West Wing or *Left Wing*? The pedagogy of politics in the masterly series of the United States

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For seven seasons, American viewers have had the chance to follow a series that showed, as fiction but very meticulously, internal life at the summit of power in the White House. Directed by Aaron Sorkin, The West Wing *series has set trends. Never before had North American political life been portrayed with such meticulousness. The reactions of critics and the public have been highly favourable towards this non-humorous parody of the American presidency but some right-wing groups have accused it of creating a "parallel reality" comparable with the country's real presidency, that of George Bush.*

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There are very few buildings in the world that arouse the curiosity, attention and interest generated by 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington. The White House is a key setting for world politics, one of the leading centres of intrigue in any terrain, the most absolute seat of power. It must be one of the few buildings that can be recognised the world over, one of the few houses that leaves no-one indifferent when they see it. Consequently it is, and must be, also a privileged setting for fiction. It has all the right conditions.

The White House has been portrayed on many occasions in film and on television. It is believed that *Wilson*, a film from 1945 directed by Henry King, was the first to reconstruct life at the White House with detailed sets. Since then, a whole range of films and TV series have attempted to draw back a little the curtain that obscures the most secret area of the White House from the view of the public at large. But the portrait constructed had never managed the quality and dimension achieved with *The West Wing*.

The West Wing is a true masterpiece, a description that is difficult to beat of how politics works, of how politicians work and how the strings of high politics are moved. Evidently, seven seasons and 156 episodes are a lot of hours of plot and images and there are some sublime moments but also some that could be done without. In general, however, it can be said that people are unanimous in that *The West Wing* is an extraordinary production. It's not a parody, it's not really a portrait but anyone who has followed it closely will have learned a lot about the leading political institution of the United States, about politics in general and about the complicated and difficult North American political process in particular. As a mural of life at the political centre of the United States, it can be said that this is simply an unbeatable production.

The West Wing manages all this and is also an appealing TV production for the public at large, with scripts written

down to the last detail, simply perfectionist stage design and surprising and quite particular production. From the long travelling shots (known as *walk and talk* shots) that regularly mark the passing of the days, to the detailed lighting in each scene, the episodes of *The West Wing* are a compendium of cinematographic quality. A central part of the merit goes undoubtedly to Aaron Sorkin, the main scriptwriter and producer of the series. Sorkin is a young writer who started to shine as a scriptwriter for films such as *A Few Good Men* and who also achieved certain success in his first television series, *Sports Night*. But *The West Wing* has been the series that has catapulted him to fame and with which he has managed to place himself among the elite of Emmy award-winners. Sorkin personally wrote the scripts for the first four seasons and supervised those of the other three. In just its first season it won nine Emmys, followed by a further twenty or so throughout the seven seasons that NBC broadcast the series, specifically from 22 September 1999 to 14 May 2006.

One of the key aspects that Sorkin has known how to take advantage of is that several frontline politicians have worked on the series as advisors, giving it a hitherto unheard of amount of detail with regard to the situations, settings and dialogues. This is the case, most particularly, of Dee Dee Myers, former press secretary for Bill Clinton, who has polished and reviewed the episodes of the series, providing not only her knowledge of politics but especially her knowledge of how the White House works from within and on the cycles for creating news. Perhaps this is why the character of the press secretary for the White House, C. J. Cregg, played during most of the series by Allison Janney, is one of the most successful and interesting.

1. Seven seasons on air

The West Wing was first aired on 22 September 1999. The initial proposal for the series was to follow the life of Sam Seaborn (played by Rob Lowe), one of the advisors to the new Democrat president Josiah *Jed* Bartlet (played superbly in the series by Martin Sheen). However, as the episodes passed, it became clear that limiting the action to Seaborn's adventures was not such a good idea, given the huge galaxy of characters inserted into the dance by the producers and scriptwriters. This annoyed the actor, who disappeared from the series, although afterwards he returned sporadically.

