

WHAT'S NEXT

FOREWORD BY
AARON SORKIN



A BACKSTAGE PASS TO
THE
WEST
WING

ITS CAST AND CREW,
AND ITS ENDURING
LEGACY OF SERVICE



INTRODUCTION BY
ALLISON JANNEY

Melissa Fitzgerald
and Mary McCormack

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FROM MELISSA:

To my parents, Carol and Jim Fitzgerald. You model what it is to live a life of meaning and service. This—and everything—is for you.

FROM MARY:

To my mother, Norah McCormack, who approached the world with joy, empathy, and an unshakable sense of justice. I miss you.

I think you would get a kick out of this book.

And to my father, Bill McCormack,

you led by example, in service as in everything. Your final words will stay with me forever: “The message is: To give as much as you can, everywhere you can, for as long as you can. Keep your hand out. Keep giving.”

FROM MELISSA AND MARY:

To our perennial Number One, Martin Sheen, whose dedication to and joy in service inspires and motivates us every day. We love you.

And to Aaron Sorkin,

who sat alone in a room, staring at a blank page, and conjured up the world of *The West Wing*:

You created a family. We are deeply grateful.

FOREWORD

BY AARON SORKIN

My agent had asked me if I'd like to have lunch with John Wells. I'd never met John, but I knew him by reputation as the producer of high-end dramatic television, such as *E.R.* and *China Beach*. I wasn't sure why I was being asked to meet with him. I had a pretty good career writing movies, and I knew nothing about television. I liked television as much as anyone else, I just didn't know anything about it.

"He just wants to say hello," my agent told me.

I could do that. A lunch was scheduled for the following week.

As it happened, the night before the lunch I had some friends over for dinner. One of the friends was Akiva Goldsman, who'd not yet won his Academy Award for writing *A Beautiful Mind*. I mentioned the lunch I'd be having the next day, and he said he thought I'd like television.

"This is just a lunch to say hello. I'm not writing a television series."

Later that night, Akiva and I went off to sneak a cigarette in the small office I kept at home. He pointed at the wall to a poster for *The American President*, a romantic comedy I'd written a few years earlier.

"You know what would make a good series? That. If you made it about senior staffers at the White House."

"This is just a lunch to say hello," I said. "I'm not writing a television series."

The next day. Lunch. I walked into the restaurant and immediately saw that this was not just a lunch to say hello. John Wells was seated at a table with several executives from Warner Bros. Television. "So what do you want to do?" John said. At that moment, I could have said, "I'm sorry, there's been a mistake; I don't have anything to pitch."

Instead, I said, "I want to do a show about senior staffers at the White House." John reached his hand across the table and said, "We've got a deal."

I was terrified. I had to write a one-hour pilot. It never occurred to me that the pilot might get picked up to series and I'd also have to write Episode 2, Episode 3, and so on, until we were inevitably canceled after thirteen episodes. After all, there was no way a network was going to put this on the air. Shows about politics didn't work. Moreover, in popular culture our leaders are portrayed as either Machiavellian or complete dolts; but in this show, due to the romantic and idealistic style of my writing, our leaders would be as hyper-competent and dedicated as the doctors and nurses on hospital shows, the cops on police shows, and the lawyers on legal dramas. Would the audience really stand for that?

They did.

NBC ordered thirteen episodes. Then ordered the "back nine." Then a second season and, in the blink of an eye, a seventh. I wrote the first eighty-eight episodes of the series before stepping down at the end of season 4. And for that time, I had the best job in show business.

I'm grateful to Mary and Melissa for keeping all these memories alive and sharing them with fans of the show. Welcome to Warner Bros. Stage 23 and the set of *The West Wing*.

INTRODUCTION

BY ALLISON JANNEY

Apparently, this all began at my house. Or at least my friend Ilana's house, because that's where my birthday party was in 2019, when Melissa Fitzgerald and Mary McCormack went to the table to get a piece of cake at the same time, and ten minutes later came back with not only cake (vanilla, chocolate frosting) but also an absolutely ludicrous plan to write this book. Ludicrous because it just seemed so...big. I think back on those *West Wing* years and it's an almost overwhelming confusion of memories, friendships, late nights, walk-and-talks, volunteering and advocating together, sharing so much with so many people. It was years, but it was over in an instant. How would they go about capturing all that? Where would they even begin, and where would they find the time? It was a fun conversation to have over a piece of cake at a birthday party, and they would both leave the party, resume their lives, and forget it ever happened.

