lity as a motivation both for action and for complicity. In this formulation, the public is shown a form of political exchange that prides itself on capitulation to an unseen and relentless chaos. What this perhaps elides is the actual nature of contemporary conflict resolution. As the United States increases its reliance on contract law and the judiciary both at home and abroad, it may be misguided to commit too much energy to glorified notions of participatory democracy. Nevertheless, *The West Wing*’s particular brand of democratic idealism is an extremely efficient way to market the United States’ number one global export: a normative form of democratic rule based on individual property rights.

This product, when packaged for *The West Wing*, first heightens, and then offers a remedy for, the symptoms of postmodern political stress. Through its interaction with America’s founding documents, and through the repackaging of current political issues, this transcendent form of media reaches beyond coaxial cable and into the everyday lives of Americans. It offers a new public space for debate, presided over by a new kind of virtual public intellectual. In the end, it may just be believing in believing, but that is a hell of a lot more comforting than what is on CNN.

### The Left Takes Back the Flag

*The Steadicam, the Snippet, and the Song*

in *The West Wing*’s “*In Excelsis Deo*”

**GREG M. SMITH**

A good episode of a prime-time serial ensemble drama has to accomplish many difficult tasks. The makers of the series have to juggle several plotlines in parallel action to keep key cast members in front of their audience and to provide dramatic payoffs for them. In addition, a serial drama must invoke the past histories of its characters to take full advantage of an audience’s long-term relationship with those beloved individuals. The temptation is to rely on talk, talk, talk, but the reigning television wisdom says that static talking heads are visually deadening. How, on the one hand, does a series like *The West Wing* pack all the required action and information into an episode without bogging the audience down in dialogue? And how, on the other hand, does it avoid taking on too frenetic a pace, overloading the audience with a blur of information? Producers could string together a rapid series of short scenes to cover the many separate pieces of required plot information, but the overall effect would be disjointed. An episode needs some unifying element to bring together the disparate plot strands into a cohesive, satisfying whole.

Close attention to a particular episode’s aesthetic strategies can provide a grounded explanation of how *The West Wing* manages its narrational juggling act. How does the episode balance the need for multiple plotlines with the need to create a cohesive whole? Using the first-season episode “*In Excelsis Deo*,” this chapter shows how *The West Wing*’s aesthetic strategy de-
pends on the coordination of key visual and verbal techniques. "In Excelsis Deo," which won an Emmy for Outstanding Writing in a Dramatic Series in 2000, exemplifies how the series uses conversational snippets and steadicam tracking shots to accomplish its dramatic tasks. Along the way to its lyrically musical coda, the episode also displays one of The West Wing's most innovative strategies: its activation of rousing, traditional, patriotic imagery in the service of left-wing politics.

Sound Bites

As the title indicates, "In Excelsis Deo" (the Latin translation of the proclamation of the angels to the shepherds at Jesus' birth: "Glory to God in the highest") is a Christmas-themed episode, full of bustling to prepare the White House for the holidays. Mandy (Moira Kelly) is making arrangements for a special Christmas reception, and Donna (Janel Maloney) pesters Josh (Bradley Whitford) about getting her a present. Press secretary C. J. (Allison Janney) and reporter Danny (Timothy Busfield) continue to dance around the conflict between their attraction and their official roles. More serious matters arise when the White House staff realizes that Leo (John Spencer) will soon be lambasted by a zealous Republican congressman who wants to expose Leo's history of drug use. In spite of Leo's admonition to remain calm, Josh convinces Sam (Rob Lowe) that they should take action, interrogating Sam's prostitute friend, Laurie (Lisa Edelstein), for incriminating information about possible Republican sexual indiscretions. In another dramatic plotline, the White House follows the unfolding story of a gay high school student (modeled on the real-life Matthew Shepard case in Wyoming) who was beaten and murdered, thus sparking a policy debate on hate crimes.

Through a chance connection, Toby (Richard Schiff) gets involved in the final affairs of a homeless veteran found frozen to death near the war memorials on the National Mall. Toby begins to understand the aggravating bureaucracy that a man of his high status normally bypasses, and he blasts through protocol on behalf of the departed to arrange for a military funeral in the episode's closing moments.

