

# The never-ending story: Palestine, Israel and *The West Wing*

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## Abstract

*This article examines the way in which the popular American television series The West Wing represents the Palestinian–Israeli conflict and the way in which Middle Eastern audiences responded to that depiction. This fictional and highly idealized portrayal of the American presidency has frequently used ‘real’ storylines that reflect contemporary political discourse to its primary domestic audience. However, the programme is also shown outside the United States where its storylines – and the time of broadcast – may give an episode an entirely different meaning. This article looks at audience responses to the episode ‘Isaac and Ishmael’ and the story arc that begins at the end of Season 5 and continues at the beginning of Season 6. This centres on an attempt to settle the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. Placing The West Wing within a broad political and historical framework, the article uses the idea of American exceptionalism as the basis from which to argue that The West Wing presents ‘real’ as well as idealized American political stances and in that sense has to be read, in certain contexts, as contributing to audience perceptions of the ‘real’ world. The article questions whether the asynchronous transmissions of the programme in the domestic US and Middle Eastern markets contribute to this perception. Using the responses of audiences of varying ages, education levels and origins, the article concludes that although it sometimes portrays Arabs negatively, it is usually well intentioned and makes genuine, if occasionally clumsy, attempts to portray Arabs in a favourable light. While episodes of The West Wing are the article’s main source, I have also drawn heavily on academic and non-academic articles to provide background to mainstream audience reaction and some of the issues – religious, political and historical – addressed by the series.*

## Keywords

*West Wing*  
Arabs  
Islam  
Middle East  
orientalism  
Abu Dhabi  
Palestinians

This article looks at audience reactions in Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates) to two specific parts of *The West Wing*. The first was the special episode that preceded Season 3 and which was the series’ response to the terrorist attacks on New York. The second was the story arc spanning Season 5 and 6, which tells of President Bartlett’s attempts to settle the Israeli–Palestinian question. The programmes were watched by a mix of Zayed University students, graduates, faculty and non-university employees. All the viewers were Muslim and most were women. While the majority were Emirati, two were American converts, several were from other Arab countries and one was of Palestinian descent. Some of the responses were hostile, others positive. Audience response appeared to be governed by age, political sophistication, education and exposure to outside ideas.

1. Of more recent films, students who had seen it were very positive about *Syriana*, which was partly shot in Dubai.
2. Shaheen's stereotypical Arab is a fabulously wealthy, sex mad barbarian with a penchant for terrorism.
3. This has actually happened in some unexpected places. Alexander Siddiq played 'Dr Bashir' the station doctor on *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*. Siddiq later appeared in *Syriana*, an extremely sympathetic portrayal of the complexities of politics and oil in the Gulf.

This examination of audience reaction began more or less as an accident with the screening of the '9/11 special' 'Isaac and Ishmael'. The depth of student reaction to that episode prompted me to screen it to a different audience and then to seek an audience reaction to the story arc centring on Israel and Palestine. When re-screening 'Isaac and Ishmael' and the Palestinian episodes I let the audience view the programmes on their own and then sought detailed, written reactions, from which I have quoted.

*The West Wing* was originally available to Abu Dhabi audiences via the satellite channel America Plus on the Saudi-owned Orbit platform. The programme was shown with Arabic subtitles and appeared to be run intact, although one episode critical of Saudi Arabia appeared to have been censored when shown. *The West Wing* was subsequently repeated on Dubai One and each season was rapidly made available on video or DVD. Anecdotal evidence, largely gathered through surveys of student media usage by communication students at Zayed University, indicates that many female students watch little English-language drama on television, dislike subtitles and in any case have their viewing choices severely controlled by male relatives. Discussions of representations of Arabs by the western media are one of the staples of communications classes, although these tend to focus on the cinema. That western media will portray Arabs negatively seems to be taken as a given, although some students praised older films like *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Lion of the Desert/Omar Mukhtar*.<sup>1</sup> Although the hypothesis is untested, it may be that many students are actually far more familiar with western cinema than television, preferring to watch Arabic television.

Shaheen's pioneering work on the representation of Arabs on American television (Shaheen 1984: 4–54) is nearly a quarter of a century old, but his thesis that Arabs and other minorities are generally portrayed imperfectly still holds.<sup>2</sup> Arabs have continued to hold attention as television villains, especially at times of crisis. According to Gladstone-Sovell and Wilkerson (2002) 40 per cent of dramas aired during the 2001–02 television season in the United States referred to the attacks on New York in their storylines.

At the end of *The TV Arabs*, Shaheen (1984: 126–34) suggests that with good will and understanding, it would be possible to produce more accurate and sympathetic images of Arabs on television.<sup>3</sup> *The West Wing's* portrayals of Arabs are not always positive, but they are not restricted to the hostile stereotypes listed by Shaheen. In fact, as I discuss later, the programme attempted to give a balanced, even positive portrayal in certain episodes. As we shall see, however, there are several questions about the ability of non-American domestic audiences to perceive this.

