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'When you think of the Taleban, think of the Nazis': Teaching Americans '9-11' in NBC's 'The West Wing'

Abstract[1]

Only three weeks after the events of September 11th 2001, Aaron Sorkin's 'The West Wing' delivered a special one off episode, outside of usual storylines. The episode, titled 'Isaac and Ishmael', is interesting because it adopts an explicitly pedagogical theme to *teach* viewers how to think about the event of 9-11. The episode can thus be read as an instance in the wider construction of the meaning of those events. In this respect, this article argues that the production of the episode contributed to notions of rupture and exceptionalism. In addition, despite the potentially 'liberal' and 'academic' lessons given by the show's stars, the extensive contextualisation of the previously incomprehensible events for a dominantly American audience actually relayed, amplified and reinforced the emerging dominant discourses of the Bush Administration. Accepting and repeating official tropes, The West Wing ultimately served to further limit space for debate in the wake of 9-11.

1. Introduction

On October 3rd 2001, three weeks after the events of September 11th, episode 0 series 3 of NBC's *The West Wing* aired in the United States. Attempting to confront the events of September 11th head on, this episode was remarkable in a number of ways. First, the show's creator, Aaron Sorkin, deemed it necessary to produce an episode (the only episode ever) that did not follow the ongoing plotlines of the popular series. Interpreted as an exceptional event and moment of temporal rupture, *The West Wing* responded to 9-11 with an exceptional episode and a temporal rupture of their own. Second, having been produced in only two weeks and written in only two or three days, the episode presented a 'formidable logistical challenge for the directors, editors and cast', who were left 'scrambling to meet a virtually unprecedented production schedule'.[2] Third, the speed of this televisual 'response' to the events in New York, Virginia and Pennsylvania ensured that it 'was the first TV show to address the events and aftermath of 9/11'.[3] Fourth, the *West Wing* achieved extremely high viewing figures of approximately twenty-eight million (an 18/26 rating/share), 'Isaac and Ishmael' received the show's highest ever viewing figures and was the most watched programme in the United States that week.[4] Fifth, the show was met with a generally polarised critical and popular reception. While some noted that it felt like 'op-ed' TV and others found it 'preachy', these readings of the one-off 'Isaac and Ishmael' episode were in the minority amongst the general public, with most reviews voicing positive readings and warm approval for the show's attempt to tackle the issue dominating US politics and society

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[1] I would like to thank the editors, two anonymous referees, Stuart Croft and Matt McDonald for their insightful comments on earlier versions of this article.

[2] Brian Lowry, 'The West Wing' Is in a Rush to Wrap', *Los Angeles Times*, October 2, 2001; Aaron Sorkin, 'Interview - Post Terror America: Hollywood Reacts', *Occidental Policy Forum*, October 22, 2001.

[3] Kel, 'Message 9150 of AaronSorkin@yahoogroups.com', *The West Wing Episode Guide*, posted October 6, 2001, accessed March 23, 2011, http://www.westwingepguide.com/S3/Episodes/45_IAI.html.

[4] Internet Movie Database, 'The West Wing', (2001), accessed December 10, 2010 http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0200276/news?year=2001.

at the time.[5] Approximately forty per cent found the show sufficiently engaging to afford it the highest possible ratings, awarding ten stars out of ten, with the episode declared a 'Winged Victory' despite some critics arguing that Sorkin had 'wimped out on terror'.[6] In general, reviewers found the episode to be 'very informative' and helpful in 'clarifying issues after 9-11'.[7]

> 'I loved this episode coz I think it wonderfully manages to walk the fine line of honouring the events of 9/11 while still reasonably and calmly talking about what happened and why. A very educated and informative episode!'[8]

Against this background, the episode arguably offers 'the perfect example of knowledge transfer and emancipative anti-racist education'.[9] Mining traditional liberal themes of cosmopolitanism and understanding, the episode represents an attempt to forge a broadly 'liberal response' to the events of 9-11 at a time when these alternative voices had generally fallen silent.[10] This article argues that far from offering distinct interpretations, framings and responses to September 11th, 'Isaac and Ishmael' instead helped to reinforce official emerging narratives and invalidate alternatives. In this respect, understanding both the production and reception of 'Isaac and Ishmael' requires that the episode be 're-contextualised' within the post 9-11 moment, characterised by an initial 'void in meaning' and a subsequent construction of crisis of which 'Isaac and Ishmael' was ultimately a part.[11] Placed back into this tumultuous moment, it becomes apparent that the purportedly 'liberal response' articulated in 'Isaac and Ishmael' is limited and limiting. No fewer than sixteen dominant tropes are invoked, the most significant twelve of which are discussed here. These tropes gave credence to official narratives and narrowed the space for debate in the wake of 9-11. 'Isaac and Ishmael' ultimately served to reinforce the Bush Administration's response to the events of September 11th, simultaneously helping to silence dissent along the way. In this,

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[5] See, for instance, reviews at: TV.com, 'Episode Guide: Isaac and Ishmael', accessed December 10, 2010, http://www.tv.com/the-west-wing/isaac-and-ishmael/episode/77672/summary.html; Internet Movie Database, 'Isaac and Ishmael', accessed December 10, 2010, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0745644/; and The West Wing Unofficial Continuity Guide, 'Isaac and Ishmael', accessed December 10, 2010, http://westwing.bewarne.com/third/isaac.html.

[6] The average rating for the show was 8.1 out if 10. Interestingly, for non-Americans the average was only 7.6 compared to 8.7 for United States citizens. Potential reasons for this divergence will be borne out in the article. Internet Movie Database, 'The West Wing', (2001), accessed December 10, 2010, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0200276/news?year=2001; Adam Buckman, 'West Wing Wimps Out of Terror', *New York Post*, October 4, 2001.

[7] Sil_lee, 'Fans' Reviews: A very special episode to clarify issues after 9/11', *TV.com*, October 16, 2007, accessed December 10, 2010, http://www.tv.com/the-west-wing/isaac-and-ishmael/episode/77672/summary.html.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ruth Wodak, 'The Glocalisation of Politics in Television', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 13, no. 1 (2010): 50.

[10] Ronald Krebs and Peter Jackson, 'Twisting Tongues and Twisting Arms: The Power of Political Rhetoric', *European Journal of International Relations* 13, no. 1 (2007): 35-66; Ronald Krebs and Jennifer Lobasz, 'The Sound *of Silence*: Rhetorical Coercion, Democratic Acquiescence, and the Iraq War', in *American Foreign Policy and the Politics of Fear: Threat Inflation and 9-11*, eds. Trevor Thrall and Jane Cramer, (Oxford: Routledge, 2009); Ronald Krebs and Jennifer Lobasz, 'Fixing the Meaning of 9/11: Hegemony, Coercion, and the Road to War in Iraq ', *Security Studies* 16, no. 3 (2007): 409-451.