The vast majority of conversations in this episode are conveyed through simple shot-reverse shot editing. All television dramas rely on shot-reverse shot conversations as their basic material, but different dramas choose additional visual techniques to tell their stories. The television genre that has worked the longest at juggling multiple plotlines is, of course, the soap opera. Mainstream prime-time serial drama tends to reject many of soap opera's more marked devices for conveying information. Verbal asides, flashbacks, voiceovers, and dream sequences are considered a bit heavy-handed.

The prime-time serial drama tends to use devices that are not so "tainted" with their association to soap opera. ER (1994–), for instance, avoids an overreliance on static shots of talking heads by alternating its fairly standard conversational scenes with elaborate, kinetic, steadicam camera movements during emergency incidents. This technique traces its lineage to the more highly valued feature film practice of the sequence shot, used in films from Touch of Evil (1958) to The Player (1992). Homicide's (1993–99) much ballyhooed televisual style used flashy jump cuts and other continuity violations to add pep to its character interactions, although it did tend to rely on more standard editing for most of its dramatic interchange.

Series also use a range of techniques to unify an episode's plotlines and to provide a satisfying sense of closure. The courtroom drama is perhaps best prepared to offer such tight closure because a lawyer's final arguments provide a natural forum for making connections and drawing conclusions. Northern Exposure (1990–1995) turned to disc jockey Chris Stevens (John Corbett) to provide a running philosophical commentary on the characters' activities, using the forum of a radio show to provide voice-over narration. Oz (1997–), the show that manages to juggle the largest number of plotlines and principal characters, steps out of the diegesis to provide a unifying element. Wheelchair-bound Augustus Hill (Harold Perrineau) directly addresses the camera with literate musings about the fates of the characters. All of these shows recognize that a successful prime-time ensemble drama must find its own set of aesthetic techniques to unify the episodes of a series into a cohesive whole that expresses a consistent viewpoint.

Any discussion of The West Wing's aesthetics should begin with Aaron Sorkin's dialogue. Sorkin alternates rat-a-tat interchanges with florid speech-making to create a distinctive voice for the show. One of the ways that Sorkin and, in this episode, writing partner Rick Cleveland accomplish so much business in so short a period of time is through the use of mini-scenes. His-
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I historically, dramas devoted an entire scene to communicating a single new plot development, and thus the show moved forward one step at a time, one scene at a time. Giving a whole scene to every significant character interchange would make it almost impossible for The West Wing to do multiple plotlines. Therefore Sorkin and Cleveland choose to break single scenes into separate dramatic mini-scenes that are unrelated to each other narratively but which share the same time and space. Characters come and go in pairs, each couple intent on its own conversation but each occupying center stage for only a brief moment.

For instance, in "In Excelsis Deo" President Bartlet (Martin Sheen) visits a rare bookstore in Georgetown with members of his staff, all of whom seem uninterested in the historic texts. The camera tracks with Charlie (Dulé Hill) and then settles on Bartlet as he discourses about a book of animal fables in iambic pentameter to a bored Leo. When Mandy passes in front of them, the camera follows her as she and Josh bemoan their fates in this bookstore. Then Bartlet and Leo cross behind them, and the camera follows their conversation. They begin by discussing Leo's plans for the holidays but soon move to a more serious discussion of the scandal brewing around Leo's former excessive use of prescription drugs. Charlie interrupts their conversation, and the camera follows Bartlet as he briskly starts to exit the store. The camera lingers for one more conversation in the store—Leo urges Josh not to act rashly on his behalf. The brief conversations might as well be separate scenes as far as the actors' dramatic objectives are concerned, but they are efficiently conveyed and effectively unified by including them in a single movement-filled scene in a closed environment.

While this reliance on mini-scenes is characteristic of The West Wing, it is not unique to the series. John Wells's ER, for instance, also uses mini-scenes to break up the business of an individual scene into separate conversations. However, Sorkin's dialogue in The West Wing and in his other show Sports Night (1998–2000) is distinctive in that it breaks up single conversation between two characters into multiple topics, thereby conveying information quickly while mirroring the complexity of the West Wing world.

