years who are, who would have been able to continue on. No, the real change – the real moment was John [Spencer]'s death. For me.

JOSH: And I assume, ultimately the decision lay with you.

JOHN: Yeah. It did, I think. The network was, "This is an expensive show," and I think we were on our third or fourth [network] president – since we started the show, people were coming and going, because by that point the broadcast network business was under a lot of pressure changing from pay cable and basic cable – not unlike what's starting to happen now with streaming, where everything was a little up in the air, and...

JOSH: You didn't get four years in that presidency.

JOHN: No, no. Fifteen years – I actually got a big laugh at the wrap party, after fifteen years of *ER*, because I thanked – I didn't think I was being sarcastic – but I wanted to thank all the presidents in the network, and there were like seven of them, and I kept going, and by the third or fourth one, it started to get pretty funny, then I realized well I'll just go with it. But yeah, we definitely could have continued on, and as I say, a wonderful cast, and then John died very suddenly.

HRISHI: What was your thought process behind how you ended up depicting that on the show?

JOHN: It was quick. Because we were, at that point, we were scripts ahead, in which he was very much a part of the scripts that had already been written. It was very emotional for all of us. I'd known him longer than anyone else had, I think, cause I'd known him from New York, and we'd done shows together before, and with the inevitable, Martin leaving the show because the presidency was ending, we had sort of assumed that John would be the continuing – he wasn't that old, particularly now at my age, he didn't seem old at all, but he was going to be the elder presence who stayed on, and whether that character would have ended up being the secretary of state or you know something else, he was going to be that



kind of continuity for us going forward. So, but to lose Martin for story purposes, and then John as well, I just had trouble kind of thinking past it.

HRISHI: It's understandable.

JOHN: And then actually sitting down and writing all those episodes, or rewriting episodes, and working with the other writers, in which we had to deal with his – with John's death and the character's death, on the show, it was...

JOSH: Rewatching it, you did a beautiful job, because that is a tall order for something not to feel manipulative, or cheapened a real-life tragedy by having – of course you had to incorporate it into the show. I was blown away by the emotional impact of Leo's death as it's portrayed [crosstalk]

JOHN: [crosstalk] Thanks, it was – we were sort of all in it, you know? And thankfully Bradley was still around to bait – Brad around to make jokes which helped lighten [crosstalk] because he can't help himself.

JOSH: No, he's incorrigible.

JOHN: No matter how dark the situation [crosstalk] he'll discover the dark humor.

JOSH: [Crosstalk] Indeed.

HRISHI: So there were, I think, five episodes between – you know, there's sort of a preamble where Martin Sheen comes and sort of tells the TV audience that we've lost John Spencer, until we get to "Election Day Part 2" where it's finally revealed that ...

JOHN: We'd already shot episodes we were going to air.

HRISHI: Yeah. I mean, one of them is a very Leo-centric episode that had already been filmed. But did you feel like for the story's sake you wanted to then find a time when it made the most sense to actually have that happen and to [crosstalk]

JOHN: [crosstalk] Well, some of that, but also we had finished an episode before his death, and then we were starting another one, and so that 'nother one had to actually – he wasn't going to be there, and it was a long time before the technology that we have now, where Carrie Fisher can appear in *Star Wars*, you know where you can de-age DeNiro and Pacino, so he was not going to be in the episode, and it was an election, so...

HRISHI: Right.

JOHN: ...we had to – the fact of John's death made us kind of work our way back into what that episode would be, and then we had to rewrite it and then it had to be prepped to shoot, because it had already been prepped before the holidays.

JOSH: Do you ever watch the show?

JOHN: I couldn't, actually – I mean after I finished editing those episodes, which we did, I haven't watched them since. He was a friend, so it's a little...

JOSH: Obviously I didn't know him for as long or as deeply as you did and I found it difficult to watch, but I think worth it – I think you should revisit [crosstalk]

JOHN: [crosstalk] Should do it again?

JOSH: Yeah.

JOHN: It was a very – I don't want to sound melodramatic, but – people we love pass away, but it was, yeah, it was tough.

HRISHI: At that point now you've made the decision that you're not going to continue the show, and the election is over, and you have the winner – the conclusion of that storyline has arrived. And now we're looking at these final four episodes. What were you thinking about, in terms of like, what was the task left to do, narratively, now that these things have kinda [crosstalk]

JOHN: [crosstalk] Well a lot of the background conversations about it had already happened because we were very interested in the transition of power. And we were very interested in – you've been the President of the United States and now you're gonna get one last flight home, on Air Force One, and then you're gonna go off to your – whatever that life is. And every president – every living president and even back to like, Johnson, had talked extensively – had done extensive interviews about that experience. And so it was from that moment we made that decision, I knew the last thing I wanted to write was – Bartlet on the plane. And so then everything worked backwards from that. We worked on, in the last years of the show, we worked on big dry erase boards, so we put everything down, we wrote down, "That's the end" as the inauguration day, and the flight home, and Santos moving into the White House, and then let's work our way back with these episodes that we have remaining. And make certain that all the things that we've come across, that we've really wanted to write about, are still in there.