[11] David Campbell, 'Time Is Broken: The Return of the Past in the Response to September 11', *Theory and Event* 5, no. 4 (2001): 1-11; Stuart Croft, *Culture, Crisis and America's War on Terror*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Jack Holland, 'From September 11th 2001 to 9-11: From Void to Crisis', *International Political Sociology* 3, no. 3 (2009): 275-292.

sadly, *The West Wing* was typical of the broader 'liberal' response to 9-11.[12] As a powerful, popular and emotive television series, *The West Wing* was able to make important contributions to political (im)possibility. Powerful entertainment programmes have the ability to widen the space for debate and challenge dominant orthodoxies. In light of this recognition, it is particularly noteworthy that 'Isaac and Ishmael' contributed to a narrowing of political dialogue after 9-11. In 'Isaac and Ishmael', *The West Wing* reflected (and arguably helped to drive) calls for a more muscular liberalism in the realm of foreign policy after September 11th 2001.[13]

2. Context: Filling the Post 9-11 Discursive Void

Temporality was and has been of crucial significance to making sense of the events of September 11th 2001. Notwithstanding clichéd narratives of 'night falling on a different world' and 9-11 as 'the day the world changed', it is apparent that for the majority of United States citizens the events clearly marked and heralded a moment of temporal rupture.[14] Transformed into passive 'viewers', Americans struggled to make sense of the unfolding events as they seemed to contradict the existing truths of US security culture and few authorised voices were forthcoming in explaining the situation to a bewildered public. As I have argued elsewhere, the *wrong* (the disproving of perceived security truths) and the *lack* (the failure to narrate) were the twin arms of the void that held Americans in a stunned, silent embrace.[15]

On the first arm, American security culture had long promulgated myths of invulnerability and invincibility. Although peaking in the 'unipolar moment' of the 1990s, with declarations of the 'end of history', the popular image of being separated from the dangers and corruption of the rest of the world was an enduring myth in American politics and society.[16] Tracing to the Monroe Doctrine and beyond, Americans had long considered themselves blessed by God with the protection of two vast oceans.[17] The events of September 11th took place against this predominant understanding of America's blessed geography and were subsequently met with spatial and temporal distanciation. Events were frequently denied and disregarded as either

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[12] See, for example, James Brassett, 'Cosmopolitanism vs. Terrorism? Discourses of Ethical Possibility Before, and After 7/7', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 36, no. 2 (2008): 121-147.

[13] Rachel Gans-Boriskin, R. and Russ Tisinger, 'The Bushlett Administration: Terrorism and War on the West Wing', *Journal of American Culture* 28, no. 1 (2005): 100-113. The phrase 'muscular liberalism' refers to broadly neoconservative calls in the United States for a more robust defence of liberal values abroad, often through the military force. The term has since been given a greater domestic focus, to which this article does not allude, as adopted and adapted by British Prime Minister David Cameron. See, David Cameron, 'Speech to the Munich Security Conference', Munich, February 5, 2011.

[14] George W. Bush, 'Address to Joint Session of Congress and the American People', Capitol Building, Washington D.C., September 20, 2001; see Holland, 'From Void to Crisis'.

[15] Holland, 'From Void to Crisis'; see also Campbell, 'Time is Broken'; and Dirk Nabers, 'Filling the Void of Meaning: Identity Construction in U.S. Foreign Policy After September 11, 2001', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 5, no. 2 (2009): 191-214.

[16] Charles Krauthammer, 'The Unipolar Moment', *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 1 (1990 / 1991 Winter): 22-33; Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and The Last Man*, (London: Macmillan, 1992).

[17] John Lewis Gaddis, *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience*, Joanna Jackson Goldman Memorial Lecture on American Civilization and Government. (London: Harvard University Press, 2004); Jack Greene, *The Intellectual Construction of America: Exceptionalism and Identity from 1492 to 1800*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Books, 1993).

news from some other country or from some previous time; Americans struggled to accept that the events were happening 'now' and they were happening 'here'.[18]

On the second arm, the incomprehensibility of (what would later become) '9-11' arose due to the difficulty, and often impossibility, of subsuming the events within existing frameworks of intelligibility. The events of September 11th were 'unspeakable' as Americans lacked an appropriate language to describe what they were seeing.[19] Unlike, for example, British, Spanish or Sri Lankan experiences, Americans lacked a language for the illegitimate use of large-scale, external violence on domestic soil.[20] The *lack* of an appropriate language to make sense of 9-11 meant that cues were frequently taken from unofficial sources and 'lower' levels of cultural life. Religion and films were frequently drawn upon as initial American attempts to comprehend 9-11 took place at the level of the individual in contrast to the more commonplace intersubjective understandings that are produced through discursive regularities.[21] The resulting discursive void – as a lack of shared meaning regulated by an overarching narrative – saw a plethora of competing and fragmentary understandings in place of more commonplace harmonised meaning. In short, the cultural shock of 9-11 was compounded by the emptiness of the space usually occupied by assured 'official' voices.

These twin arms – the wrong and the lack – then represent an inability to comprehend and an inability to articulate. If discursive failure is symptomatic of what Campbell has termed the 'void in meaning', it is the cultural shock that is symptomatic of what Edkins has termed 'trauma'.[22] Succinctly, 9-11 invalidated notions of anarchy, chaos and danger existing only beyond the borders of the United States. Falling outside of expected and predictable patterns of politics and everyday life, 9-11 was a traumatic event in that it was seen to *demand* a response. The insistence on a response outside of usual politics reflected the reading and experience of 9-11 as having occurred beyond politics-as-usual. It was this demand – even yearning – to be communicated and to 'reply' that generated such acute tension, as the void was marked by the very difficulty of communicating what had happened for the public. It was in this tension that President Bush had begun to articulate an official response and Aaron Sorkin wrote, directed and produced 'Isaac and Ishmael', outside of *The West Wing* continuity.

3. The West Wing

The West Wing first aired on NBC in September 1999, going on to run over seven series. The show drew high audiences – the finale of series two attracted over twenty million viewers in the United States – and was critically acclaimed, winning three Golden Globes and twenty-

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[18] Croft, *Culture*; Holland, 'From Void to Crisis'.
[19] Heinz Steinert, 'Unspeakable September 11th: Taken for-Granted Assumptions, Selective Reality Construction and Populist Politics', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 27, no. 3 (2003): 651-665.
[20] Margo Kleinfeld, 'Strategic Troping in Sri Lanka: September Eleventh and the Consolidation of Political Position', *Geopolitics* 8, no. 3 (2003): 105-126.
[21] Croft, *Culture*, Holland, 'From Void to Crisis'.
[22] Campbell, 'Time is Broken'; Jennifer Edkins, 'Forget Trauma? Responses to September 11', *International Relations* 16, no. 2 (2002): 243-256; Jennifer Edkins, 'Ground Zero: Reflections on Trauma, in/Distinction and Response', *Cultural Research* 8, no. 3 (2004): 247-270.

seven Emmy Awards.[23] Although the show's creators, including Sorkin, were adamant that they were creating a work of fiction, numerous real-world parallels were evident from the start. Mockingly referred to by the American Right as 'The Left Wing', these parallels were initially most evident with the Clinton White House.[24] Waxman noted the ease of reading key characters as counterparts of Clinton Administration officials: Sam Seaborn as George Stephanopoulis; Josh Lyman as Paul Begala; and C.J. Cregg as Dee Dee Myers.[25] Along with numerous other real life politicians and practitioners, Dee Dee Myers actually served as a consultant for the show. And throughout the seven series, the show frequently dealt with issues paralleling those that had faced the previous Clinton Administration or that continued to challenge the Bush White House.

The show's liberal leanings and optimistic outlook meant that reviews were not always positive. *The West Wing* was mocked in the *Weekly Standard* and *Atlantic Monthly* as 'nothing more or less than political pornography for liberals', the 'ultimate Hollywood fantasy: the Clinton White House without Clinton' and naively 'Capra-esque' 'pseudo-politics'.[26] With a 'tacit mission of the revival of lagging liberal spirits', right-leaning critics were aware that *The West Wing* was no more than a 'cultural platform for the revival of liberal politics in America'.[27] While that may have been true, it was clearly nonetheless a platform that even the most sceptical critics took seriously, as evidenced by the perceived need to comment on and ridicule the popular show. And after 9-11 it was a platform that would be used to give voice to a largely non-existent 'liberal response' to terrorism. That response came in the form of 'Isaac and Ishmael'.