Except, the one thing you don't do with Melissa Fitzgerald and Mary McCormack, you don't underestimate them. When they decide to do something, they get it done.

Both Mary and Melissa are activists who care passionately about their causes—Melissa cares so much that she left Hollywood and moved to Washington, DC, to dedicate herself to advocacy full time. When they first mentioned to me that they wanted to write an insider's book about *The West Wing* through the lens of service, it all started to come into focus for me. After all, the show itself was just that—stories of people in the East Wing of the West Wing, each of whom is there because of their own lifelong devotion to serving their country. Aaron's scripts always seemed full of that reverence for service, whether it was actively part of the dialogue or—more often—a feeling that was there under every scene.

But what they've done with the book that follows is something I couldn't have imagined they would be able to do so well: They've captured the feeling of what it was like to be part of this show. It's a stroll back through Soundstage 23 on the Warner Bros. lot. It's full of stories from on set and off, full of insights and anecdotes, and it's full of all the voices you know, and many you may not have met yet.

Somehow they brought those years back to life, and that is a profound gift to all of us who were part of it, and I hope for all of you who watched it. They call it a "backstage pass," and I can tell you, that's exactly what it is.

So, thank you, Mary and Melissa, for honoring this show we all love, and for setting down on paper so many memories from so many people. I thought I was big enough to resist the obvious joke, but dammit I'm not. This idea you had together at my birthday party years ago was certainly no piece of cake, and you almost bit off more than you could chew. But you did it. This introduction is really nothing more than the icing on... You know what? I'll stop.

—ALLISON JANNEY

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS

This book is about *The West Wing* and the army of dedicated people who created it, starred in it, watched it, and kept it moving forward for seven seasons. It's also about what the world of the show, and the characters who inhabited it, represented: a dedication to service. It was assembled from a number of sources, chief among which are more than a hundred interviews we conducted from 2021 to 2024 with members of the cast and crew, including actors, writers, directors, and producers; designers, technicians, executives, and casting directors; and even a handful of devoted (and in some cases, prominent) fans, aka "Wingnuts." (Note: Brackets are periodically used for clarity or to change the tense of a statement, and a full list of sources by chapter is available at the end of the book.)

Supplementing these primary-source Q and As, we were fortunate to have available to us the extensive archival material that living in the twenty-first century allows. These sources range from published articles, broadcast interviews, and DVD commentaries to websites, blogs, and podcasts. The abundance of this content has been particularly meaningful to us as it pertains to those now unavailable to share their stories, including and especially our dear friends—gone but never forgotten—John Spencer and Kathryn Joosten.

Finally, we are singularly indebted to *The West Wing Weekly* and its hosts, Josh Malina and Hrishikesh Hirway. Without this brilliant, insightful, enlightening podcast, we could not have painted as full a picture of the show as we hope to have done in the following pages.

We are deeply grateful to *all* of you.

PROLOGUE

Up above a small, unmarked door leading to Soundstage 23 on the Warner Bros. lot, a red light sits mounted, silent and still. This is one of numerous so-called wig-wags, or red-eyes—some inside, some out—that alert cast and crew (and occasional stray visitors) that cameras are rolling. It warns them to stay out, steer clear, or at least keep mouse-level quiet, until someone somewhere inside yells, “Cut!,” a loud bell rings, and the din of actors, artists, and operators suddenly fills the space inside like a collective exhale. Right now, though, that outside red light is off. Right now, it’s just sitting there, waiting. Waiting for the next take to begin, waiting for the magic words that serve as the run-up to “Action!”—words like “on a bell...” and “rolling...” Waiting...for Martin Sheen.

It’s safe to say most of us on set that day idolized Martin. Honestly, who wouldn’t? An acclaimed star of countless venerated films—*Badlands*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Wall Street*, *The American President*, to name a few—he was also an icon in the realm of social justice. The patriarch of a famous acting family, Martin was a bona fide movie star, a widely respected member of the Hollywood community, and a consummate professional.

