West Wing Babies

Just as All the President’s Men made newspapers seem cool—imagine!—and propelled legions of baby-boomers into journalism, so Aaron Sorkin’s The West Wing has inspired a new generation with its vision of a Washington brimming with lofty ideals. Six years...
after the series finale, the Sorkinization of politics is still under way.

BY JULI WEINER | ILLUSTRATIONS BY Darrow

On March 18, 2008, Barack Obama, then the junior senator from Illinois and a candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination, addressed a crowd of supporters at the National Constitution Center, Philadelphia’s boxy shrine to democracy and the Founding Fathers. The speech was a sprawling, profoundly personal examination of race relations in America, prompted by increased media scrutiny of the senator’s former pastor, Jeremiah Wright, whose outré politics had precipitated the first real crisis for the Obama campaign. Indeed, it’s probably fair to say that the viability of Obama’s candidacy rested on the speech. Certainly it felt that way at the time, especially for the young volunteers who had flocked to the campaign, among them Sam Graham-Felsen, who was just three years out of Harvard, fresh from a stint writing for The Nation, and now working as Obama’s chief blogger. He caught the address in a campaign office back in Chicago. It was a moment of high drama, with the communications team huddled around a monitor as Obama intoned, in churchy cadences, “For we have a choice in this country. We can accept a politics that breeds division, and conflict, and cynicism Or, at this moment, in this election, we can come together and say, ‘Not this time.’ ” Graham-Felsen still remembers the scene vividly: “One of the staffers was a young African-American guy, and he was crying.” This was a heady moment, history unfolding in the present tense, right now, but Graham-Felsen had just the right framework to put around it. “It felt sort of like The West Wing,” he says. “Not to cheapen the moment.”

President Obama is often credited with inspiring political idealism in young people (at least until the campaign ended and actual governing began). But before Obama there was Aaron Sorkin and President Josiah Bartlet. It’s been nearly 6 years since the series finale of The West Wing, and more than 12 since the one-hour drama, which Sorkin created and largely wrote, first walked and talked its way through NBC’s Wednesday-night lineup; and yet you might think the series never ended, given the currency it still seems to enjoy in Washington, the frequency with which it comes up in D.C. conversations and is quoted or referenced on political blogs. In
part this is because the smart, nerdy—they might prefer “precocious”—kids who grew up in the early part of the last decade worshipping the cool, technocratic charm of Sorkin’s characters have today matured into the young policy prodigies and press operatives who advise, brief, and excuse the behavior of the most powerful people in the country.

In the same way that the noble, sleeves-rolled sleuthing of Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman as Woodward and Bernstein in All the President’s Men prompted legions of baby-boomers to dream of careers in journalism, The West Wing, which made policy discussions seem thrilling and governing heroic, has become a totem—its romanticization of a stuffy, insular industry infusing a historically uncool career with cultural cachet. Rather than treat the political process as risible at best (Dick, say, or Primary Colors), a horror show at worst (The Ides of March), The West Wing was pluckily idealistic. A hyper-real drama about waiting for a callback from some freshman congressman (D—Nowheresville) would have sent aspiring White House interns and aides running back to law school. Instead, The West Wing “took something that was for the most part considered dry and nerdy—especially to people in high school and college—and sexed it up,” says Eric Lesser, who worked in the Obama White House as a special assistant to former senior adviser David Axelrod and is now a student at Harvard Law School.

Which isn’t to say all high-school and college students were equally susceptible to the show’s siren call. But for those who were primed to be seduced, The West Wing was something of a first (intellectual) crush—immediate, unconditional, and, naturally, one-sided. “I remember when they were first promoting The West Wing, and I was like, ‘Oh, man, I can’t wait to see that,’ ” Lesser says, recalling a pop-cultural urgency that others in his cohort might have reserved for a new Jessica Simpson video.
Another pre-sold fan was Meredith Shiner, currently a personable 24-year-old congressional reporter for *Roll Call*, who describes herself as “the kind of girl who woke up on Sunday morning and watched *Meet the Press* with my dad.” At Duke, from which Shiner graduated in 2009, she would watch old *West Wing* episodes over milk shakes with friends on what she calls “*West Wing* therapy nights.” (In fairness, this sort of social event could conceivably happen at campuses other than Duke’s.) Shiner’s enthusiasm for the show is particularly unbridled: “I always say to my friends, ‘I wish Aaron Sorkin could script my life.’”