Isaac and Ishmael

The choice of title is itself interesting and revealing. As elaborated in the episode, 'Isaac and Ishmael' refers to a contested interpretation of the story of Abraham. *The West Wing* chose to emphasise that 'what most people find important to remember is, in the end, the two sons', Isaac and Ishmael, 'came together'. This emphasis on unity and 'coming together' through the analogy of a story contested in Christian, Jewish and Islamic thought was largely welcomed in the United States and mirrored President Bush's own repeated appeals for national unity. The choice of title does, however, indicate a reading and framing of September 11th through a religious lens rather than a political one. Religious metaphors risked constructing a particularly intractable problem and de-politicising the events of

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[23] Kamila Shamsie, 'Triumph of the West Wing', *Prospect*, 66, August 20, 2001.

[24] Peter Rollins and John O'Connor, *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 3; For later comparisons with the Obama Administration see: Jeanette Ballard, 'Haven't We Seen This Election Before?', *BBC*, September 15, 2008, accessed December 10, 2010, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/7616333.stm; Christopher Hope, 'Why the US Election is Just Like the West Wing', *The Telegraph*, February 6, 2008; Jonathon Freedland, 'From West Wing to the Real Thing', *The Guardian*, February 21, 2008, accessed December 10, 2010, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/feb/21/barackobama.uselections2008; and Ian Woods, 'Life Imitating Art?', *Sky News Blog*, November 7, 2008, accessed December 10, 2010, http://blogs.news.sky.com/frontlineblog/Post:a8d0d85e-dae0-45b1-ab9e-bf4b8448e3f3.

[25] Sharon Waxman, 'Inside the West Wing's New World', *George Magazine*, (2002), re-printed in Rollins and O'Connor, *The West Wing*, 203-212.

[26] Podhoretz cited in Rollins and O'Connor, *The West Wing*, 4.

[27] Lehmann cited in Rollins and O'Connor, *The West Wing*, 4.

September 11th. These twin moves would ultimately be reinforced throughout the episode, centring on the notion that the United States was attacked because of who they are, not what they have done.

From the very beginning, it was clear that 'Isaac and Ishmael' was not a usual episode of *The West Wing*. Viewers were made aware of the exceptional nature of the episode and its placement outside of the usual *West Wing* continuity through a number of cues: the episode was characterised from the outset by its static filming, in contrast to usual dynamism and movement; and, crucially, the episode began with the actors addressing the audience as themselves, not their characters.

Martin Sheen:	Good evening, I'm Martin Sheen, and I'm with the cast of *The West Wing*. For those of you who tuned in tonight to see our season premiere, I'm afraid you won't. That'll be next week.
Rob Lowe:	We're eager to get back to our continuing storylines, but tonight we wanted to stop for a moment and do something different.
Allison Janney:	You'll notice a few things different about this show tonight ...
Bradley Whitford:	... tonight we offer a play. It's called "Isaac and Ishmael." We suggest you don't spend a lot of time trying to figure out where this episode comes in the timeline of the series. It doesn't. It's a story-telling aberration, if you'll allow.

Clearly, as Wodak notes, 'this episode illustrates an explicit intervention into viewers' expectations and possible understandings ... present[ing] a parable intended to make people reflect on their beliefs and stereotypes about Muslims and 'others' who have become targets for aggression after 9/11'.[28] This parable is delivered through two parallel stories, told concomitantly although not explicitly linked. The first sees White House Chief-of-Staff, Leo McGarry and Head of the President's Secret Service Detail, Ron Butterfield interrogating a 'suspect'. Having been 'crashed', The White House is in a state of 'lockdown' and the 'suspect' is aggressively interviewed about his connections to fictional terrorist 'Kharim Sharif'. The 'suspect', Raqim Ali, is held because his name matches a known alias of one of Kharim Sharif's conspirators. The link is spurious and deliberately so, enabling Sorkin to present Leo McGarry's suspicions of the Muslim, Arab White House employee as grounded in racism, prejudice and misplaced fear.

Ali:	It is not uncommon for Arab-Americans to be the first suspected when that kind of thing [terrorist threat] happens.
Leo:	I can't imagine why.

This storyline delivers a classic liberal, Jeffersonian narrative on the need to resist discrimination in times of national danger. It warns against the unchecked concentration of power in the hands of the Executive and reminds of the need to resist stereotyping in the face

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[28] Wodak, 'Glocalisation', 48.

of threat and fear.[29] Through this storyline Americans were reminded that the perpetrators of the September 11th attacks were nineteen fanatical individuals and therefore, in post 9-11 America, there is no possibility of 'reading' threat from ethnicity or religious affiliation.   If this first story is simplistic to the point of being blunt, it is in marked contrast to the parallel second story which attempts to capitalise on the show's cast in their positions as authorised experts, capable of articulating and explaining events which had thus far left America's 'brightest and best' baffled. It is also in direct contestation with the second imagining and construction of the enemy that the show offers. Just as in the official language of the Bush Administration's response to 9-11, the show presented a tension between understandings of the perpetrators as a group of radical individuals and an organised, omnipresent and threatening Islamic enemy.[30]   And just like the Bush Administration, the show struggled to sell the former, whilst delivering an exceptionally resonant lesson on the latter.[31]   If the former encourages a response to 9-11 oriented around a constant refusal to stereotype and a need to confront prejudice, the latter is central to maintaining support for a 'War on Terror'; indeed, the latter naturalises a response of militaristic interventionism.

The format for the second story, in which this second imagining of the enemy is delivered, is in itself noteworthy. A group of school pupils who have been selected for the 'Presidential Classroom' scheme are stuck in the White House Mess Hall due to the lockdown. Starting with Josh Lyman, the White House Deputy Chief of Staff, the show's main characters one-by-one join the group to contribute to a question-and-answer based 'lesson' on terrorism. Before moving to consider the answers the show gives, it is important to note two points. First, the show has afforded the time to ask questions.

> I felt it was appropriate to just take a week and stop ... I was thinking 'Gee, I've really got to stop and pause and take a moment.[32]

Executive Producer John Wells recognised in 'Isaac and Ishmael' both the need to respond and the need to acknowledge the exceptional nature and temporal rupture that 9-11 wrought.

> 'Obviously, everybody in entertainment and series TV have been trying to figure out what's the appropriate response, such as what needs to be said on 'West Wing' ... We didn't feel comfortable going back to our fictional White House without taking a moment. Hopefully, we can say something that's useful ... Hopefully, it will make people talk and think'.[33]

The experience of 9-11 as a traumatic event – as a moment of rupture, outside of normality – was recognised in the production of 'Isaac and Ishmael' as a stand-alone episode. Second, the decision to frame the episode around knowledgeable, but scared and confused children asking questions was recognition of the voiceless-ness of the post 9-11 void. After the events

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[29] Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World*. (New York: Knopf, 2002).

[30] George. W. Bush, 'Remarks by President Bush and His Majesty King Abdullah of Jordan in a Photo Opportunity', White House, Washington D.C. September 28, 2001; George. W. Bush, 'Remarks by the President to Airline Employees', O'Hare Airport. September 27, 2001.

[31] See, for example, Richard Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005); Sandra Silberstein, *War of Words: Language, Politics, and 9/11*. (London: Routledge, 2002).