So, of course, it wasn’t that Martin was late or missing. But, just before the director got ready to roll, you could see something happening, right over there, just steps away. That was Martin, walking around to every single background artist, the actors often referred to as “extras,” despite their absolutely fundamental contribution. That was Martin, playing host to person after person, welcoming them into his “home,” treating these new faces like old friends. That was Martin, this deeply kind and generous spirit, engaged in a genuine exchange with each one of them.

“I’m Martin Sheen. Welcome. What’s your name?”

“Nice to meet you. Thank you for joining us today!”

“Hi, I’m Martin. How you doin’ today?”

“Hi there—good to see you! So glad you’re here!”

That was Martin.

Watching this time-consuming exercise, I stood there perplexed, wondering what was going on. “What is he *doing*?” And then it dawned on me: He was teaching us. He was showing everyone on set how this was all going to go down, today and for however long we would stay on the air. He was letting us know, from the beginning—even before the cameras rolled on him—that how we act off camera is just as important as how we act on camera. He was letting us know that every single person who was part of *The West Wing* would be treated with dignity, respect, and gratitude; that every single person had an important role to play and that every role would be valued. We were all a part of the team. That gesture, which he repeated without fail for each season that followed, established a culture and a simple, powerful set of values that we all treasure and carry with us to this day. “Watch,” his unspoken lesson went. “This is how we treat each other.”

(This is Melissa, by the way. Mary was hanging out on movie sets with Clint Eastwood at the time, I think...or Russell Crowe or Robert Duvall. In any case, this seems like a good moment for us to welcome you to the book. For most of it you won’t know which one of us is speaking—though, of course, you’re welcome to guess. But a quick heads-up: every now and again we’ll check in with thoughts, commentary, or insights that come specifically from one of us. With that, as they say, on with the show! Let’s see...what’s next? Oh yeah—“It was 1999...”)

It was 1999, just a handful of days into shooting a new, high-profile, big-budget series for NBC, and the stress level was, well...not, like, “through the roof” or anything, but we weren’t

exactly sipping mai tais on the beach either. It was somewhere between the two—closer to “roof” than “mai tais.” That’s what I’m *told*, anyway. (This is Mary. I show up in season 5. Maybe I would’ve been on sooner, but, according to some pilot casting notes we unearthed during the research for this book, I was apparently “not interested in series work.” Great call, right? Career advice? I’m right here. Seriously—I’m the worst.)

Now, the first thing you need to understand about production is this: If cast and crew are new to each other—especially early on, like when shooting the first episode, aka the “pilot”—it can be exciting (of course), but it can be stressful as well (also of course). The second thing you need to understand about production is that every literal *minute* on set is expensive. Even back in the late ’90s, where our story begins, we’re talking thousands upon thousands of dollars a minute. So, naturally, no one likes to waste a single second. Especially the executives overseeing the show.

Yet there we were, standing around. No “on a bell...” no “rolling...” No “sound speed” and nothing even close to “Action!” And, still, no Martin. (SPOILER: He’d get on his mark once he finished with every single handshake.)



There’s a common saying in TV: “As Number One goes, so goes the show.” This refers to the ranking of cast members on a call sheet. Martin was Number One. (John Spencer, who played chief of staff Leo McGarry, was Number Two.) The idea is, the person with that top billing in the cast sets the tone for everyone else. As Melissa saw on day one, on this show Martin was our walking, talking primer. When “crew lunch” came and the background artists filed to their separate catering line—it’s the norm for background artists to eat separately (different food, at different times, in a different area) from the rest of the cast—Martin wouldn’t hear of it. “We’re all going to eat together,” he insisted. “We’re a family. Families eat together.” This moment above all instituted the cardinal rule of *The West Wing*: “Families eat together.”

To the millions of people who tuned in to seven seasons of the series on NBC—and to those viewers who gave it new life on Bravo and Netflix and, now, the app formerly known as HBO Max—the characters on *The West Wing* seemed like a family. A family of smart, committed, but flawed patriots who cared deeply about America and the world beyond its borders. They watched as beloved (if occasionally boneheaded and arrogant) characters would hustle, cajole, flirt, lobby, joke, fight tooth and nail, and, more than anything, walk-and-talk—all in service to a higher calling, to a country they truly revered. Taking up critical issues of the day, Jed and Leo, C.J. and Toby, Josh and Donna and Charlie and the rest of the gang, aimed to solve problems big and small, to make life better, sweepingly or by degrees. And while they didn’t always hit it out of the park, even when they failed, they went down swinging.