*The West Wing* is a linear descendant of Frank Capra's films about the perfectibility of the American political system by the good will and understanding of decent men and women. In such a world anybody should be capable of redemption, but *The West Wing* also attempts to portray reality and so not everybody can be saved. On the one hand, *The West Wing* is, in the words of *The Economist*, 'essentially a fairy story about a benign ruler' (*The Economist* 2002a). Others have ascribed its appeal to its reinforcement of faith in the American political system:

it seems clear that the fundamental attraction of *The West Wing* for Americans is its promise that, despite our failings and lapses, our system is still [...] a lighthouse. Such an appeal to our better selves is both refreshing and chastening.

(Rollins and O'Connor 2003: 13)

And yet it is debatable whether *The West Wing* really is such a liberal fantasy. The fictional President Bartlett's behaviour is in fact closer to the realities of twenty-first-century global politics. Writing in her monumental study of the Versailles Conference, Canadian historian Margaret MacMillan depicts the United States as a country that has always believed that it is exceptional. She goes on to argue that such a fervent belief in its own system has led to an equally fervent belief in its special place in the world. This, she says, has its dangers:

American exceptionalism has always had two sides: the one eager to set the world to rights; the other ready to turn its back with contempt if its message should be ignored. Faith in their own exceptionalism has sometimes led to a certain obtuseness on the part of Americans, a tendency to preach at other nations rather than listen to them, a tendency to assume that American motives are pure where those of others are not.

(MacMillan 2002: 22)

*The West Wing* is also convinced of American exceptionalism, of its goodness and of its ability to solve all the nation's ills through an idealized process of rational debate, negotiation and good works. However, when the mythical president of *The West Wing* is threatened or cannot get his own way, he too turns his back with contempt – and then uses force to either coerce or punish those who oppose him. By showing a president who threatens to use force, *The West Wing* reflects not Hollywood myth, but the real world. The world of *The West Wing* and its fictional President Josiah Bartlett works safely within the established – and real – paradigm of American imperialist power. The programme reflects a world that has moved beyond the 'end of history' in which liberal democracy was supposed to have triumphed. Instead, in terms of global *realpolitik*, it has reverted to what Cooper (1997: 313) describes as the pre-1989 international order of 'hegemony or balance'. Bartlett's occasional references to the Pax Romana makes it clear that he sees the United States as fulfilling a hegemonic role. For a supposedly liberal president – and for an overtly liberal series – this presents a paradox, but these internal contradictions are never questioned. Never once do Bartlett or any of the other fictional characters seriously challenge the 'real' system. Perhaps they have taken Cooper's position that:

We need to get used to the idea of double standards. Among ourselves we operate on the basis of laws and open cooperative society. But when dealing with more old-fashioned kinds of state we need to revert to the rougher methods of an earlier era – force, pre-emptive attack, deception, whatever is necessary to deal with those who are still in the nineteenth-century world of every state for itself.

(Cooper 1997: 322)

4. Andrew Stuttaford (2003) begins a profile of actor Martin Sheen, who plays the fictional president, with 'If there is anyone more sanctimonious than the West Wing's Jed Bartlett.'
5. Fred McKissack (2000) presents a dissenting view from the American left: 'Let's drop the pretence that this is somehow a pro-lefty, commie-lovin' roll-a-doobie.'

Each country has its own myths and powerful nations seek to present those myths to the world through culture or other projections of power. *The West Wing* is clearly a cultural product designed to reinforce and bolster the myth of the supremacy and superiority of the American political establishment. To a non-American audience, the first and major contradiction is that Bartlett is presented as 'liberal', an American code word for left wing. He certainly seems to be accepted as such by right-wing commentators in the United States (Leo 2002; Stuttaford 2003).<sup>4</sup> By the standards of much of the rest of the world, however, he is nothing of the sort (McKissack 2000).<sup>5</sup> He is a pro-capitalist and considers that free enterprise is the best solution to every problem. The series' creator, Aaron Sorkin, clearly conceived Jed Bartlett as a liberal character and compared to George Bush Jnr, he is. If this represents a state of ideological false consciousness on the part of Sorkin, the writers who replaced him and, one must presume, many viewers, then we must accept it, at least within the parameters of the series.

*The West Wing* represents an idealization of the American system, not a critique of it. Idealization would be fine if the programme concentrated wholly on domestic issues, but it does not. From time to time it stumbles into the arena of world politics and falls flat on its face. The programme often reflects an astonishing ignorance of the non-American world and a mocking, hostile attitude to it. One is forced to wonder whether the world is portrayed in this way because that is how *The West Wing's* writers see it, how they think President Bartlett would see it, or how they think American viewers see it.

But who are *The West Wing's* viewers? Within the United States the programme was immensely popular, winning a number of Emmy awards and garnering a sizeable part of the market (*The Economist* 2002b). The programme continues to be shown outside the United States on terrestrial television and on satellite. It has been more successful in some markets than others, being praised by critics but ignored by audiences (*The Economist* 2003). Craciun (2004) argues that:

*The West Wing* [...] has the obvious limit that it covers only the American political system. If [a television programme or film touches on] foreign policy issues it becomes substantially more interesting for the non-American viewer. Although very informative and insightful, *The West Wing* sheds little light on other [political systems] than the American one.