However, it was evident that the decision to portray all the members of the West Wing and their interrelations was much more interesting and established a very strong choral image, full of resources. A set-up was therefore gradually created where each of the main actors was capable of shining with their own light without interfering with the others. And the main characters in the series emerged. The first, President Bartlet (Martin Sheen), who enthused some of the viewers so much that a public campaign was organised calling for the actor to attempt to get to the White House in real life. At his side shone the most specific and intimate circle of power, the summit of the White House, with the Chief of Staff, the methodical Leo McGarry (played by John Spencer); the Communications Director, the worrying Toby Ziegler (Richard Schiff); the deputy Chief of Staff, the impulsive Josh Lyman (Bradley Whitford); the Press Secretary, C. J. Cregg; the First Lady, Abbey (Stockard Channing), and an extensive series of civil servants, members of Congress, military, diplomats and foreign figures that appear very often throughout the seven seasons.

Following the reality of American politics, a president can only hold the position twice so, in the seventh season, the scriptwriters were forced to prepare his replacement. An exhaustion of themes, surely inevitable, and the difficulty of bringing in a new character as a successor, in this case the future president Matt Santos (played by Jimmy Smits) ended up finishing the series amidst the disappointment of a great many followers, who protested vehemently. However, it should be recognised that this was possibly the best decision, as the seven complete seasons broadcast had drawn a mosaic of the presidency of the United States that would have been very difficult to beat and that will become more valuable as the years pass.

Precisely during the last season, and probably once the series' audience difficulties had been noted, some of the most audacious television experiments were carried out on *The West Wing*. Particularly the famous TV debate between Santos and the Republican candidate, Arnold Vinick, paradoxically played by Alan Alda, one of the most progressive actors on the North American scene.

The episode dedicated to the debate is a unique experiment. It was broadcast live, with the actors even improvising some of the answers, using the logo of MSNBC, the information channel continuously compared with the NBC, and the word *"Live"* constantly superimposed on the screen. Even Forrest Sawyer, one of the NBC journalists who, on various occasions, had led debates between real presidential candidates in the United States, accepted to chair this debate. In the end it led to criticism from some viewers, who felt that crossing the boundary between reality and fiction was going too far.

The debate was broadcast on 6 November 2005 and it was highly controversial in the United States since, in the series, the two actors aspiring for the presidency agreed to break the strict rules for this kind of debate and met face to face, talking about any subject, interrupting and not avoiding any kind of challenge. For some political commentators, the broadcasting of this episode made it clear to what extent real official debates are insipid due to the excess of precautions on the part of campaign teams.

This was not the only, nor the first, occasion when *The West Wing* crossed boundaries. Two seasons previously, in episode 518, they had simulated the broadcast of a special report on the work by the Press Secretary of the White House, C. J. Cregg. The report, which pretended to be part of the Access programme, was recorded with a clearly different visual texture, including interviews with C. J. Cregg's main colleagues, where they talked with a naturalness reserved for real interviews and where a voice in off narrated the key events.

The West Wing had previously included a documentary, at the start of the third season, in which former presidents such as Bill Clinton, Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford, and famous politicians such as Henry Kissinger and Leon Panetta had agreed to comment on the resemblance between the real and fictional White House.

2. After 9/11

However, on one previous occasion that was very special, *The West Wing* had already broken with the programme's schema. It was after the attack by Al-Qaeda on New York and Washington in 2001. The whole team worked against the clock to record an episode considered exceptional, as Martin Sheen himself announced in a prior recording, broad-cast on 3 October 2001, one week before the start of the second season proper. The episode, entitled "Isaac and Ishmael", actually dealt with the story of the persecution of an Arab American working in the White House, something that made him a suspect for the intelligence services, although there were no reasons to doubt him, except for some coincidences in name. Seen in perspective, this singular episode became certainly complicated to be broadcast a few weeks after the Al-Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington, with emotions still running high. But, without doubt, its broadcast and the controversy that followed right at the start of the third season helped extraordinarily to consolidate the image of *The West Wing* as a "liberal" series that, in American political language, means "left-wing". Some newspapers were indignant by the episode's content but, in general, the more progressive media applauded the episode and compared it with the view of the "war against terror" that President Bush had started to make explicit. *The Washington Post* even said that *The West Wing* had taken on the role of compass for American politics. The episode was very successful in terms of ratings.