Who was the monk who wrote, “I don’t always know the right thing to do, Lord, but I think the fact that I want to please you *pleases* you”?

—LEO TO PRESIDENT BARTLET, “POSSE COMITATUS”

From the start, a commitment to service was in the bones of *The West Wing*, in its DNA. It was the ethos of a show designed to be, in the words of creator Aaron Sorkin, “a love letter to public service.” That said, you can’t get people interested in service if they’re not watching. As Aaron has told countless journalists countless times, it was an hour a week devoted to “telling good stories.”

And Lord knows there were lots of good stories. But between the smart, interwoven

narratives, the periodic flourishes of workplace romance, and the back-and-forth banter, Aaron also managed to offer up a weekly civics case study, one laced with inspiration, a robust sense of patriotic optimism, and a bold ambition too. On top of all that, his stories seemed to steer the conversation toward the better angels of our nature. But don't tell him that. After all, Aaron's the one who famously said, "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."

You think I think that an artist's job is to speak the truth. An artist's job is to captivate you for however long we've asked for your attention. If we stumble into truth, we got lucky.
—TABITHA FORTIS TO TOBY, "THE U.S. POET LAUREATE"

Not unlike the show, this book is about service as much as entertainment. Over the years, lending our voices to issues and causes we care about, the cast of *The West Wing* got involved and stayed involved. (That feeling, as Josh Lyman once famously told a wide-eyed Charlie Young, "it doesn't go away.")

Different causes are near and dear to different members of the *West Wing* family, but whenever someone sends out the bat signal, we all respond to the call. The cast text chain lights up with details about this cause or that, and what any or all of us can do to help. And then...we get to work. More often than not, the keeper of the signal (and to be clear, this is Mary talking now) is Melissa Fitzgerald, C.J.'s always sunny shadow, born smiling with a briefing book in her hand and trailing one step behind.

ALLISON JANNEY: I may have played Melissa's boss on *The West Wing*, but in real life, she's my boss, no doubt about it.

DULÉ HILL: If Mary asks you to do something—a book or whatever—there's no way to say no. If you need to negotiate a hostage situation, she's the one for the job.

LAWRENCE O'DONNELL: When you're growing up in a big family, you never know who's going to be the glue who holds the family together long after you've all gone your separate ways. In the *West Wing* family, that turned out to be Melissa and Mary. Melissa has something uncommon in the acting community and that is an organized mind. She organizes us in ways that no one on Earth could. Martin and Melissa are kind of the heart and soul of the place. And Mary is a force of nature. Give her an impossible task in support of a good cause and she has this uncanny ability to inspire others to jump on board without even realizing they've signed on to do it.

BRADLEY WHITFORD: Mary and Melissa are two of the bossiest people I've ever met. They said they're writing a book and that I had to participate. I was afraid to say no.

Here's the bottom line: Just as Aaron considered *The West Wing* a love letter to public service, we see *What's Next* as a love letter to *The West Wing*, the people who made it, and the fans who loved it and were inspired by it. This, of course, includes the superfans, aka the "Wingnuts." On the off chance you aren't aware of this term, we'll be clear: If you're reading this book, odds are good you are one. We all are. Welcome.

Thanks to scores of interviews with members of our *West Wing* family—actors and writers, directors and designers, gaffers and grips—you're about to get a backstage pass to the Warner Bros. lot, to our stages and trailers, to best boys and prop masters, set dressers, script supervisors, and background actors. These are the army of artists who made the show go. In addition, we'll take a deep dive into how the series came together, from its inception to the final FADE OUT. We'll also dispel some popular *West Wing* rumors and, while we're at it, maybe start a few new ones. (Ask us about the time Josh Malina tried to break a hundred at a kids' lemonade stand.)

As we relive classic moments from *The West Wing*, as you virtually walk-and-talk with your favorite White House staffers, we'll periodically regale you with stories about *our* service

journeys, like participating in campaigns and advocating for issues we care about. We hope you'll be inspired to learn more about those organizations (our own personal "Big Blocks of Cheese") that have kept us coming back to one another year after year.