Aaron Sorkin has written that he did not intend *The West Wing* to mirror reality, but the way in which people see a programme may be quite different to what was intended, depending on local cultural and political conditions. A programme that was 'fictional' when it was transmitted to a domestic audience may be shown at a later date to an audience in another country where the fictional events may be perceived by another audience to have quite definite parallels with real events in their lives. *The West Wing* has aired its final episode in the United States, but it will continue to be shown in other countries for years to come, when its stories will have acquired entirely different levels of significance.

A programme that was intended, or expected, to be received in a particular way by a domestic audience some time in the past, will now be received in a multitude of ways by a vastly fragmented international audience. That audience might not understand English properly or see the programme with inadequate subtitles. That audience is also being asked to understand – or guess at the meaning of – an entirely alien political or social framework and to try to put the programme into what may well have become a historical framework. An international audience will have to have extremely good English comprehension (or be provided with adequate subtitles) *and* comprehend the socio-political paradigm in which a programme was framed *and* understand that the programme may have been commenting on events that happened several years ago. In short, they will have to be able to read an extremely complicated American media discourse. If they cannot do this, the possibilities for misunderstanding are enormous, especially if the audience thinks its culture, country or religion are being questioned.

*The West Wing's* depictions of most countries and people from outside the United States are usually unflattering.<sup>6</sup> However, Arab countries and Arabs have been given probably the widest range of character traits. They have been alternatively threatening, untrustworthy, neutral, honest and respectable. The first Arab country to be depicted was Syria, followed by Iraq and Saudi Arabia. In each of these programmes, the country in question was shown to be opposed to US interests of standards of behaviour. In the second and third episodes of the first series, Syria shoots down an American aircraft carrying the president's doctor.<sup>7</sup> Bartlett is enraged and calls for a massive reprisal:

Let the word go forth, from this time and this place, gentlemen. You kill an American, any American, we don't come back with a proportional response. We come back with total disaster.

(Sorkin 2002: 105)<sup>8</sup>

Bartlett is persuaded not to devastate Syria and unhappily settles for a limited air strike on military targets. McKissack (2000) describes this as 'another Hollywood production demonising an Arab nation'.

Later episodes deal with the rescue of an American pilot shot down in the no-fly zone in Iraq and a request by the Swiss government for a life-saving operation to be performed on the son of the Iranian Ayatollah.<sup>9</sup> While these episodes reflect tensions that exist in the real world, they do not treat these countries in an overtly hostile manner. However, in the episode 'Enemies Domestic and Foreign', *The West Wing* comments on a real incident in the Middle East.<sup>10</sup> The character C.J. Craig reacts to a question about the death of 17 Saudi schoolgirls who were burned to death when religious police refused to let them leave a burning building because they were not wearing their *abeyahs* (BBC Online 2002):

Outraged? I'm barely surprised. This is a country where women aren't allowed to drive a car. They're not allowed to be in the company of any man other than a close relative. They're required to adhere to a dress code that would make a Maryknoll nun look like Malibu Barbie. They beheaded

6. An earlier version of this article, given at the Arab-United States Association for Communication Education conference in Dubai in October 2003 under the title 'Extremist Arabs, Exasperating Indians and English Alcoholics: The West Wing vs the World', dealt at length with the programme's often inaccurate depictions of other countries and their inhabitants, ranging from the English to Indonesians. Episodes dealing with international politics generally display Sorkin's ignorance of the world outside the United States. He portrays everybody from the English to the Indians in an unflattering and ill-informed light.
7. 'Post Hoc, Ergo Propter Hoc' and 'A Proportional Response', *The West Wing* 1: II–III.
8. McKissack (2000) uses this episode to advance his theory that Bartlett is not left wing. 'How freaking lefty is it to bomb the Syrians, anyway?' he asks.
9. 'The Portland trip', *The West Wing*, 2: VII.
10. 'Enemies Foreign and Domestic', *The West Wing*, 3: XIX.

11. 'Enemies Foreign and Domestic', *The West Wing*, 3: XIX. To the best of my knowledge, Orbit censored this portion of the programme. Most dialogue quotations in this article are from the unofficial *West Wing* continuity guide found at <http://westwing.bewarne.com>
12. 'We killed Yamamoto' and 'Posse Comitatus', *The West Wing*, 3: XXI–XXII.
13. 'Abdul Shareef' is a most unlikely name for a Gulf Arab. One of my Arab colleagues said that at best it sounded vaguely Egyptian.
14. 'We Killed Yamamoto', *The West Wing*, 3: XXI.