It certainly cannot be denied that the manner in which the political themes were focused in *The West Wing* was highly influenced by liberal approaches. President Bartlet is a Democrat, from New England, a Nobel prize-winner who is surrounded by characters that belong, for one reason or another, to circles considered to be most liberal in American politics. There is no doubt about this, nor is it hidden at any time. Bartlet also has an impressive array of personal characteristics: he is truly brilliant and well educated, he has a sense of humour and is also very thoughtful, he is always concerned about people in the most difficult of situations and, in general, has huge personal and moral integrity, only broken by hiding a serious degenerative disease and, on occasion, an action as president that takes him beyond tolerable limits, surely so that the scriptwriters can exemplify even more how the White House works, where things are almost never black and white

3. *The West Wing* against the White House?

Is Bartlet anti-Bush? It has been speculated that part of the series' success is due to the fact that many viewers enjoy, during the forty-two minutes of each episode, thinking that the real occupants of the White House are not George Bush and his troop of *neocons*. Here the legend of *"The Left Wing"* was born, the name given by the *neocons* in an attempt to discredit the production and place it in the centre of political combat. Some right-wing propagandists were particularly aggressive against the series, among these of note being Chris Lehmann, who stated that it was actually a "revisionist" series that attempted to establish an ideal Democrat presidency in the minds of Americans after the scandals of Clinton's presidency.

But *The West Wing* is not and has almost never been a Manichean series. At no time does it avoid explaining the complex nature of politics and power and this is key to understanding its value. A liberal President, more liberal than Clinton, manages to authorise the clandestine assassination of a foreign leader, the minister of defence of a fictitious country Qumar, who is accused of trying to provoke attacks against the United States. This happens at the end of the third season and the succession of episodes during which this story unfolds is one of the most intense points in the whole series. Seeing a President like Bartlet, first debating with himself in amidst huge and incredibly important moral doubts and then, afterwards, ending up by bloodying his hands is a tremendous lesson in *realpolitik*, which at the time caused a notable impact among viewers. And which, surely, is closer to the reality of the White House than many would like to imagine.

The whole process that leads to this attack is a good example of how problems appear in cycles throughout the series. There are even characters, like the eccentric expert, first, and the ambassador of Great Britain, afterwards, Lord John Marbury (played by Roger Rees) who appear with enormous gaps between each appearance but always maintaining coherence with the political events being unfolded. Lord John Marbury is, by the way, one of the few characters who represent at some time a role close to humour. It cannot be said that he is humorous but the caricature of a British expert involved (both affectionate as well as direct), is so powerful and so well played that it's difficult not to let out a giggle every now and again, especially in view of the misery shown by Leo McGarry, always so circumspect, given the discomfort of having to talk, or worse still negotiate with him. Lord John Marbury, however, is a special protagonist in another episode full of *realpolitik*. Being ambassador, he is sent to protest to the White House for an invitation given to a Sinn Féin leader, and manages to express the formal protest while, at the same time, hinting that the invitation is good for the peace process underway in Ireland.

As happens with so many other characters in the series, Lord John Marbury does not say anything stupid, not at all. From the perspective of international politics, *The West Wing* is a perfectly documented series that deals with a whole range of situations that American foreign policy must deal with. The Middle East is obviously the inevitable centre of most of the situations. But throughout the seven seasons we also experience conflicts with the European Union (with tractors in the streets of Brussels waiting for the United States delegation), conflicts with Latin American guerrillas and drug smugglers, episodes of crisis with unstable Russian leaders, etc. Perhaps China and Cuba are the two countries that do not come under the scrutinising gaze of *The West Wing* with the intensity that might be expected.