This spirit—of continually working together, of seeking new and meaningful ways to deepen our connections and maybe do a little good along the way—is not unlike the one that guided *The West Wing*. It's the same spirit that went into this book. It is the spirit embodied by Jed Bartlet, the one captured in the rousing phrase he uttered so often across seven seasons of the show: "What's next?"

What's next? Turn the page.

PART I



RUNNING FOR OFFICE

Conceiving the Show



ONE

ORIGIN STORY

The West Wing Pilot

In 1998, Aaron Sorkin, acclaimed Broadway playwright and the writer of lauded films like *A Few Good Men*, *Malice*, and *The American President*, had never really considered writing for TV. But, as Aaron alludes to in his Foreword, on the advice of his agent, he had agreed to meet up with John Wells, a producer who had come off the critical darling *China Beach* to executive produce and write another critical darling, the ratings-monster hospital show *ER*. The night before the meeting, Aaron had been hosting some friends, among whom was screenwriter Akiva Goldsman. Just a few years later, Akiva would win the Academy Award for his feature screenplay *A Beautiful Mind*. On this night, though, he was slipping down to the basement to sneak a cigarette with his friend. Mid-smoke break, Goldsman turned to Aaron and said, “You know what would make a good television series? That.” He was pointing at a poster of *The American President*. Akiva remarked that “there doesn’t have to be a romance, just focus on a senior staffer.” To Aaron this sounded like a good idea, but...“I’m not going to be doing a television series.” That declaration lasted less than eighteen hours.

As Aaron would tell *The Hollywood Reporter* more than a decade later—as he’s told members of the *West Wing* family over the years—his expectations for the meeting with John weren’t remotely career oriented. He approached their get-together as more of a fan.

“I wanted to hear stories about *China Beach* and *ER*,” but, the former musical theater major confessed, “I especially wanted to hear about his years as stage manager for *A Chorus Line*.” The moment Aaron walked into the restaurant, though, he realized that the meeting was going to be something more than a “Hello, how are you?” affair. In what you might call a friendly sort of ambush, waiting there with John Wells were a pair of agents and some Warner Bros. studio executives.

“Right after I sat down, John said, ‘So what do you want to do?’ and instead of saying, ‘I think there’s been a misunderstanding, I don’t have an idea for a television series,’ which would’ve been honest, I said, ‘I want to do a television series about senior staffers at the White House.’ John just looked at me and said...‘You got a deal.’”

Years later, John reflected on the first of what would become myriad conversations about the project. “We talked about how Aaron had spent a lot of time preparing the script for *The American President* with the staffers who worked in the [actual] *West Wing*, and how he hadn’t been able to write about them as much as he wanted to in the movie.” (**MELISSA:** In *The American President* a recently widowed commander in chief, played by Michael Douglas, jockeys over matters of policy and politics, all while single parenting a teenage daughter and falling for an environmental lobbyist who bears an uncanny resemblance to Annette Bening. President Shepherd is supported by a team of hyper-articulate, passionate, overworked, and idealistic staffers—sensing a trend?—and a best friend-cum-chief of staff fans of *The West Wing* would find eerily familiar.)

Aaron was intrigued by the hallowed halls he’d gotten to know while working on the movie. He was interested in a political narrative that took place, as he has often put it, “during the two minutes before and after what we see on CNN.” And it wasn’t just that. “I like things that take

place behind the scenes,” he says, “whether it’s behind the scenes at the White House, behind the scenes at a naval courtroom, or behind the scenes at a national cable sports show.” Aaron had always been attracted to workplace shows, and this—the West Wing of the White House—was undeniably a glamorous workplace in which to plant his flag. “I thought I would tell a contemporary story of kings and palaces,” he says. “It appealed to a sense of romanticism and idealism that I have.”

Now it was just a matter of getting started, which, for Aaron, is always the hardest part. “If I’m writing a script, really ninety percent of it would be walking around, climbing the walls, just trying to put the idea together. The final ten percent would be writing it.” Fortunately, his first draft of *The American President* had been extremely long. Typically, a screenplay runs anywhere from 90 to 120 pages. This one came in at 385 pages, about the length of *four* screenplays! Choosing from several “tiny shards of ideas” woven into those nearly four hundred first-draft pages, he landed on one involving Cuban refugees. From that kernel, Aaron began to sketch out the underpinnings of the pilot.