[32] Sorkin, 'Interview'.

[33] John Wells cited in Josef Adalian and Michael Schneider, "Plots are hot spots for nets", *Daily Variety*, September 23, 2001.

of September 11th 2001, questions such as 'why do they hate us' were commonplace.[34] With the American public symbolically embodied in school children asking questions about who are terrorists and why do they act this way, Sorkin acknowledges and actively reproduces the discursive void in meaning that 9-11 induced. Crucially, the episode also acknowledges and reproduces the phase of the War on Terror that would follow. Despite attempting an informed liberal response to terrorism, 'Isaac and Ishmael' perpetuates the construction of 9-11 as a crisis through the (re)production of a number of dominant tropes that were beginning to define events and fix an increasingly hegemonic meaning to 9-11. Therefore, not only does *The West Wing* actively reinforce the cultural shock and voicelessness that characterised the initial post 9-11 void, but moreover 'Isaac and Ishmael' also reaffirms the later construction on 9-11 as a moment and marker of crisis by repeating, amplifying and contextualising the official narration of the events offered by the Bush Administration. To this end, *The West Wing* supported the official response to 9-11, helping to both further increase the resonance of dominant official narratives and silence dissent by demonstrating the apparent convergence of liberal and conservative responses to terrorism.

4. Amplifying Dominant Narratives: The West Wing and 9-11

'Isaac and Ishmael', despite attempting a considered and informative 'liberal response' to terrorism, reinforced a number of the key tropes that were central to the success of Bush Administration policies at the start of the 'War on Terror'. These tropes and narratives can be grouped into three main themes, based on the central questions they answer: (i) who are the terrorists and what do they want? (ii) What is going on and how should the United States respond? And (iii) what should we do, as citizens?

4.1 Who are the terrorists and what do they want?

On the first question – who are the terrorists and what do they want? – the show's stars delivered five compelling answers to educate both the fictional pupils and the real world American citizens they represented. First, viewers were reminded that terrorists do want to kill American citizens.

> Girl 1: So... what's the deal with everybody trying to kill you?
>
> Josh: Well... it's not everybody, and they're trying to kill you, too.

In the days and weeks after 9-11, the Bush Administration relied upon the omnipresent threat of terrorist attack to pass far-reaching counter-terrorism legislation at home and launch a 'War on Terror' abroad. This climate of fear was intense and widespread. For instance, despite later revelations of so-called 'home grown terror', events such as the 2001 Anthrax Attacks were readily interpreted as simply the latest instances and confirmation of an unfolding War on Terror. This was, for example, in evidence as 'white powder scares' were read through the lens of an emerging and solidifying 'War on Terror' discourse. After one such evacuation, many miles from the sites of 9-11, comments included 'we could see it from the inside … the war reached here'.[35] In its early stages, 'Isaac and Ishmael' contributed to

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[34] Richard Crockatt, *America Embattled: September 11, Anti-Americanism, and the Global Order*. (London: Routledge, 2003); Jackson, *Writing*; Silberstein, *War of Words*.

[35] S. Tulk, uncatalogued sound recording, Witness and Response Collection, Library of Congress, Washington D.C., (2001).

this tendency to read events through narratives of 'terror' and the unease they generated, before moving to address resultant fears. Thus, second, Americans were assured that despite wanting to kill them, terrorists always fail.

> Girl 1: You know a lot about terrorism?
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> Sam: I dabble.
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> Girl 1: What are you struck by most?
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> Sam: It's 100% failure rate.
>
> Girl 1: Really?
>
> Sam: Not only do terrorists always fail at what they're after, they pretty much always succeed in strengthening whatever it is they're against.

As President Bush assured Americans of 'our victory, not theirs', *The West Wing* joined him in reassuring citizens that this new form of terrorism would 'follow in the path of fascism, Nazism and totalitarianism' to 'history's unmarked grave of discarded lies'.[36] This assurance was important in confirming that a response to 9-11 of 'War on Terror' was the correct path to follow. It helped to reassure wavering support and silence doubters.

Third, assured of terrorist failure, *The West Wing* delivered its most noteworthy answer to 'who are they?'

> Josh: You're juniors and seniors. In honour of the SAT's you're about to take, answer the following question. Islamic... extremist... is to... Islamic... as... "blank" is... to Christianity.
>
> *Josh writes this on the board for the students, before turning around, writing "KKK" and circling it.*
>
> Josh: That's what we're talking about. It's the Klan, gone medieval and global.

This contextualisation of the unnamed Al Qaeda helped to explain the terrorist network to the population in a way that the Bush Administration had been struggling to achieve.[37] Eventually and inevitably, the Bush Administration would draw upon the usual reference points – National Socialism and Communism – still synonymous with evil in American political culture. Addressing Congress, Bush warned Americans that '[t]housands of dangerous killers, schooled in the methods of murder, often supported by outlaw regimes, are now spread throughout the world like ticking time bombs, set to go off without warning', but that this terrorist evil would go the way of those other evils America had previously faced down.[38] However, in the first few days and weeks after 9-11, the Bush Administration faced the difficult task of articulating this 'new' and 'unprecedented' enemy that would inevitably be defeated. Repeated references to terrorists hating freedom, hiding in caves and being evil were made (e.g. Bush 2001c; 2001d), but arguably none of these framings contextualised the

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[36] George. W. Bush, 'Address to Joint Session of Congress and the American People', Capitol Building, Washington D.C. September 20, 2001.

[37] On initial difficulties in creating compelling narratives, see for instance David Frum, *The Right Man: An inside Account of the Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush*. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2003).

[38] George. W. Bush, 'State of the Union Address', Capitol Building, Washington D.C. January 29, 2002; George. W. Bush, 'Address to Joint Session of Congress and the American People', Capitol Building, Washington D.C. September 20, 2001.

threat and nature of Al Qaeda as succinctly, powerfully or persuasively as *The West Wing's* KKK analogy.[39] This analogy also reinforced the perceived illegitimacy of moral equivalencies being drawn as Josh stated that because they 'are not blowing stuff up' the Christian Right cannot be the correct answer. Again, the Bush Administration were at pains in the days after 9-11 to invalidate moral equivalencies being drawn between American foreign policy and terrorist actions, as well as Christian evangelical groups and Islamic fundamentalism.[40] In both of these tasks, *The West Wing* helped to reinforce and sustain the efforts of the Bush Administration, further narrowing the space for debate and chances of alternative framings in the post 9-11 moment. Deeming questions of imperial blowback and Christian or Western hypocrisy off limits, the Bush Administration was aided and abetted by the cast of *The West Wing*, who ensured Americans knew that fellow citizens and their nation's foreign policy were not to blame.

Fourth, *The West Wing* confirmed that even if terrorists do have grievances with US foreign policy they cannot possibly be justified. Thus, despite offering a partial counter-reading that was generally placed off-limits by official narratives, 'Isaac and Ishmael' confirms that terrorists target the United States because of American identity and values. Like the Bush Administration, *The West Wing* reassured Americans that they were attacked 'because we are the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world', but that they should not worry because 'no one will keep that light from shining'.[41]

> Girl 1: Why are Islamic Extremists trying to kill us?
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> Josh: That's a reasonable question if ever I heard one. Why are we targets of war?
>
> Boy 2: Because we're Americans.
>
> Josh: That's it?
>
> Girl 3: Because of our freedom?
>
> Josh: No other reasons?
>
> Boy 3: Freedom and democracy.
>
> Josh: I'll tell you, right or wrong - and I think they're wrong - it's probably a good idea to acknowledge that they do have specific complaints. I hear them every day – the people we support, troops in Saudi Arabia, sanctions against Iraq, support for Egypt. It's not just that they don't like Irving Berlin.
>
> Donna: Yes, it is.