121 people last year for robbery, rape and drug trafficking, they have no free press, no elected government, no political parties. And the Royal family allows the religious police to travel in groups of six carrying nightsticks and they freely and publicly beat women. But 'Brutus is an honourable man.' Seventeen schoolgirls were forced to burn alive because they weren't wearing the proper clothing. Am I outraged? No [...] That is Saudi Arabia, our partner in peace.<sup>11</sup>

Gans-Boriskin and Tisinger (2005) argue that this blurring of the real and the fictional is part of Sorkin's attempt to pin the blame for all problems with Arab countries on Islamic fundamentalism. However, while this episode explicitly referred to an incident in Saudi Arabia, most of the fictional *West Wing's* problems have been with the equally fictitious Gulf state of Qumar, which is depicted as having an American base and being, on the surface, friendly to the United States. Why create a fictional country? I suggest that if a country is fictional, its leaders can be safely assassinated and its people bombed or invaded as required. In a cycle of stories that begins at the end of Season 3 and reaches into Season 5, Bartlett and his advisers decide to assassinate the Qumari Defence Minister, Abdul Shareef, who, it is revealed, is secretly backing terrorist organizations plotting against the United States. After some debate, President Bartlett decides to have Shareef assassinated on British territory in the Caribbean.<sup>12</sup> The repercussions of this event, the cover-up and the involvement of Israel are all designed to show the consequences of taking what Bartlett believes to be a reprehensible, but necessary stand.

The underlying message of this story arc is that the Arabs simply cannot be trusted. America offers its friendship and its bases and the Arabs try to blow up the Golden Gate bridge. It is only in this episode that some of the moral certainty of *The West Wing* slips. Assassination is, at best, morally ambiguous. We see the presidential staff struggling with the question, but it is Admiral Fitzwallace who justifies what they are planning by citing the shooting down of the Japanese commander Admiral Yamamoto over Bougainville in 1943. Ultimately, it is the knowledge that such assassination has been carried out before that is used to justify the shooting of Abdul Shareef.<sup>13</sup>

Admiral Fitzwallace: 'Can you tell when it's peacetime and wartime any more?'

Leo McGarry: 'No.'

Admiral Fitzwallace: 'I don't know who the world's leading expert on warfare is, but any list has got to include me and I can't tell when it's peacetime and wartime any more.'

Leo McGarry: 'Look, international law has always recognized certain protected persons who you couldn't attack. It's been this way since the Romans.'

Admiral Fitzwallace: 'In peacetime...'

Leo McGarry: 'I don't like where this conversation's going.'

Admiral Fitzwallace: 'We killed Yamamoto. We shot down his plane.'

Leo McGarry: 'We declared war...'<sup>14</sup>

Moral ambiguity is always a useful dramatic device, but it does not really answer the really serious questions raised by this story arc. Why would the

Qumari Defence Minister plot against the United States? And how much effort has been expended by the United States to keep him in power until now? These are difficult questions, but *The West Wing* sidesteps such issues and concentrates on matters that appear to be more easily resolvable.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in 'Isaac and Ishmael', the special episode that appeared at the beginning of Season 3.<sup>15</sup> 'Isaac and Ishmael' was the first programme to self-consciously deal, albeit indirectly, with the horrifying and cowardly attacks on New York on September 11, 2001 and to educate viewers about the issues surrounding the events (Gladstone-Sovell and Wilkerson 2002).

The programme was severely criticized by many parts of the American media, although it had its supporters as well. *USA Today* called it 'A crashing and condescending bore' (BBC Online 2001), while the *New York Post* said it 'came across as pretentious and pietistic hubris' (Shales 2001). *Time* castigated the episode but admitted that it was important 'that it was attempted at all' (Poniewozik 2001).

Outside the United States, the *Sydney Morning Herald* described it as 'an encouraging example of American television running on the best of intentions' (Oliver 2001). That it was well intentioned is not in doubt. That it tried to deal honestly with the sensitive topic of how Muslims in America are treated is obvious. Yet somehow the programme was gutless, a well-intentioned but empty polemic made by well-meaning people appalled by, but too nice, to know how to react to, such a horrific event.

'Isaac and Ishmael' would have been more effective if it had tackled the events of September 11 head on. Perhaps it would have been more honest if it had shown how honest and patriotic police, military and intelligence officers had tried desperately to warn their superiors that something dreadful was about to happen, but had been ignored. Perhaps it might have shown how ordinary Arabs, appalled by the attack, offered their sympathy to westerners living in their countries. Or, perhaps, it was simply too early and too painful to deal with the issue fully.

'Isaac and Ishmael' is so desperate to be even-handed that it does not know what to do with itself and flounders even as it gets under way. The episode begins with a security alert at the White House. Everybody is locked in and a group of visiting high-school students is taken to the basement cafeteria. Here the character Josh Lyman and other staff members lead the students through what is essentially a classroom lesson on terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism. The episode's intention is to teach, not entertain. While this impromptu civics class is going on, the security services are interrogating a Muslim White House staffer who has the same name as a wanted terrorist. The fictional chief of staff, Leo McGarry, sits in on the interrogation and is quite hostile. Josh tells the students that the security problems are due to extremists, but explains that he does not mean ordinary Muslims. He writes on the blackboard: 'Islamic extremism is to Islam as \_\_\_ is to Christianity.'<sup>16</sup> He fills in the space with the letters 'KKK', the initials of the Ku Klux Klan and says:

'It's the Klan gone medieval and global. It couldn't have less to do with Islamic men and women of faith of whom there are millions and millions. Muslims defend this country in the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, National Guard, Police and Fire Department.'<sup>17</sup>