Selecting a handful of key senior White House jobs, starting with the president’s chief of staff, press secretary, and communications director, Aaron looked to populate his “palace.” To a harried, thriving, whirling-dervish ecosystem within these halls of power, he added a collection of well-intentioned if flawed deputies, assistants, and staffers and gave it all a propulsive verbal energy. This West Wing, Aaron knew from the start, would be marked by a collegial group of fast-talking, whip-smart, highly competent people, who would, as he put it, “lose as much as they win, but we’re going to understand that they wake up every morning wanting to do good. That was really the spirit behind *The West Wing*.”

The people that 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.

—AINSLEY HAYES TO HER REPUBLICAN FRIENDS, “IN THIS WHITE HOUSE”

Armed with a six-series deal at NBC, and excited by Aaron’s idea, executive producer John Wells took it to the network, telling them he wanted to make the pilot as part of his deal. It didn’t go well. “The American audience isn’t interested in politics,” Wells was told. Additionally, given the political climate at that time, the subject was, in the view of the executives, nothing short of toxic. Plus, Sunday mornings were wall-to-wall politics on all the major networks. Was there really an appetite for *more*? It was a fair question.

At that moment, the White House was mired in a sex scandal involving Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky. During the time Aaron was writing the pilot, every newspaper, magazine, and cable news show was breathlessly reporting the sordid “presidential intern” story around the clock. “It was hard, at least for Americans,” Aaron says, “to look at the White House and think of anything but a punch line.”

By early 1999, Aaron had finished writing the pilot and submitted it to Warner Bros. What happened next may constitute the most important step in the development of *The West Wing*. On February 22, 1999, veteran studio executive Peter Roth left his post at Fox and 20th Century Fox Television to become president of Warner Bros. Television. Given a stack of scripts representing the potential slate for the upcoming season, he pored through them all. He wasn’t exactly wowed by most of what he read, but a silver lining came shining through. This one script—*The West Wing*—knocked him out.

“I thought, ‘This is brilliant,’ ” Peter told us. “‘This is as smart, as powerful, as well written as anything I have *ever* read!’ ” That was the weekend of February 22. That Monday, Peter picked up the phone and dialed the writer.

“Hey, Aaron,” he said. “You don’t know me—I’m the new guy. I just want you to know, I

read your script and it may be one of the best scripts I've ever read. The only thing that I feel sort of compelled to tell you is that in the history of broadcast television, there has never been a successful series set in Washington, DC."

As a real student of television, Peter Roth believed he knew why. "People don't want the institution of the presidency to be sullied or to be ballyhooed. Whatever the reasons"—and this he said to Aaron—"Washington just hasn't worked." Aaron's near instantaneous response, according to Peter, went something along the lines of "Well, why the fuck should I care about *that*?" Today, Peter laughs at the memory with a sense of admiration. "I sat back in my chair," he told us, "and said, 'You know what, Aaron? I'm embarrassed. You're absolutely right. The fact that it's never worked doesn't mean that it *can't* work.'"

Setting aside Aaron's bravado and Peter's unbridled support, the project, it seemed, had its back against the wall. Luckily, the structure of John Wells's deal was such that NBC had to either make the show or give it back to him to set up someplace else. But between the subject matter's meager past performance and the current state of political affairs, an uphill battle was the best they could hope for. Ultimately, a deal was struck. NBC would make the show. There was just one catch—they wanted to wait a year.

In the meantime, Aaron had followed up his *West Wing* pilot by writing another fast-paced workplace show, the half-hour dramedy *Sports Night*. Set in the world of a fictionalized *SportsCenter* (ESPN's nightly highlights program), *Sports Night* aired on ABC for two critically acclaimed seasons. The success of that show was due in no small part to what would become one of TV's most celebrated dynamic duos—Aaron Sorkin and his new and trusted creative partner, producing director Tommy Schlamme. Tommy had come on board at the recommendation of John Wells, who had hired him years earlier as a director on *ER*.