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[39] George. W. Bush, 'Remarks by the President to Airline Employees', O'Hare Airport. September 27, 2001; George. W. Bush, 'Remarks by President Bush and Prime Minister Koizumi of Japan in Photo Opportunity', The Colonnade. September 25, 2001.

[40] For example, George. W. Bush, 'Ridge Sworn in to Lead Dept of Homeland Security', The White House, Washington D.C. October 8, 2001. Bush invoked narratives of a benign and reluctant superpower, arguing that September 11th 'roused a mighty giant'. He also argued that Christian evangelicals in the United States were 'at prayer' with Jews and Muslims, unlike the 'evildoers' who lacked the 'treasure[d]… values, the freedoms and the character of the American people'. See, for instance, George. W. Bush, 'Remarks by the President to Airline Employees', O'Hare Airport. September 27, 2001.

[41] George. W. Bush, 'Address to the Nation', The White House, Washington D.C. September 11, 2001.

> Josh: No, it's not.
>
> Donna: No, not about Irving Berlin, but your ridiculous search for rational reasons why somebody straps a bomb to their chest is ridiculous.

Despite relying on Josh's supposedly superior, more considered and authoritative male logic as representative of the liberal voice of reason over Donna's more irrational and scared female voice, this remains one of the more critical readings that 'Isaac and Ishmael' offers in an attempt to recognise that terrorists might not be motivated purely by hatred. The strategy is repeated later in the episode to again represent the two competing discourses that emerged in the post 9-11 void: 'imperial blowback' and 'they hate our freedoms'. Portraying an enemy motivated by pure hatred, rather than any political grievance (justified or otherwise), ensured that questions of American blame were kept 'off the table' and beyond the limits of acceptable reflection after 9-11. While 'Isaac and Ishmael' was clearly more prepared to discuss the possibility of terrorist grievances than official narratives, *The West Wing* ultimately comes down strongly on the side of 'they hate our freedoms' over 'imperial blowback' in terms of understanding the drivers of terrorist violence. The conclusion that both the Bush Administration and *The West Wing* lead American citizens towards is that while terrorists may have grievances, they are never legitimate and fighting terrorists is always about ensuring freedom.

> Toby: Well, what would you say the point of fighting terrorism is?
>
> C.J.:   It's to insure freedom, Pokey. I don't need the brochure.

And, with freedom as the essence of American-ness, 'War on Terror' became an inevitable response. As Bush bluntly put it: 'We understand the enemy. We understand their hatreds. We know they hate freedom. We know we love freedom and we know we're not going to change in our love for freedom'.[42] Framing 9-11 as an attack on freedom, with confronting terror logically presented as freedom's defence, helped to ensure that Sorkin ultimately aided Bush in locking the United States into a logic whereby a 'War on Terror' was the only and unavoidable response to the events of September 11th 2001.

Fifth, to reinforce the point that fighting terrorists is always and inevitably about defending freedom, Toby confirms how Americans should think about the Taleban and Afghanistan.

> Toby: When you think of Afghanistan, think of Poland. When you think of the Taliban, think of the Nazis. When you think of the citizens of Afghanistan, think of the Jews in concentration camps.

To the question 'who are they and what do they want?' *The West Wing* leaves us with the over-lexicalised answer that Al Qaeda are the KKK, the Taleban are the Nazis and both want to exterminate us and our freedoms, as they are already doing to ordinary Afghani citizens. Using these commonly understood reference points, 'Isaac and Ishmael' *teaches* Americans little that the Bush Administration had not already sanctioned for public consumption. In the same way that Josh performs the role of America's teacher in circling the 'KKK', Toby actively lectures and implores Americans – so clearly represented in the school children – to think in particular, far-fetched and dangerous ways. Just as the Bush Administration relied upon the most commonly understood markers of evil in American political culture – National Socialism and Communism – *The West Wing* explicitly directed viewers to draw comparisons

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[42] George. W. Bush, 'Campaign Speech in Pennsylvania', Pennsylvania, November 1, 2002.

between Germany during the Third Reich and Afghanistan under Taleban rule. This is a highly consequential analogy that does more than mark out the Taleban as evil. Appeasement and the lessons of Munich are well understood in American political culture. By drawing a direct comparison with Hitler's Germany, confronting evil trough militaristic intervention in Afghanistan is rendered the only logical, moral and responsible course of action.

4.2 What is going on and how should the United States respond?

Having answered the first question, 'Isaac and Ishmael' broaches a second, addressing the broader situation: 'What is going on and how should the United States respond?' In response, the cast offers three important and increasingly commonplace tropes. First, Josh re-assures the pupils and the watching public that killing terrorists is acceptable:

> Pupil: Do you favor the death penalty?
>
> Josh: No.
>
> Pupil: But you think we should kill these people?
>
> Josh: You don't have the choices in a war that you do in a jury room. But I wish we didn't have to. I think death is too simple.

A liberal response then regrets having to kill America's enemies, but acknowledges that the 'law paradigm' does not apply here. For Josh, these were acts of war and it is necessary to switch to a 'war paradigm' to fight back and keep America safe. C.J. Cregg backs up this position in a discussion of civil liberties and security:

> C.J.:   Look, I talk civil liberties as seriously as anybody, okay? I've been to the dinners and we haven't even talked about free speech yet and somebody getting lynched by the patriotism police for voicing a minority opinion. That said, Tobus, we're going to have to do some stuff. We're going to have to tap some phones and we're going to have to partner with some people who are the lesser of evils. I'm sorry but terrorists don't have armies and navies. They don't have capitals. Some of these guys we're going to have to walk up to them and shoot them. Yeah, we can root terrorist nests but some of these guys aren't going to be taken by the 105th armoured tank division. Some of these guys are going to be taken by a busboy with a silencer. So it's time to give the intelligence agencies the money and the manpower they need. We don't hear about their successes. Guess what? The Soviets never crossed the Elbe. The North Koreans stayed behind the 38th parallel. During the Millennium? Not one incident. Do you think that's because the terrorists decided that'd be a good day to take off? Not much action that day?

For C.J. the liberty-security debate is a 'no brainer'; faced with an existential terrorist threat, Americans should increase defence funding and widen the scope for intelligence officers to act. After 9-11, these are particularly significant arguments to make. On 26th October 2001 the USA Patriot Act was passed, which established far-reaching legislation to enable controversial 'counter-terrorism' measures such as 'roving wiretaps', property searches and extended periods of detention for suspected terrorists. On 25th November 2001 the Department of Homeland Security was established with a budget rising from $20 billion in

2002 to $40 billion the following year.[43] That C.J., as the show's most prominent female character, made these points is also noteworthy. In post 9-11 America, 'soccer moms' were seen to be a new and crucial political and electoral group. Previously Democratic, but now primarily concerned about their children's safety, this group were seen to represent the growing concerns of American women about the threat posed by terrorism. They were seen to favour strong anti-terrorism measures, at the expense of civil liberties, in order to pursue the 'no brainer' of keeping American children safe.[44] As a result, 'soccer moms' were increasingly identified as 'security moms'. Thus, like the Bush Administration, *The West Wing* actively contributed to the birth of this psephological grouping by helping to construct 'security' as the new women's issue.[45]

Second, in answer to 'how should the United States respond?' the pupils are reassured that America has friends; and that coalition-building is American.