With regard to the Middle East, throughout the different seasons viewers have been faced with all kinds of situations. From negotiations at Camp David, tense and extraordinarily high quality in terms of narrative, to confinements of the Palestinian President, as well as bus explosions against Jewish citizens and relatively obvious pressure from some lobbies. Although Toby Ziegler is Jewish, it cannot be said that the series takes any particular side. In any case, it supports the view expressed by the Clinton administration, taken on board but with a lot of reservation by the Bush administration, according to which conflict can only be resolved by two independent states that share Jerusalem as a capital. The epicentre of the treatment of the Middle East crisis perhaps arrives at the end of the sixth season, when a delegation from Congress visits the Middle East and suffers a Palestinian attack that kills Admiral Percy Fitzwallace (played by John Amos), a great friend of President Bartlet, and Donna Moss is injured (played by Janel Moloney), one of the most powerful secondary characters in the series, who has an ongoing flirtatious but never resolved

relationship with her boss, Josh Lyman, which at the end of the seventh season is specified as one of the few sexual relations visible in the series.

The complications of domestic political life in the United States, generally more unknown and intricate, are also dealt with in great detail. The seven seasons cover practically all situations that might be expected to affect a President. And the dramatic resolution always follows the rules agreed by the Constitution and political practice, be it of the White House or of Congress.

Some particularly controversial points, such as impeaching the President, are dealt with at some time or other in the series. In some cases, specific parallelisms can be established between the series and reality, although generally the series attempts to escape the possibility of any details that might identify real presidents. However, throughout the controversy unleashed by making public the degenerative disease suffered by President Bartlet, which he had hidden from public opinion, are echoes of the lies given by President Clinton concerning his relations with Monica Lewinsky.

4. Lessons from politics

When the situations are particularly complex, the script-writers take advantage and give real lessons of constitutionalism. This is what happens, for example, during the fourth season, when a terrorist group kidnaps the President's daughter and he temporarily resigns, as he feel he cannot carry out the affairs of the country with the equanimity required. To do so, he resorts to the 25th amendment of the Constitution. But as the Vice President has also resigned because of a scandal, the line of succession must be clarified, a line which, as explained by the episode, continues with the Speaker of the House of Representatives. The role of the characters on the staff who are not normally in the front line of public knowledge (as is the case of political pollsters and the combination of pollsters-assessors) is constantly highlighted throughout the series, in the case of pollsters, surely because one of the most well-known in real life, Patrick Caddell, is another of the top class advisors for *The West Wing*.

The number of small details that are typical of the White House appearing from time to time in the content of *The West Wing* is spectacular. When the President is about to give the State of the Union address, one of his ministers must remain confined in an unknown location, precisely to stop any attack from completely destroying the line of command. In episode 39, the figure of a filibuster appears, a politician who talks non-stop for hours and hours only to stop a bill from being passed and thereby delay it. And there is also the final act of Bartlet's Presidency, consisting of giving a presidential pardon to Toby Ziegler, one of the best members of his staff, who had been forced to resign for having leaked highly confidential information (in an episode reminiscent in real life of the Valerie Plame affair) and who was sentenced for treason. The presidential pardon is usually one of the most complicated episodes in a President's life and, traditionally, is used to clean up part of his past.

In short, *The West Wing* is a series that is complicated to characterise. It is a parody, a drama, in fact, but it also has a manifest desire for political pedagogy and does so with great quality, without hardly resorting to humour. But, for this very reason, it is inevitable that Jed Bartlet's White House should be considered by George W. Bush's America as not always pleasant opposition. Its role as a mirror to a reality that does not please everyone is, in this respect, particularly remarkable, and gives it the value of criticism and truly significant confrontation. But, having said this, only through the greatest obfuscation can one possibly deny the quality of such a project that has raised the bar for political fiction on television forever.

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