15. The title of the programme is drawn from the story of Ishmael (Ismail in Arabic), the son of Abraham by the slave woman Hagar, and Isaac, Abraham's son by Sarah. The story of the two sons has been used in the past as a metaphor for the Arab-Israeli conflict. The story of Isaac and Ishmael/Ismail can be found in Genesis, 16: 1–XVI and 21: 1–XX (*The New American Bible* 1971: 15–16, 20–21). The union of Abraham, Ismail and Isaac and their descendants through Islam is highlighted in Sura 21, 'Al Baqarah' ('The Calf') 16: CXXXIII (Yusuf Ali 1991). Some modern Jewish scholars have contended that the Biblical text 'does not seem to support the notion of a necessary, ongoing enmity' between Arabs and Jews (Zucker 1990).
16. 'Isaac and Ishmael', *The West Wing*, 3: I.
17. 'Isaac and Ishmael', *The West Wing*, 3: I.

18. 'Isaac and Ishmael', *The West Wing*, 3: I. And what do you call a country where Israeli tanks arrive at 4 a.m. to blow up your house? It was not a question anybody asked, or answered.

19. Armstrong describes fundamentalism as 'an embattled faith (that) sees itself fighting for survival in a hostile world. This effects and sometimes distorts vision.' She argues that fundamentalism can sometimes be seen as a rational and even modernizing response to particular social and historical developments and that it does not necessarily lead to fanaticism and violence. 'Fundamentalist faith, be it Jewish, Christian or Muslim, fails [...] if it becomes a theology of rage or hatred' (Armstrong 2001: 322). However, as Huntington notes, in his discussion of the twentieth-century Islamic resurgence: '[...] religions give people identity by positing a basic distinction between believers and non-believers, between a superior in-group and a different and inferior out-group.' This makes it easier to justify acts against non-believers (Huntington 1996).

20. The debate was shown on Abu Dhabi TV as a follow-up to Friedman's programme 'The Roots of 9/11,' which was aired in the United States on the Discovery Channel on 26 March 2003.

Later, a student asks staffer Sam Seabourne:

'What do you call a society that has to just live every day with the idea that the pizza place you are eating in could blow up without any warning?' 'Israel,' Sam answers.<sup>18</sup>

Ultimately, the only answer that Josh, Sam and the others can offer the students is pluralism, the pious notion that people will stop being fanatics if they are confronted with a variety of religious, political, ethical and moral options. Alas, history has shown that it is precisely to such things that religious fundamentalists are opposed.<sup>19</sup> The attempt in 'Isaac and Ishmael' to offer a rational, pluralistic, even-handed solution to the problem of global terrorism is what makes the episode so weak. As *The West Australian* commented:

This balanced, non-inflammatory approach to the terrorist attacks makes it a stillborn drama – preachy, self-important and pulling its punches so often that it's hardly surprising the episode has...angered both left and right in the US.

(Naglazzas 2001)

'Isaac and Ishmael' was shown with Arabic subtitles in the United Arab Emirates on Orbit's America Plus satellite channel early in 2003, eighteen months after the attack on New York. By this time the war in Afghanistan had been fought and the invasion of Iraq was on everybody's minds. Thus, 'Isaac and Ishmael' had lost the immediate significance it had when it was transmitted to a domestic US audience, but was now being seen in the United Arab Emirates against a background of even more troubled US–Arab relations. In the intervening period the attack had been endlessly debated in the Arabic and English-language media in many countries. Students from Zayed University were involved in these debates as well. In mid 2003, Abu Dhabi Television hosted a live satellite debate between students of Zayed University and the Higher Colleges of Technology in Abu Dhabi and James Zogby and Thomas Friedman in New York.<sup>20</sup>

Critical thinking is one of the learning outcomes emphasized across Zayed University's curriculum and a number of staff in the university's seminar department decided that, with careful preparation, the episode could be shown to students as a stimulus for debate about global issues. The students involved were new to the university, mostly straight out of school and with, in some cases, a limited command of English. The seminar instructors discussed the episode with students before it was shown and afterwards reinforced this by distributing a written outline of the episode, a summary of its contents and an explanation of its intentions. The instructors explained to the class that it was an attempt to highlight the problems caused by stereotyping people because of their religion and race. At this point there was only curiosity from the class, but as soon as the episode got under way, there was a discernable negative reaction from some students. This appeared to be caused by the debate about the nature of Islam begun by Josh. Students began to call out that Islam was being insulted and Arabs attacked. A handful of the most vociferous students

left. Those students who stayed said that they understood and applauded the episode's intentions.

Clearly, 'Isaac and Ishmael' was well intended and tried to be sympathetic to ordinary Muslims caught up in larger events. It laboured the point that ordinary Muslims should not be equated with terrorists. However, in order to understand this, students would have to have watched the entire programme and listened carefully to the dialogue. Instead, it appears that the instant the subject of Islam was broached, some students felt they were being insulted and began the protest that led to the walkout.