To this day, Tommy looks back fondly on the evening of not-so-light reading that changed his life forever. "My agent sent me Aaron's scripts for both *The West Wing* and *Sports Night*. I read them the same night, called [my agent back] at, like, twelve thirty, and went, 'These are the two best scripts I've ever read!'"

Even two decades later, Tommy's effusiveness for the writing remains unbridled. "When I read his words, there was just energy, I would read standing up!" Even on a page with a big block of monologue, without another person talking, to Tommy both scripts still felt...almost musical. "I loved *Sports Night*, but everything I wanted to do was in the *West Wing* script, everything I wanted to say about America...about my immigrant parents coming to this country...my sense of patriotism...was there. I saw this show right away. It just was so clear to me."

To that point in his career, Tommy had been best known for directing in the half-hour space, so the timing—on *his* end anyway—couldn't have worked out better. Since *The West Wing* was delayed by the Clinton sex scandal, he started working on *Sports Night*, a show squarely in his dramedy wheelhouse.

With Tommy excited about being on board, Wells went to NBC with a compelling "dream team" pitch: "It'll be Aaron and Tommy and me. Aaron's going to write them, Tommy's going to direct them, and I'll produce. You told me if I signed this six-series deal with you, you were going to make stuff, I want to make it, so let's make it!"

And with that, the *West Wing* pilot got the green light.



Looking back, it's hard to fathom anyone seeing Aaron's initial pitch as anything but a dead-perfect fastball down the heart of the plate. A crew of quick-witted, passionate, unsung public servants sacrificing the prime of their lives for the betterment of their country? It's an idea so patriotic that it's practically romantic, and uniquely *American*. At the time, though, even after the project got the go-ahead, in the halls of NBC there was a lingering skepticism that this "dream team" could pull it off.

Aaron was Aaron, sure, and he'd teamed up with John and Tommy. Still, even if the series were flawlessly written, directed, acted, and produced, a nagging doubt persisted. Could a show about not-so-glamorous civil servants navigating cramped hallways and discussing policy minutiae command a large audience, let alone hold it week to week? And could a clarion call to public service, however rousing and romantic, compete with the sex, drugs, and rock and roll—scape prime-time viewers had come to expect?

They were fair questions. But while the "rock and roll" would have to wait, Aaron's pilot script came armed with a little "sex and drugs" up its sleeve. That was thanks to a certain dashing deputy communications director, who can wear the *hell* out of a suit but can't quite manage to keep his pants on or his pagers straight. Yes, God bless Sam and that mix-up with Laurie the call girl. Without them, we would've been robbed of his succinct—if hilariously desperate—sum-up of pretty much everything that went down in the pilot:

Ms. O'Brien, I understand your feelings, but please believe me when I tell you that I am a nice guy having a bad day. I just found out the *Times* is publishing a poll that says that a considerable portion of Americans feel that the White House has lost energy and focus, a perception that's not likely to be altered by the video footage of the President riding his bicycle into a tree. As we speak, the Coast Guard are fishing Cubans out of the Atlantic Ocean, while the governor of Florida wants to blockade the port of Miami, a good friend of mine is about to get fired for going on television and making sense, and it turns out that I accidentally slept with a prostitute last night!

—SAM SEABORN TO LEO'S DAUGHTER, MALLORY, "PILOT"

To sidestep the reality that *real* West Wing conversations typically take place in small offices with the doors closed, Tommy suggested setting the script's wide-ranging policy debates on the move. Winding in and out of hallways and offices, passing the baton from this character to that, and then to another...and another, Aaron and his director endowed the "world" of the show with a whirlwind feel. This stop-and-go-go-go choreography had the added benefit of showing off production designer Jon Hutman's breathtaking set, which actual West Wing staffers would later marvel "looked better than the real thing!"

If you go to the real West Wing it looks like a boring law office.... The moulding is frayed, the carpet is a little dirty.... By putting windows in the Roosevelt Room...they created this maze of rooms you can see through. The bullpen has glass, where the writer's bullpen in the real West Wing is on the bottom floor and it looks like a series of closets.