She’s not alone in that. “I was interested in politics before the show started,” says Matt Yglesias, an influential 30-year-old business-and-economics correspondent at *Slate*. “But a friend of mine from college moved to D.C. at the same time as me, after graduation, and we definitely plotted our proposed domination of the capital in explicitly *West Wing* terms: Who was more like Toby? Who was more like Josh?”

Another young White House staffer who has been with Obama since the campaign says the show set a standard that he and his colleagues self-consciously aspired to: “Yes, the show was sexier, faster-paced, and more idealistic than Washington really is, but what’s wrong with that? *We should* aspire to do big and ambitious and idealistic things in this country—even if it takes longer than one hour, or one season.” *The West Wing*, he says, “was idealistic and so were we. Everyone hoped politics would be like that.”

The show “very much served as inspiration,” says Micah Lasher, who today is New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg’s chief negotiator with the New York State government. Lasher began his career more than 10 years ago as something of a political prodigy, serving as a campaign-strategy adviser to New York politicians—among them Manhattan borough president Scott Stringer and New York State assemblywoman Deborah Glick—when he was just 17. A true *West Wing* baby, he was hooked by the series as soon as it premiered. “Roughly, I could guess I watched the first episode when it premiered on television. As a political junkie, that there was going to be an hour of television every week opening the window on the highest level of that world … I was completely fascinated.” This is, by the way, how real political
advisers tend to speak, as opposed to those who have been scripted by Aaron Sorkin.

‘T here’s a cultural meme or cultural suggestion that Washington is boring, that policy is boring, but it’s important stuff,” says Ezra Klein, 27, another policy savant, who launched a blog when he was 19 and whose meritocratic rise—he is now a writer for The Washington Post and a contributor on MSNBC and Bloomberg View—has made him a wonk-world folk hero. In his view, The West Wing served an important cultural function by dramatizing “the immediacy and urgency and concern that people in this town feel about the issues they’re working on.”

Or as Kurt Bardella puts it, “This was a show that made even the census compelling!” It’s true: the census episode, despite its being the census episode, presented an affecting argument about institutionalized racial inequity and postmortem marital obligation. (You can imagine the lessons reaped from, say, the attempted-assassination plotline.) Bardella, 28, served as a spokesman for Representative Darrell Issa, Republican from California, for about two years. Like other West Wing devotees, he found that the actual Washington didn’t always measure up to the Sorkinian version: “It’s funny because I ended up working on the Oversight Committee—which has jurisdiction over the census—and I can tell you, the census is not the most exciting topic in the world.”

Harold & Kumar star Kal Penn braved similar disillusionment when he took a break from acting to work in the White House Office of Public Engagement. As he told The New York Times last year, “I was there my first night until 11 P.M. and I was like, ’Sweet, let’s order Chinese food.’ And everybody was like, ‘You can’t actually order delivery to the White House.’ I was like, ’But they do it on West Wing!’”

Nevertheless, the show’s ability to pull optimistic young
people into politics was all the more remarkable, given that its seven-season run overlapped with the economically robust turn of the millennium—a time when freshly graduated Ivy Leaguers were flush with six-figure offers from investment banks, top-tier law firms, and glitzy Internet start-ups. While entry-level salaries climbed to precipitous new heights, national politics had recently hit some all-time depths: the Monica Lewinsky scandal, the 2000 election’s unending Florida recount, the many institutionalized deceptions of the Bush administration. These did not shine a flattering light on a life of public service. For budding politicos, *The West Wing* was a once-a-week life raft, an alternative universe where civic-mindedness, while buffeted, ultimately triumphed. For liberals in particular, Martin Sheen’s Nobel Prize-winning, Latin-speaking President Bartlet was a soothing foil to George W. Bush’s down-home anti-intellectualism and execrable consonant swallowin’; it was as if each week Sorkin and his colleagues were writing the counter-factual, shoulda-been history of the Gore administration.