> C.J.:　　There's nothing more American than coalition building. The first thing John Wayne always did was put together a posse.

Of course, Bush's assertion that 'you are either with us, or you are with the terrorists' attempted to force wavering or indifferent states to explicitly back the US-led response of a 'War on Terror'. And at this particular moment, then Secretary of State Colin Powell was investing considerable political capital in attempts to court General Musharraf's Pakistan. That such efforts could be constructed and viewed as a quintessentially all American act of putting together posse was useful in light of the fact that such an act could equally (and relatively easily) be viewed as straightforward hypocrisy. As Daalder and Lindsay note, aid to Pakistan went from $9 million in the three years before 9-11 to $4.3 billion in the three years after the events of September 11th 2001.[46] Welcoming Musharraf back into the international community, after designating Pakistan a pariah state following his military coup of 1999, could very easily have been framed as the logic of a narrow, amoral realpolitik, in which concerns for 'freedom' mattered very little. Third, the pupils are told why the US must take action in Afghanistan, by simply replacing Bush's harbouring metaphor with that of 'incubator'. After Bush had argued, 'we will make no distinction between terrorists and the states who harbour them', *The West Wing* confirmed the ineluctable link between terrorists and their host states.

> Boy 1:　Where do terrorists come from?
>
> Josh:　　Where do they come from?
>
> Sam:　　Everywhere. Mostly they come from exactly where you'd expect: places of abject poverty and despair. Horribly impoverished places are an incubator for the worst kind of crime.

As Charlie goes on to explain, it is no different from the gangs of 'South Central L.A., Detroit, the South Bronx' and 'Southeast D.C.'. Linking the present threat to wars – gang wars, war on drugs – that Americans are familiar with and understand the necessity in fighting helps to naturalise an assertive, interventionist American response to 9-11. Having already invested hundreds of millions of dollars in lengthy conflicts abroad and faced

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[43] Department of Homeland Security, 'Brief History of the Department of Homeland Security', (2008), accessed December 10, 2010, http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/brief_documentary_history_of_dhs_2001_2008.pdf.
[44] Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream: What 9-11 Revealed About America*. (Cornwall: MPG Books, 2007).
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ivan Daalder and James Lindsay, *America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy*. (New York; [Chichester]: Wiley, 2005).

repeated news coverage of gang wars at home, Americans had already been exposed to arguments that such 'wars' were clearly in the national interest and for the greater good. It was an analogy that resonated as it contextualised the new threat for Americans by drawing on an old threat with which they were already familiar and used to fighting. As one reviewer of 'Isaac and Ishmael' noted, 'while all the characters gave amazing performances, there were a few standouts. Charlie's comparison of terrorist camps and gangs was really well written'.[47] Ironically, for this reviewer, such articulations were useful in teaching Americans 'what can't be learned in classrooms'.[48]

4.3 What should we do, as Citizens?

Informed of who the terrorists are, what they want and what America should do, the third major question that 'Isaac and Ishmael' asks is: 'What should we do, as citizens?' The answer again takes three forms. First, the pupils learn that, as Americans, they should not worry (despite having begun the lesson by learning that terrorists want to kill them all), continue to put faith in their education and continue to believe in liberal values such as pluralism.

> Josh: But listen, don't worry about all this right now. We got you covered. Worry about school. Worry about what you're gonna tell your parents when you break curfew. You're gonna meet guys, you're gonna meet girls... Learn things. Be good to each other. Read the newspapers, go to the movies, go to a party. Read a book. In the meantime, remember pluralism. You want to get these people? I mean, you really want to reach in and kill them where they live? Keep accepting more than one idea. Makes 'em absolutely crazy.

All of this was, of course, supposedly the correct response because the government are responsible for and capable of keeping Americans safe; politics, terrorism and war should be left to the experts, citizens should uphold (liberal) American values and identity. To this end, *The West Wing* spoke in tandem with Bush's insistence that ordinary Americans should 'live your lives and hug your children'.[49] And, while the liberal values advocated might not be shared with the Bush Administration, there were also clear parallels with official (neo)liberal calls to respond by continuing to shop as normal.[50] Through such calls, the official response of the Bush Administration and that offered by *The West Wing* constructed and reaffirmed an enabling and dangerous division between the personal and political. Second, despite the overtly 'liberal response' being put forward, 'Isaac and Ishmael' confirms that it is normal to feel angry and to seek violent retribution. *The West Wing* gives voice to a common theme in American society during the post 9-11 void: the desire to realise the Jacksonian logic of the counter-punch.[51] In fusing love and anger, 'Isaac and Ishmael' adopted a strikingly similar tone to Bush's official announcements on terror.

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[47] Kickdoor 'What can't be learned in classrooms', TV.com, (2010), accessed December 10, 2010, http://www.tv.com/the-west-wing/isaac-and-ishmael/episode/77672/summary.html.
[48] Ibid.
[49] George. W. Bush, 'Address to Joint Session of Congress and the American People', Capitol Building, Washington D.C. September 20, 2001.
[50] Ibid.
[51] See, Holland, 'From Void to Crisis'; Gearoid O'Tuathail, "Geopolitical Structures and Cultures: Towards Conceptual Clarity in the Critical Study of Geopolitics". In *Geopolitical Perspectives on World Politics*, edited by Lasha Tchantouridze, (Winnipeg: Centre for Defence and Security Studies, 2003); and Mead, *Special Providence*.

> Josh: I'd put 'em in a small cell, and make them watch home movies of the birthdays and baptisms and weddings of every single person they killed, over and over, every day, for the rest of their lives [clears his throat]. And then they'd get punched in the mouth every night at bedtime. By a different person, every night. There'd be a long list of volunteers, but that's all right. We'll wait...

Third, 'Isaac and Ishmael' closes on what was one of the defining juxtapositions in the official narrative of the response to 9-11 and a theme commonplace throughout American media and society. The fusing of American exceptionalism with individual acts of heroism – from fire fighters, the police and the passengers of United 93 in particular – was a recurrent theme in Bush's speeches.[52] American exceptionalism – the belief that America is unique and superior – was central to American foreign policy in the response to 9-11, as it had been during the 1990s, Cold War and Second World War before.[53] What was unusual in American foreign policy after 9-11 was the degree to which these perceived national qualities were tied to the actions of individuals. For instance, not only was America attacked because of its exceptional nature ('we are the brightest beacon of freedom in the world'), but the attacks were also seen to bring out the best in America and encourage 'everyday acts of exceptionalism' in ordinary Americans. One frequently deployed strategy, was to contrast this exceptionalism – as manifest in the individual acts of heroism witnessed on 9-11 – with the cowardice of America's enemies. The question of whether suicide bombers were 'cowardly' had been a politically charged topic in the shadow of the fall of the Twin Towers.[54] *The West Wing* correspondingly saved this topic for the show's close and the wise words of President Bartlett:

> Boy 1:   Well, don't you consider...I mean, I know they're our enemy, but don't you consider there's something noble about being a martyr?
>
> Bartlett: A martyr would rather suffer death at the hands of an oppressor than renounce his beliefs. Killing yourself and innocent people to make a point is sick, twisted, brutal, dumb-ass murder. And let me leave you with this thought ... we don't need martyrs right now. We need heroes. A hero would die for his country but he'd much rather live for it...