HRISHI: This is what I love about the return of Ainsley Hayes and Amy and this idea of like the roles that people are going to have in the new administration. Because it doesn't just feel like you're putting periods at the end of sentences, it does feel like you're starting new sentences for us to imagine.

JOHN: Yeah, I mean my hope with these shows is that – and we did the same with *ER* and with I'm sure we're getting close to the end of *Shameless* after eleven years or ten years – I always want it to feel like, with these shows, about families – about a world that feels real – as if it just exists out there somewhere. That you could go back and visit it again, and you'd find those people in places – and you wouldn't – you'd be amused, but you wouldn't be surprised where you found them. You know, doing something that's exactly what they would be doing.

JOSH: So do you imagine – getting back to the reboot possibilities – do you imagine, have you imagined, how you might do it, around whom it might be centered... [laughs]

JOHN: You know, Aaron and I, because the question comes up so often, we kind of check in with each other every year or so, every six months, depending on what year it is, about is there is something that's exciting enough to do it for. I don't think it would be to reboot the show and do 22 episodes. I think it would be – to find some way to check in again and actually see all these characters that we loved and cared about and where they are, and probably just sit there continuing belief in the strength of our constitutional norms, our democracy, the dedication to that democracy...

JOSH: We could use a jolt of that again, John! [crosstalk]

JOHN: [crosstalk] ... is what we'd probably be touching down with. But again – I worry that in rebooting the show, because everything now is just political fodder, for "You're with us or

ag'in [against] us," that it would have to fall into those categories, which I think is a disservice to what the series was.

JOSH: Do you have any sense of legacy protection, like, "It was so good," [crosstalk] and it was so – Right, maybe just leave it?

JOHN: [crosstalk] Yes, yeah, and it lives in a place and particularly now, I hear from people all the time – regularly – it's kind of a regular thing, and you probably both hear the same thing, which is, "I'm showing all of the *West Wings* to my kids."

JOSH: All the time.

HRISHI: Right.

JOHN: All the time. "My teenagers and I just watched all seven years of *West Wing* because I want to show them how it's supposed to work." Right? That's a fabulous legacy to have had some kind of hand in, or participation in, right? So – boy, you don't want to do anything that, you know, disrupts that. And without taking any shots at any of the lovely people who have attempted to reboot favorite shows of the past over the last few years, I don't think they've served the initial success of what it was well. I don't think you can point to anything – I may be forgetting something, because there's so many shows, but – I don't think you can point to anything where that was a great idea.

HRISHI: Do you ever get tired of people asking you about *The West Wing*?

JOHN: No. One of my favorite things is that people, because I've had the great good fortune to be involved in a bunch of different shows, and people will come up to me and say, "I loved your show." And I try and look at 'em and figure out [crosstalk] like which one, and I'm almost always wrong. I'm almost always wrong.

JOSH: [crosstalk] Which show?

HRISHI: That's great!

JOSH: That reflects well on your work!

JOHN: Well, yeah, and you try to do different things...

HRISHI: And I think it reflects well on people too. It taps their capacity to surprise you.

JOHN: Yeah, it does, and constant capacity to surprise you, in the same way that one of our great – and I still have his letter framed, somewhere – one of our great fans of *West Wing* was Ted Stephens, from Alaska, who wrote me four or five times a season, to complain about some position we'd taken, but with clearly never missing a minute of the show, right? One of the stories I love to tell is – I don't know if you were on the show when we did it – we did a senatorial dinner, where they invited us to come, and we all went, and I can't remember, there might have been fundraisers involved, but we ended up in the Rotunda at one of those ridiculous 'ten people to a table' dinners, and I was seated at that time, Daschle was the Majority Leader, and Trent Lott was the Minority Leader, and I got 'em both at the table, with their wives on one side and the other, and they couldn't have been friendlier. And they couldn't have agreed - you couldn't imagine how many things they actually agreed on. We're so much closer to having the same values, and through these fits and starts, which is what Aaron was trying to get at in writing *West Wing*, through these fits and starts of Left and Right and liberal and conservative, we as a country we continue to find a center that works.

So that's just a great experience of being involved and being able to talk about that on the show.

JOSH: Well said.

HRISHI: Thank you so much!

JOHN: Good to see you guys.

HRISHI: That's it for this episode, and for our podcast for this year. Thank you so much for listening. Thanks so much to John Wells for being such an incredible guest, and giving us his thoughts on *The West Wing*. Our thanks to Zach McNees and Margaret Miller, of course, and to Radiotopia. You can find out about all the other shows on Radiotopia who really provide the support for *The West Wing Weekly* in so many ways at Radiotopia.fm. We're off to London to record our live show over there, and when we come back next year, we'll have that to share with everyone. That'll be in the New Year. Until then, Happy Holidays, and Happy New Year.

JOSH: Ok.

HRISHI: Ok.

JOHN: What's next?

[Outro Music]