Sorkin's characters tend to switch from one topic to another at a moment's notice, sometimes devoting only a single line to a subject. Just as he fractures scenes into mini-scenes, he also divides individual conversations into snippets, extraordinarily brief dramatic units that together comprise a complete conversational interchange. For example, in "In Excelsis Deo" C. J. and Sam begin a hallway conversation about the pros and cons of "hate crime" legislation. Sam is hesitant to legislate against what people are thinking and is satisfied to let laws against violent action punish the perpetrators. C. J., disturbed by the news of the attack on the gay high school senior, feels that society should punish these cases more heavily. The discussion is political, philosophical, and passionate. Suddenly, without transition, C. J. turns to a discussion of their Secret Service code names. She is worried about what her code name ("Flamingo") implies about her. In the spirit of snippets, Sam picks up the new topic without question and without missing a beat.

Similarly, C. J. asks Danny for his opinion on hate crimes, and when his answer displeases her, she asks him to dinner so that he can convince her of his position. This conversation (in which C. J. partially backs down from her invitation, claiming it is not a date) ends with this set of snippets:

C. J.: This is a business dinner. In fact, bring your notebook.
DANNY: OK.
C. J.: My secret service name is "Flamingo."
DANNY: That's nice.
C. J.: I have to feed my fish.

The shot continues, revealing a brief interchange between Danny and Josh ("Hey Danny." "Hey Josh." "How's it going?" "Hard to tell." "OK." "OK."). Still within the same shot, the next scene begins (in which Josh gives Donna a Christmas gift).

These brief conversational snippets have several functions. They provide the pleasure of witty, rhythmic banter. They also can tersely incorporate the previous history of the show into the current moment. In order to get the humor of Danny and C. J.'s little haiku, one has to know not only that C. J. is obsessing about her Secret Service code name but also that lovesick Danny gave her a live goldfish, not understanding that she actually likes the Pepperidge Farm Goldfish snack crackers. Evoking the characters' past history is a central technique of the serial drama, and conversational snippets can do this both effectively and playfully.
Turning the conversation on a dime also helps to convey how busy the lives of these characters are: their jobs are so important that they do not have time to make conversational transitions, and so they all naturally understand that dialogue must lurch from one topic to the other. This conversational tactic has added benefits for the actor. Actors often search their lines for subtext, for the meaning hidden under the lines spoken. Sorkin tends to build this subtext explicitly into the structure of the conversation. Actor Allison Janney knows that while C. J. is engaging in a passionate debate about the morality of hate crime legislation with Sam, her character is still bothered that the code name “Flamingo” makes her appear ridiculous. Janney knows this because C. J. turns the conversation to this inane subject without any outside provocation. Placing one conversational snippet after another gives the actors valuable clues about their characters’ sensibility.

Breaking conversations into these smaller units allows The West Wing to contrast the high seriousness of these characters’ jobs with moments of low silliness, which humanizes the West Wing staffers. Citizens hope that the White House staff is comprised of intelligent people who argue political questions with moral fervor, but they also want these politicos to be ordinary people, human enough to obsess about a nickname.

The most dramatic contrasting moment in “In Excelsis Deo” occurs during a bit of presidential window dressing, a photo opportunity in which President Bartlet hams it up with a group of schoolchildren with well-rehearsed questions. Bartlet keeps pretending that he does not know what country he is the president of, and the delighted children keep shouting their reminder. The silliness of this moment halts when Charlie calls the president aside to tell him that the battered gay high school student has just died. After a solemn moment, the president immediately returns to his duty as First Jester, joking with the children. One can imagine that the president’s day is filled with moments that alternate between the ludicrous and the earthshaking: Sorkin and Cleveland use brief conversational snippets to reveal these contradictions. In an era in which political messages need to be packaged into sound bites, the conversational snippet in drama condenses a great deal of information about the daily lives of characters, maximizing dialogue efficiency with a syncopated variation on the telegraphic style of network and cable news programs.

Dashing Through the Halls

The problem with depending on the snippet is that it creates a choppy rhythm. As Sorkin and Cleveland demonstrate, it can efficiently accomplish a great many tasks, but the technique requires a balancing force to smooth over the disjunctures. A good series episode needs a unifying device that can guide the program toward a satisfying conclusion.