Click to enlarge.
For fans who eventually chose politics or political journalism as their profession, the show would prove useful as well as inspirational. Eric Lesser, as special assistant to David Axelrod, was responsible for everything from briefing his boss on the day’s news to monitoring his brown-sugar intake. “My job became very easy to explain to people. When people ask me what do I do, I say, ‘Oh, I’m kind of like Donna Moss on The West Wing,’ ” he says, referring to the flaxen-haired, flighty assistant to the show’s fictional deputy chief of staff, Josh Lyman.

Before The West Wing, most parts of the country south of Arlington and north of Chevy Chase barely knew there was a real-life Josh, let alone a Donna. Most movies and television shows portrayed politics as silly or cynical or corrupt—or all three. The few series set in the political world (Tanner ’88, Spin City) were satirical. The West Wing, which won a total of 27 Emmy Awards, was a higher-profile presentation of the people behind the politician, a kind of ER for press aides, advance people, and assistants to the assistant to the chief of staff.

“It used to be you were only ‘in politics’ if you were running for something or elected to something,” says Kurt Bardella, Darrell Issa’s former press secretary, who can still recite dialogue from almost every West Wing episode by heart. Growing up in Southern California, he began watching the show in its first season, after his mother brought home a few episodes on a for-your-consideration VHS screener she had picked up at a thrift store. “I had never been to Washington and didn’t have a really full understanding of how the federal government worked,” he says. “It opened my eyes for the first time to the idea of trying to come to Washington and working here. I was interested in local politics in San Diego, never the federal-government side of it—and didn’t know anything about it, frankly.”

Bardella’s career came to an unfortunate end when he was let go from Issa’s staff last March, after allegations surfaced that he had allowed a New York Times writer to view e-mails from other reporters. “Certainly having done the press side of things on the Hill, I would have been better off had I kept more of some of the lessons that The West Wing had to offer in mind,” he concedes. (Bardella was rehired by the Oversight
Perhaps the most amazing thing about the West Wing generation is that, for the most part, its members haven’t lost their Sorkin-fed idealism. Though “the people that get the headlines represent the worst [in politics], by and large, people are doing it for the right reasons,” says Bardella, and in that sense, he believes, the show “was incredibly realistic.”

“The show did do a good job of portraying the quiet courage of otherwise normal people who get thrust into difficult circumstances,” says Lesser, who notes that in the four years he’s worked in politics he’s become “less cynical.” This places him within a silent minority: according to a September 2011 Gallup poll, 81 percent of Americans are dissatisfied with government—a record at the time this article went to press, though a figure that almost certainly has since been eclipsed.

In that regard, The West Wing didn’t exist in a bubble. It wasn’t ignorant of, say, the way rapacious lobbyists wield untoward influence over unprincipled politicians; it simply suggested that Washington didn’t have to work that way—if those in power were righteous and good.

One of the series’s most memorable episodes involves a senator filibustering a health-care bill that did not include sufficient funding for autism research. When President Bartlet learns the senator’s grandson suffers from the disorder, he dispatches other lawmakers to the Senate floor to filibuster, too. Right before the credits roll, C. J. Cregg, the press secretary, says in a voice-over, “If politics brings out the worst in people, maybe people bring out the best.” This is the sort of sentiment that made the show’s detractors roll their eyes, and we could offer a caustic rejoinder of our own, but instead we’ll leave the floor to Micah Lasher: “At a very elemental level, episode after episode, you’d finish watching feeling truly inspired. You can’t say that for a lot of television—and you can’t say that of a lot of politics.” But, Sorkin and his acolytes would argue, you can say it about some politics.