Juxtaposing American heroes and cowardly martyrs, 'Isaac and Ishmael' closed once again by reinforcing and amplifying one of the key themes of the official response to 9-11. Just as Bush frequently brought 'good Americans' and 'evil terrorists' together in official narratives for maximum impact through juxtaposition, 'Isaac and Ishmael' did likewise. Indeed, the tendency toward moral absolutes and American exceptionalism in *The West Wing* after 9-11 was so great, and the tendency for Presidents Bush and Bartlett to converge in narratives so frequent, that some analysts have dubbed Sorkin's fictionalised but increasingly hybrid White House 'the Bushlet Administration'.[55]

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[52] For example, George. W. Bush, 'Address to Joint Session of Congress and the American People', Capitol Building, Washington D.C. September 20, 2001. See also Jackson, *Writing*.

[53] See, for example, Trevor McCrisken, *American Exceptionalism and the Legacy of Vietnam*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003).

[54] See, for example, James Der Derian, "The War of Networks". In *Worlds in Collision*, eds. Booth, K. (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

[55] Gans-Boriskin and Tisinger, 'Bushlet Administration'.

5. Television and (Im)possibility

The possibility of the 'War on Terror' was inevitably reliant upon 'a background of social/discursive practices and meanings'; such a background 'makes possible the practices as well as the social actors themselves'.[56] Understanding how the 'War on Terror' came 'to appear necessary' and 'the only reasonable course of action', whereas alternatives were rendered 'unthinkable', requires an appreciation of 'the way in which power works to constitute particular modes of subjectivity and interpretive dispositions'.[57] By helping to establish, what would become a largely agreed upon, background of discursive meanings, *The West Wing* through the 'Isaac and Ishmael' episode contributed to the possibility of the 'War on Terror' and actively shut down the scope for debate in American politics and society after 9-11.

Alternative voices were silenced by the amplification of official narratives. Of course, *The West Wing* was far from alone in this enterprise. Hayes and Guardino have noted that, in news coverage, 'Bush administration officials were the most frequently quoted sources, the voices of anti-war groups and opposition Democrats were barely audible, and the overall thrust of coverage favoured a pro-war perspective'.[58] And, after 9-11, the new context of the 'War on Terror' was frequently reflected and re-affirmed in television shows such as *MI-5/Spooks* and *24*.[59] What makes 'Isaac and Ishmael' noteworthy then is that the episode is explicitly written to respond to the events of 9-11 from a liberal perspective and it does so before any other entertainment television show of a similar nature. The show contributed to the rapid narrowing of the space from which alternative narratives could be put forward. The openness of the void, which was so quickly closed down, had initially enabled some alternative, critical and dissenting voices to be heard:

> "It's not a surprise … No, it's not all that far-fetched".

> "I think Bin Laden is basically a genius".

> "… all he [President Bush] uses are buzz words like evil, good, resolve and you'd think he was talking about a Star Wars movie or something".

> "It has nothing to do with freedom whatsoever … this might happen again so long as our policy towards the Middle East doesn't change".

> "The American people aren't thinking".

> "I can sort of understand where Bin Laden is coming from … I'm not necessarily proud to be an American … it will be a slightly longer version of the Oklahoma City bombing".

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[56] Roxanne Doty, 'Foreign Policy as Social Construction: A Post-Positivist Analysis of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy in the Philippines', *International Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (1993): 298.

[57] Ibid, 297-299.

[58] Danny Hayes and Matt Guardino, 'Whose Views Made the News? Media Coverage and the March to War in Iraq', *Political Communication* 27, no. 1 (2010): 59.

[59] Christian Erickson, 'Thematics of Counterterrorism: Comparing 24 and MI-5/Spooks', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 1, no. 3 (2008): 343-358.

"… well, don't people die every day?"[60]

'Isaac and Ishmael' contributed to the establishment of increasingly dominant discourses that marginalised these alternatives, acquiescing and co-opting potential oppositional voices. This can be seen not only in the rapid disappearance of alternative voices amongst the general public but also in overwhelming bipartisan support for Government policies after 9-11. The 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force Against Terrorists was opposed with only one vote against (Democrat Congresswoman Barbara Lee) compared to the five hundred and eighteen supporting votes the resolution received from across party lines in both houses of Congress. In this context, *The West Wing* episode 'Isaac and Ishmael' can and should then be read as an important moment in the transition from void to crisis, as the meaning of 9-11 slowly harmonised across American society and the Bush Administration established a hegemonic foreign policy discourse that would come to underpin the subsequent 'War on Terror'.[61]

In three principle and related ways, 'Isaac and Ishmael' helped to make the 'War on Terror' possible and to make alternative responses less likely. First, Sorkin's script clearly placed the government at the centre of key relationships in a post 9-11 world. With government agency (and a monopoly on the use of violence) having been challenged so directly by the events of September 11th, re-locating and re-concentrating agency at the heart of government was an important move for the Bush Administration. And it was aided by *The West Wing*. By positioning government officials as the only people who can understand and fight terrorists, simultaneously explaining events to the public and keeping them safe, 'Isaac and Ishmael' places the Bush/Bartlett Administration as both the link and barrier between the public and terrorism. The ambiguity of this dual role ensures agency is located at the heart of government and citizens are reliant on elected officials for the information that guides security policy and the safety those policies supposedly bring. 'Isaac and Ishmael' encourages the role of government as judge, jury and executioner on the terrorist threat.

Second, this (re-)elevation of the government to a position of 'sovereign protector' through both knowledge and ability is reinforced by a 'recognition' that the response to terror is particularly challenging and will require great minds. This is backed up by the fact that in 'Isaac and Ishmael' the show's stars are shown to be those minds teaching an informed but uncertain public. Third, the episode thus confirms that the role of the public is to listen to those government officials who are 'experts', have the knowledge of and the capability to respond to terror that they themselves lack. As has been shown, according to 'Isaac and Ishmael', the role of the public is to support officials by loving your family, your life and your country. The decision to construct and perpetuate this distinction was not accidental. De Jonge reported from the set during filming that Sorkin instructed the characters to assert mastery of the facts.

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[60] It is a sad reflection on the dangers of talking in the 'War on Terror' that have led me to anonymise these quotations, taken from interviews with ordinary American citizens conducted very shortly after 11 September 2001. All are available in the Witness and Response Collection at the Library of Congress and are respectively available on: SR375, September 13, 2001; SR375, September 13, 2001; SR381, September 15, 2001; SR381, September 15, 2001; SR085, September 20, 2001; SR276, September 20, 2001; SR376, September 19, 2001.

[61] For example, Croft, *Culture*; Jackson*, Writing*.

'You don't have to be so somber and funereal. It's not a wake ... You're smart. You know these things. Here they are'.[62]

This demonstration of knowledge is important in the transition from the post 9-11 void to a situation whereby understandings of terrorism are increasingly homogenised across society through the construction of 9-11 as crisis.

Despite its scale, the shock it generated and its obvious significance for most Americans, 9-11 was not self-evidently a crisis.[63] To be constructed as a crisis, 9-11 relied upon a double articulation: the simultaneous identification of both the problem (the morbid underlying condition the events represented) and the solution. As Colin Hay has argued, crises rely upon a population being shown the solution to the impasse.[64] To be constructed as a crisis, 9-11 required a *decisive intervention* to be made, which articulated the events 'as 'symptom'-atic of a more general condition of crisis' and a 'War on Terror', conducted through the agency of the American military led by President Bush, as the solution.[65] This 'decisive intervention' was essential to fill the void and respond to 9-11 as a crisis.[66] And it was a task aided and abetted by 'Isaac and Ishmael'.