Steadicam tracking shots in The West Wing give coherence to the various bits of dialogue. As in ER, these shots create visual interest, which is probably more needed to energize the representation of politics (a much more abstract practice than emergency medicine). But the steadicam serves a larger purpose in The West Wing. The series uses these tracking shots to provide a visual unity that counterbalances the verbally fractured snippets, making it possible for the show to make longer eloquent statements.

The tracking shot in The West Wing often begins by focusing on a small action, often by a bit player (e.g., carrying a gift basket) or on an object (a wall decoration). The camera almost immediately picks up one or two of the central characters moving through the White House office space. The camera follows as a couple of principal players march quickly through the hallways, discussing one or more topics. Then one of the characters forks off and is almost immediately replaced by another principal, who initiates another discussion. Several exchanges of characters can occur during one long continuous shot. The camera need not follow the same character throughout the shot as long as one holdover from the last conversational duo is still in the frame. Often these shots end as they began, with the camera focusing on a bit player (e.g., a Secret Service man) with the primary couple walking offscreen. In this way the camera stages a series of pas de deux, with partners pairing off and then cutting in on one prolonged dance. This steadicam of interchanging couples is the defining visual trademark of The West Wing and wordlessly communicates the dynamism of the dedicated people who work there.

For example, consider the previously mentioned hallway steadicam sequence that follows C. J. and Sam as they discuss first hate crimes and then her Secret Service code name. After C. J. leaves the frame, the camera follows Sam as he talks about his imminent departure for Bermuda with the secre-
This particular episode begins with another example of these elaborate tracking shots. After initially following a bouquet being delivered, the camera picks up Mandy and C. J. discussing the details of preparations for the White House Christmas holiday celebration. As Toby and Sam enter the conversation, the camera arcs around them, showing a full 360-degree view of the gaily decorated lobby (while Sam interjects trivial snippets about weatherman Al Roker and about the sales figures for the song “Feliz Navidad”). One of Sam’s snippets about the coming of the new millennium triggers an argument between Sam and Toby about the millennium’s exact date, and this argument propels all four characters (and the steadicam) down a hallway. This first tracking shot is elegantly matched to the subsequent tracking shot by a natural wipe (an object that moves across the screen, giving the appearance of and serving the function of a “wiping” transition). In this particular instance, the edge of a wall creates the natural wipe, producing an apparently natural continuity between two steadicam shots. (The West Wing frequently uses the edges of the set walls or characters crossing in front of the principals to create fluid and visually interesting edits.)

When such a smoothly gliding visual style becomes a norm for the series, then variations from that norm can bear aesthetic force and narrative meaning. While Toby and Sam debate about the millennium, a secretary comes behind them with a phone message for Toby. All is business as usual until the moment has passed, the characters disburse, except for Sam and C. J., who walk and continue the millennium conversation (now followed by the camera). At the first mention of C. J. as “Flamingo,” Sam pulls her offscreen, ending the shot with a final image: the same floral arrangement that started this steadicam sequence, providing an elegant formal closure.

“In Excelsis Deo” also reveals how the tracking shot can be used not just for aesthetic purposes but also to make social commentary. The episode tells how Toby becomes involved in the world of the Washington homeless when an impoverished veteran, Walter Hufnagle, is found dead, wearing a coat that Toby had donated to charity. Toby is outraged at the negligent treatment that this U.S. Marine Korean War veteran’s body receives, and he intervenes personally. At night he ventures into the urban demimonde for the homeless, and the camera follows him in long shot as the well-dressed Toby Ziegler walks through an alien environment. This tracking shot cannot help but evoke the earlier tracking shots through the lavish world of the White House, and the contrast is striking. In this particular episode, director Alex Graves uses the tracking shot to comment on the differences between America’s haves and have-nots.

A primary function of these tracking shots, however, is to smooth over the herky-jerky energy of the fractured conversations. The steadicam track down the hall is not the most frequent shot in the series, but it is the most dominant consistent pattern of technique, used to distinguish the particular look and ambiance of The West Wing. It is this aesthetic technique that unifies the various scattered arguments about several different topics into a cohesive political statement that is forcefully voiced in the episode’s coda.