'Isaac and Ishmael' was not screened to test the students' reactions, but as part of their normal exposure to other ideas and discussions of global issues. However, the way the students reacted prompted a number of questions and led to the programme being evaluated by their instructors. It also led to the decision to seek a reaction to the Palestinian story arc when it was aired. Was the students' reaction to 'Isaac and Ishmael' the result of religious over-sensitivity, a reaction to the crisis in Iraq and a general anti-American feeling, or because they were simply unwilling to believe that an American programme could attempt to be even-handed? Some time later, a small group of students asked to see the episode as part of a group project. These students were generally better academically and had a higher level of English. They reported positively on 'Isaac and Ishmael' and discussed the episode in a way that showed that they had understood its intentions. However, it was decided not to show the episode again. I believe that the reaction to the programme was affected by the students' level of English, their willingness (or ability) to listen to another point of view and their exposure to western ideas.

Reaction from Arabic and Muslim seminar staff was mixed. One female staff member, an American who had converted to Islam, said that she did not like the episode because of its slick presentation, use of stereotypes and what she called its 'We know all about this' attitude. Others felt the episode was fair, but that some students were too politically unsophisticated to grasp its intentions.

A number of the seminar faculty watched the episode later without students present. They suggested that it contained a number of points that may have acted as triggers for the negative reaction of the students. These included:

- The use of the Hebrew 'Ishmael' instead of the Arabic 'Ismail'. Sensitive Muslims would interpret this as a subtle indication of bias.
- The use of the word 'Islamics', instead of Muslims. 'Islamics' is not a word they recognized. Islamists are Muslims with a particular political agenda.
- They found the analogy with the Ku Klux Klan offensive. They pointed out that contrary to what Josh Lyman says, fundamentalist Christians do carry out murders in the United States on such targets as abortion clinics.
- The use of the term 'medieval'. They point out that organizations like Al-Qaeda are very much part of modernity.
- The reference to women not being allowed to attend soccer matches in Afghanistan under the Taliban. They felt this trivialized more important questions about the denial to Afghani women of the right to education and work.

21. As Roger Scruton (2002: 128) puts it: '[...] the techniques and infrastructure on which Al Qa'eda depends are the gifts of the new global institutions. It is Wall Street and Zurich that produced the networks of international finances that enables Osama bin Laden to conceal his wealth and to deploy it anywhere in the world. It is Western enterprise [...] that produces the technology that bin Laden has exploited so effectively against us.'

22. 'Gaza', *The West Wing*, 5: XXI.

- The name of the Muslim character, Rakeem Ali, is not a proper Arabic name. They suggested that it might be a name derived from the American 'Black Muslim' movement, the Nation of Islam.
- There are two references to the Holocaust that could be taken as equating Muslims with Nazis.
- They said the reference to the Hashashins was historically incorrect, simplistic and ignored the extremely complicated circumstances from which the group emerged. They felt that Brutus's murder of Caesar would have been a far better example.<sup>21</sup>

'Isaac and Ishmael' was clearly not written for our students, but intentionally or not, they are part of *The West Wing's* international market. Because of its inconsistencies and its insistence on choosing a particular, limited viewpoint, it failed to connect with some of the very people outside the United States who needed to understand that, however clumsily, a sincere effort was being made to show an America that rejected prejudice and violence.

*The West Wing* ended its fifth season with a series of stories showing President Bartlett bringing the Israeli and Palestinian leadership together for peace talks at Camp David. Despite the strenuous objections of his chief of staff, Bartlett succeeds. This story arc continued at the beginning of Season 6. It was shown on Orbit after Yasser Arafat's death, which gave it a strange atmosphere, since the Palestinian leader in *The West Wing* was clearly meant to be him. The story arc begins with a group of American politicians, including, for some reason, the character Admiral Fitzwallace and Donna Moss, Josh Lyman's secretary, touring Gaza. A mine explodes and destroys one of their vehicles. Admiral Fitzwallace is killed and Donna is seriously injured. The Israelis surround Palestinian leader Chairman Farad's compound, Josh flies to the American base in Germany to which Donna has been evacuated and President Bartlett decides that the only solution is to stop the Palestinians and Israelis fighting each other.

It is clear from the beginning that as with 'Isaac and Ishmael', the scriptwriters had decided that they must be fair and even-handed. Having Donna along on the fact-finding mission allows her – the sweet, blonde, slightly goofy girl from the Mid-West – to ask questions and receive highly simplified answers about the situation in the Occupied Territories. Some examples:

Israeli soldier: 'It's an Israeli's most sacred duty. Nothing I will ever do is more important...'

Donna: 'Colin [the Irish photographer] says you have strong feelings about serving here.'

Israeli soldier: 'Is no good. Gaza... 7500 settlers surrounded by 1.3 million Palestinians who do not wish them here and we in the middle.'

Donna: 'In Israel there's talk of giving up these settlements?'

Female settler: 'God wants us in this place. It is our divine, moral obligation to be here.'

Her husband: 'If we give in to the Arabs they'll take more and more and we'll all end up in Tel Aviv. And then they'll take that.'<sup>22</sup>

Much of what Donna learns is picked up from an Irish photographer sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. Donna is blown up shortly after she has sex with him.