—RICHARD SCHIFF, EMPIREONLINE

Despite all the pop of the dialogue, punctuated by soaring speeches, the pilot script—early on, anyway—still drew concerns at NBC. In a meeting with the network, Aaron got the distinct impression that they were having trouble following the various plot lines. There was, the executives suggested, "too much dialogue" and not enough time spent on each story. One pitched the alternative of a populist celebrity president, along the lines of Minnesota's then governor Jesse Ventura (the former pro wrestler turned Reform Party politician) or maybe "a...race car driver?" Another mused that perhaps instead of *talking* about the plight of the Cuban refugees, one White House staffer could rent a boat, jump in, and speed off to save the immigrants himself. The network note, according to Brad Whitford, lived somewhere in the vicinity of "We need to get Sam and Josh in the water."

"I honestly didn't know if I was being messed with or not," Aaron later recalled. "And I didn't want to insult the executive or appear to be difficult to work with. So I said, 'That's worth

thinking about.’ ”

On the other hand, to anyone remotely familiar with the inner workings of the White House, the teleplay was nothing short of a masterpiece. Indeed, when the *West Wing* pilot script made its way to longtime Senate aide and seasoned politico Lawrence O’Donnell, it floored him. “I read it and I’m kind of stunned,” the future MSNBC host (and *West Wing* writer-producer) remembers. “I’ve been in that room...the interior Oval Office...in a governing meeting. Aaron Sorkin never has. He’s just imagining this stuff. How did he get this so *right*?”

Down the road, of course, the script would be praised as one of the great pilots of all time. Critics, historians, and film school professors would celebrate the groundbreaking ways in which it established character, braided storylines, and conveyed a palpable sense of stakes and urgency. This, despite the fact that President Bartlet wasn’t an alum of NASCAR or the WWE, just an old-fashioned New England governor, and Josh didn’t rescue fleeing Cuban refugees personally, he just relentlessly worked the levers of power to help make it happen.

A surrogate for President Biden’s 2020 campaign, Kevin Walling is a leading Democratic voice on Fox News who often references *The West Wing* in his political analysis. (He’s also these three things: a dear friend, a fan of the show since high school, and the first and most persistent voice pushing us to write this book.) “The story arcs of *The West Wing* were, for many of us now working in politics, our first introductions to public policy,” he says. “Whether it involved serious issues like immigration, gun control, military interventions, or navigated the intricacies of a government shutdown, every episode provided a crash course in what governing could actually look like without ever having to dilute the complexity of each issue.”

To Kathleen York (congresswoman Andrea Wyatt, aka Toby’s ex-wife), that level of sophistication, and the level of trust *The West Wing* would show in its audience, stood out. “It was a broadcast network series that didn’t spoon-feed information or emotional moments. That was really novel. In network television,” Kathleen continued, “the note you always get is: clarify, explain...simplify, so no one’s left out. But Aaron Sorkin is a rocket—you get on or you don’t.”

Before that rocket had a chance to take off, though, Aaron’s script was put into the proverbial “graveyard drawer,” alongside a depressingly large number of other unproduced pilots. And it may well have stayed there, if not for a change of network leadership. The new president of NBC West Coast, Scott Sassa, pulled the script out, read it, and called Aaron to say NBC was going to shoot the pilot. “I was inexperienced enough in that job,” Sassa would tell *The Hollywood Reporter*, “that I didn’t know why I should not like it, so we set it up.”

To any writer almost anywhere on the planet, the president of the network issuing a pilot order for your script would be pretty big news. And we imagine it must have been for Aaron as well. But it also had to have posed a bit of a dilemma. By then, he and Tommy were hip-deep in production on *Sports Night* for ABC. Could Aaron handle the chaotic slog of writing *two* weekly series simultaneously? After all, a single TV schedule turns a showrunner’s life upside down. But two series, especially when you’re doing the vast majority of the writing on both? Fortunately, Aaron was armed with support from Tommy and John, along with an impressive team of writers, consultants, and research assistants.

Act as if ye have faith and faith shall be given to you. Put another way: Fake it ’til you make it.

—LEO TO GOVERNOR BARTLET, “IN THE SHADOW OF TWO GUNMEN: PART I”

Even setting aside the *Sports Night* double duty of it all, when it came to getting the *West Wing* pilot on its feet, there were still countless details on the creative team’s to-do list. Now that plans were falling into place for this “contemporary story of kings and palaces,” now that this world of columns and corridors—of outer offices and busy bullpens—was under construction,