Arguably, of course, all of this is nothing new. The rapid-fire and intelligent nature of the dialogue is part of the show's attraction for its fan base, and as Michelle Mouton argues *The West Wing* generally validates the 'codes, desires and aspirations of the educated professional class'.[67] Perhaps it should not be surprising that *The West Wing* helped to fill the post 9-11 void by amplifying dominant narratives and assisting in the construction of 9-11 as crisis. However, there have been important instances of *The West Wing* confronting and challenging dominant narratives to imagine alternative possible futures.[68] No better example of this exists than the prophetic seventh series, in which an overtly liberal, Hispanic candidate with soaring campaign rhetoric successfully overcomes the odds and expectations to win the presidential election. The character, Matt Santos (played by Jimmy Smits), was modelled on a young, liberal and little-known Senator. That Senator – Barack Obama – went on to win the real-world presidency in 2008, creating a strong sense of déjà vu for many who had watched *The West Wing* and cries that life was imitating art, imitating life. As this brief example and the preceding discussion highlight, entertainment television can both confirm *and* challenge; it

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[62] Sorkin, cited in Peter De Jonge, 'Aaron Sorkin Works His Way Through the Crisis', *New York Times*, October 28, 2001.
[63] Croft, *Crisis*; Holland, 'From Void to Crisis'.
[64] Colin Hay, 'Narrating Crisis: The Discursive Construction of the `Winter of Discontent'', *Sociology* 30, no. 2 (1996): 253-277.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Croft, *Crisis*.
[67] Michelle Mouton, 'Victorian Parliamentary Novels, The West Wing and Professionalism', in *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama*, eds. Rollins, P. and O'Connor, J. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 187-202.
[68] See, Ballard, 'Haven't We'; Brendan Carlin, George Jones and Toby Helm, 'Blair's Whips Fooled by West Wing Plot', *The Telegraph*, February 2, 2006, accessed December 10, 2010, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1509435/Blairs-whips-fooled-by-West-Wing-plot.html; Heather Hayton, 'The King's Two Bodies: Identity and Office in Sorkin's West Wing', in *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama*, eds. Rollins, P. and O'Connor, J. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 63-82; Hope, 'Why'; Freedland, 'From West Wing', Woods, 'Life'.

has the potential to close down or open up space for debate in politics and society. And that is why 'Isaac and Ishmael' remains so disappointing, disturbing and dangerous.

Conclusion

In reaction to the more vitriolic criticism that was launched at 'Isaac and Ishmael', Aaron Sorkin agreed that the episode might not have been *The West Wing* at its best but also by denying that it mattered or that it was even an episode of *The West Wing* at all.

> 'Some sort of respect had to be paid to the event that just happened ... We couldn't just do a regular 'West Wing.' I don't think that it was a good episode of 'The West Wing.' I don't think it was an episode of 'The West Wing.' I don't even know if it was good television. It was well intended, it was never meant to teach anything, to be preachy'.[69]

> '... the show had to bow its head somehow before it moved forward'.[70]

Executive Producer Thomas Schlamme confirms that the episode, inclusive of its limitations, was very much a product of that moment:

> 'We can remember the absolute visceral feeling that we all had those two weeks after Sept. 11 -- that episode was a product of those feelings. George W. Bush becoming president instead of Al Gore doesn't affect the show at all. But the pain of the nation and the pain that we all felt does affect the show a little bit. So it took awhile for us to find our sea legs'.[71]

Similarly, this paper has argued that 'Isaac and Ishmael' was a product of the moment and also a powerful mechanism through which the moment was constructed in the terms set out by the Bush Administration. It helped to settle some of the unease that characterised American society, filling the void in meaning that followed the events in Pennsylvania, Virginia and New York. Having helped to establish 9-11 as crisis by reproducing emerging and increasingly dominant narratives, Sorkin has been adamant that NBC should not re-air the episode; it should remain something to be watched once and then locked away, never to be seen again.

And yet, of course, the episode can be purchased to view, standing outside of the usual sequence and storylines, again and again. The exceptionalism of 9-11 can be revisited, along with a purportedly 'liberal response' that reinforces dominant narratives, every time 'Isaac and Ishmael is viewed', out of continuity, by new and loyal viewers of *The West Wing*. Moreover, the narrowing performed by the foreign policy positions articulated and performed in 'Isaac and Ishmael' does not stand alone. Rather, as Gans-Boriskin and Tisinger have argued, the foreign policy of *The West Wing* was frequently 'more hawkish than that of the Bush administration' and these 'messages matter; they matter in real and political ways'.[72] What Gans-Boriskin and Tisinger do not mention is that this was not always the case, but

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[69] Sorkin cited in Pat Nason, 'West Wing Boss Relieved 2001 is Past', *UPI*, September 6, 2002.
[70] Sorkin cited in Bill Keveney, 'Political powerhouse made TV history', *USA Today*, May 10, 2006.
[71] Cited in Daniel Coleridge, 'Why Bush Refused West Wing Invite', *TV Guide Online*, April 14, 2002.
[72] Gans-Boriskin and Tisinger, 'The Bushlet Administration', 100.

rather that, like many American politicians and citizens, *The West Wing* became more hawkish on foreign policy after the events of September 11th 2001. Just as 'Isaac and Ishmael' was a product and important contributor to the political context of the post 9-11 moment, so other episodes are inevitably produced through the complex interactions of the show's director's liberal leanings and the political circumstances of the time.

It is only necessary to consider the measured, unemotional arguments on foreign policy put forward in the show's third ever episode titled 'A Proportional Response' to appreciate this transition. Here, President Bartlet is slowly led away from a desire to blow terrorists 'off the face of the earth with the fury of God's own thunder'; he literally learns appropriate foreign policy behaviour based on 'what our father's taught us'. After 9-11, as the Bush Administration constructed a new era, replete with new and unprecedented dangers, which required new strategies, *The West Wing* followed suit. Early calls for a 'proportional response' to terrorism stand in marked contrast to the plotlines that followed 9-11. It is apparent that the events of September 11th had a dramatic impact on the show, the context in which the show aired, and on the broadly liberal views that informed plotlines. Initial, generally liberal, concerns with responding appropriately in line with a respect for precedent and international law rapidly lost favour after 9-11, as instead the show turned to consider the need to step outside of international law with plots advocating the political assassination of leaders allied with terrorists. Again, assisting the Bush Administration, *The West Wing* confirmed the exceptional nature of the post 9-11 world, in which a 'war paradigm' was required to keep us safe. In this paradigm, it was accepted as necessary that the law may have to be suspended to ensure security.

It is important that Political Scientists and International Relations take fictional dramas seriously.[73] They exert considerable influence in shaping public opinion and can help to derail or to reinforce the official policies of elected officials. They are also an important gauge, driver and reflector of 'real world' political currents of thought. As 'softer' liberal arguments lost out in post 9-11 America to the 'hard Wilsonian' positions advocated by neo-conservatives – famously described by Irving Kristol as liberals mugged by reality – *The West Wing* helped to imitate and initiate this crucial transition. As the official narratives and policy of the Bush Administration were put forward, *The West Wing* gave credence to the particular and contingent vision they offered, helping to contextualise the terror threat and naturalise the response they entailed for the American public. This was done by using established characters and a carefully crafted script to ensure that both Bush's and Bartlet's 'War on Terror' would resonate at home.

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[73] See, for good examples, Cynthia Weber, *Imagining America at War: Morality, Politics and Film*, (London: Routledge, 2006); and Jutta Weldes, 'Popular Culture, Science Fiction and World Politics' in *To Seek Out New Worlds: Exploring Links Between Science Fiction and World Politics*, (New York: Palgrave, 2003).

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