President Bartlett, driven by guilt over the death of Fitzwallace and Donna's near-fatal injuries, decides to bring peace to the region. His chief of staff, Leo McGarry (played by the late John Spencer, who bore an uncanny resemblance to Donald Rumsfeld) strenuously opposes his efforts. The McGarry character has been portrayed earlier as pro-Israeli and was the one interrogating the Muslim suspect in 'Isaac and Ishmael'. Leo's opposition, however, is shown as stemming as much from his fear that Bartlett will fail, as anything else. Screened in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq, this story arc draws on a number of elements outside the immediately obvious one of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. In Donna's injuries there are clear links with the case of Private Jessica Lynch, the American soldier captured by the Iraqis, subsequently rescued and then exploited by the Bush administration (Takacs 2005). In *The West Wing* story arc, the character of Donna is similarly used as an emotional prop to justify the hostile reactions of Josh and Leo. Bartlett's new intelligence advisor, Kate Harper, takes a neutral, or even pro-Palestinian stance. However, she is constantly rebutted by Leo:

Leo: 'This isn't the UN. He's not the Secretary General. He's President of the United States, and our job is to make sure his priorities are clear. Today's priority is not world peace.'<sup>23</sup>

The story arc continues at the beginning of Season 6, with Leo still arguing violently with Bartlett, demanding that he take action against the fictional terrorist group responsible for the mining of the convoy, the Sons of the Sword.

Leo: 'Mr President, please, Congress, the Joint Chiefs, the American public, your own staff, EVERYONE disagrees with your assessment of this situation.'

Bartlett: 'Killing Palestinians isn't going to make us feel safer. They'll kill more of us, then we'll have to kill more of them. It's Russian roulette with a fully loaded gun.'

Leo: 'We can't allow terrorists to murder our citizens...'

Bartlett: 'Why would they do it? Why would Palestinians murder American government officials they never have before? They're deliberately provoking us, Leo. They know we have to retaliate. They've studied us. They want us to over-react. This isn't over-reacting. It's the appropriate, balanced [...]'

Bartlett: 'Tell me how this ends, Leo. You want me to start something that will have serious repercussions on American foreign policy for decades, but you don't know how it ends.'

Leo: 'We don't always KNOW how it ends. The *Lincoln* will be in position in a few hours and then you are going to have to give the go-ahead for the bombings.'

Bartlett: 'Or what?'<sup>24</sup>

23. 'Memorial', *The West Wing*, 5: XXII.

24. 'NSF Thurmont', *The West Wing*, 6: I.

25. As we shall see, at least one member of the Abu Dhabi audience who watched this episode disagreed with me completely on this point.

26. As yet another indicator of the omnipresence of American television in a global culture, the audience watched the programmes on perfectly copied DVDs from a beautifully presented boxed set bought for a few dollars in a Shanghai market.

Bartlett manages to convince the Palestinians and Israelis to come to America and once they have landed safely he orders the US military to destroy a camp belonging to the faction that mined the convoy. Thus the scriptwriters manage to present him as a peacemaker, but one who is prepared to blow people up to make them peaceful. This reflects what Haine (2003) calls:

The specific and ambiguous American way of dealing with world problems [which] combines the privilege of power and the innocence of ideals [...] [the] permanent ingredients of American exceptionalism.

However, while the script shows Bartlett trying desperately to make the Israelis and Palestinians talk and even sacrifice his friendship with Leo, the images on the screen tell a different story. The depiction of the Palestinians and Israelis at the peace talks is revealing. Both sides arrive on a Friday and on the Muslim holy day and the eve of the Jewish one, both delegations pray. The Jews, however, are seen sitting around a table, in the light, looking relaxed and civilized. The Palestinians are shown praying outside in the gathering dark, against a background of tangled undergrowth. The dichotomy could not be clearer. Here are the civilized Israelis, ready, however reluctantly, to talk and out there in the wild woods are the Palestinians, afraid to come in to the light.<sup>25</sup> The light, of course, comes from President Bartlett. Bartlett succeeds in bringing the two sides together, but by then the focus of the story has switched to the clash between Bartlett and Leo, who has a heart attack while wandering, distraught after an argument with the President, in the woods around Camp David. With peace at hand the audience is free to ignore the Palestinians and Israelis and concentrate on Leo's recovery and the run-up to the election that dominates the rest of the season.

One can be quite cynical about the intentions of this four-part story and it can be shown to have all sorts of barely hidden resonances with contemporary events. However, when shown to different groups of people in Abu Dhabi, the response was far more positive than for 'Isaac and Ishmael' and certainly more positive than expected. One of the viewers had been in the original group of the Zayed University faculty who watched 'Isaac and Ishmael'. Another is of Palestinian descent. Also included were another American convert to Islam, a Somali and a Yemeni woman. The audience was typical of the diverse population of Abu Dhabi.<sup>26</sup> The response to the programme was quite positive. There were questions about where some of the 'Palestinian' actors really came from, but the general feeling was that an effort had been made to present both sides of the story. The fact that the Palestinian side was presented by the character Kate Harper was certainly noted. The audience was certainly more positive towards the way issues were presented than the group that watched 'Isaac and Ishmael'. One of the viewers said that the depiction of the Muslims and Jews praying at sunset had not seemed divisive to her, but had shown how much the two religions had in common.