The West Wing

In the End, a Song

The combination of the steadicam and the snippet allow The West Wing to accomplish one of its most distinctive purposes: to connect the personal with the political. The series presents the compelling fantasy that the White House is inhabited with articulate people who are wholeheartedly devoted to their political beliefs and who also are full of human foibles. It shows characters who can be so moved by the plight of a particular forgotten veteran that they violate protocol and arrange for a Marine honor guard funeral. It depicts persons who are outraged at the violence perpetrated on a young man solely because of his sexual orientation, and yet that high moral outrage does not make them into stuffy caricatures. This political fervor does not exclude them from the pettiness and the petulance, the merriment and the mistakes, that characterize everyday interactions among normal human beings. The West Wing presents both dimensions of its characters, slammed side by side through its juxtaposing technique.
The end result can be a coda of considerable power. *The West Wing* does not have a standard way of closing its episodes, like a courtroom drama’s summary arguments or Chris Stevens’s radio wrap-up in *Northern Exposure*. An episode may end with one of Sorkin’s lyrical speeches or with a long story. But the closing device attempts to provide a denouement that unifies the various plot threads into a formal whole.

“In Excelsis Deo” uses a song to create a particularly lyrically coordinated finale. Much in the way that *Homicide* often did, the series here uses a highly foregrounded piece of music to anchor a montage connecting its disparate threads. In the White House, a boys’ choir performs the carol “The Little Drummer Boy.” Earlier Mrs. Landingham (the president’s secretary, played by Kathryn Joosten) reveals that her twin sons Chris and Simon were killed near DaNang, Vietnam, on Christmas Eve 1970. She accompanies Toby and the dead veteran’s brother George—also homeless—to a full honor guard funeral for the former Marine.

The montage is jam-packed with gloriously patriotic brief shots (the visual equivalent of the verbal snippet) of the veteran’s internment at Arlington National Cemetery. The young voices sing in harmony back at the White House, serving as a reminder of a similarly orchestrated effort of young manhood during wartime. Director Alex Graves intercuts the precision honor guard reverently folding an American flag with a shot of the West Wing staff falling into line formation to listen to the carolers. The intercutting makes the formal point that both groups are soldiers serving the same higher good: the nation.

There are fine character details in this montage, as well, giving insight into the persons involved, not just the politics. Toby, an inexpert mourner, has to be reminded (by the driver’s example) to salute the flag-draped coffin. The camera shows that Toby, the veteran, and Mrs. Landingham, the mother, both flinch involuntarily at the loud discharge of the honor guard’s rifle salute.

This is powerful patriotic iconography, but the thing that is most unusual about this imagery is that it is used in service of left wing politics. In the last several decades, the Left has tended to shy away from flag-waving because it is all-too aware that what the flag stands for is not all positive. The flag has been used as a symbol both to unite people against tyranny and to encourage young people to die for arguably political policies. The New Left is often unsure about what it is saluting when it salutes the flag, and so a good leftie like Toby needs to be reminded of this formality. Except in wartime, the New Left tends to avoid wrapping itself in the flag, leaving that imagery available for almost exclusive peacetime use by others.

*The West Wing*, like the left wing under William Jefferson Clinton, has begun to recognize the power of such patriotic symbols. By leaving that imagery to the Right, the Left sacrifices a strong unifying element. The politics of this episode could not be more clearly leftist. It tells the story of a young man killed by antigay bigotry today and two young men killed during a tragic war thirty years ago. This is America. And yet the lyrical coda salutes the notion of national service, that people who sacrifice for the nation—in the military or in government—are engaged in a noble endeavor. In making that point, the Left does not need to stop being the Left. I am glad that Toby and Mrs. Landingham wince when the rifles blast. It reminds us that wars have human costs, and the Left should always flinch at that. Toby’s and Mrs. Landingham’s presence show that their personally scarred histories can find encouragement in the collective rituals of patriotism. In “In Excelsis Deo,” the song finishes what the steadicam and the snippet have begun. *The West Wing* links the personal with the political, and it drapes the flag around both.