The response to the Gaza story arc differed from that to the 'Isaac and Ishmael' episode largely, I think, because the audience was older, largely western-educated and more aware of political realities and knew how to

read an American media discourse. This does not necessarily mean that they accepted the parameters of that discourse, but they were able to put it into context and draw their own, often oppositional, meaning from it. One must also admit the simple fact that when you have four episodes in which to deal with a complex situation, the results are invariably better than when you try to cram everything into the 44 minutes of script that American commercial networks allow. The Gaza cycle may therefore be described, however warily, as a more successful attempt to deal with international episodes than any of its previous episodes.

Perhaps the most measured response came from the Palestinian viewer. It is worth quoting at length:

If I was asked to describe the four episodes of the fifth and sixth seasons of *The West Wing* in one word, that word would be 'real'. Of course real in a sense that it was like it would appear to me on TV from watching the news.

That does not in any way imply that it being 'real' means that the reality of the situations portrayed is good, just that it's real and it happened, and it will keep on happening until someone comes to their senses.

The sad part about all this is that the majority of Arabs, or people of the Middle East, believe in conspiracy theories and that the West is working in conjunction with Israel to get 'us'. There is no conspiracy theory; there are only agendas, and no hidden ones.

I think that the producers/writers made a great effort for these episodes to be balanced [...] too balanced actually. I don't think that the Palestinian and the Israeli parties would have been too easily fooled with 'promises' and 'deals' made with the American government. I also think that great effort was made to show the greatness of Judaism and Islam as religions. The scenes where the Palestinian government officials are performing the 'Salla' while the American president and his entourage were invited to celebrate the beginning of the Jewish Sabbath by the Israeli Prime Minister showed how similar everyone, and everything is. I thought that was great.

As a Palestinian, I'm usually ashamed of how Arabs and specifically Palestinians are portrayed in western movies. I was not ashamed while watching the four episodes. I was pleased to see that there were two sides to the whole story, which makes it a lot easier for the next 'Joe Blow' on any of the streets of the US or Israel to understand that there are sane people on the other side who simply ask for the minimum of their rights to live.

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## Television programmes and films

### *The West Wing*

A sample of episodes dealing with the Arab world and other international issues.

'Post Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc' (Season 1: episode II) Syria

'A Proportional Response' (1: II) Syria

'The State Dinner' (1: VII) Indonesia

'Lord John Marbury' (1: II) United Kingdom, India, Pakistan

'The Portland Trip' (2: VII) Iraq

'Shibboleth' (2: VIII) China

'Galileo' (2: IX) Russia

'The War at Home' (2: XIV) Colombia

'Isaac and Ishmael' (The '9/11 special')

'On the Day Before' (3: IV) Israel

'Gone Quiet' (3: VI) North Korea

'The Women of Qumar' (3: VIII) Qumar, a fictional Arabian Gulf country

'Hartsfield's Landing' (3: XIV) China/Taiwan

'Enemies Foreign and Domestic' (3: XIX) Saudi Arabia

'We Killed Yamamoto' (3: XXI) Qumar

'Posse Comitatus' (3: XXII) Qumar

'20 Hours in America' (4: I) Qumar

'College Kids' (4: II) Qumar

'The Red Mass' (4: III) Qumar

'Debate camp' (4: IV) Qumar

'Swiss Diplomacy' (4: IX) Iran/Switzerland

'Twenty Five' (4:XXIII) Qumar

'7A WF83429' (5: I) Qumar

'Dogs of War' (5: II) Qumar

'Han' (5: IV) North Korea

'Battlefield Earth' (5: X) Saudi Arabia

'The Usual Suspects' (5: XIII) Israel/Iran

'Gaza' (5: XXI) Palestine/Israel

'Memorial' (5: XXII)

'NSF Thurmont' (6: I)

'The Birman Woods' (6: II)

'Third Day Story' (6: III)

'The Dover Test' (6: VI)

### *The American President*

Written by Aaron Sorkin, directed by Rob Reiner, starring Michael Douglas and Martin Sheen. Viewed now, this seems like a feeble pilot for *The West Wing*. The same characters are there, albeit with different names, and Martin Sheen plays the Leo McGarry role. Many ideas, incidents and some dialogue were recycled for the first season of the television series.

### **Websites**

<http://westwing.bewarne.com>

This is the ultimate *West Wing* site, compiled by people who are truly fanatical about the show.

<http://www.televisionwithoutpity.com>

For unfettered discussion and vituperation about *The West Wing* and other cult programmes.

### **Suggested citation**

Cass, P. (2007), 'The never-ending story: Palestine, Israel and *The West Wing*', *Journal of Arab and Muslim Media Research* 1: 1, pp. 31–46, doi: 10.1386/jammr.1.1.31/1

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