NBC's The West Wing -an illusory view of the Clinton White House

Kate Randall
16 October 1999

The new television program *The West Wing* is a distasteful affair. Debuting on Wednesday evenings this fall on the NBC network, the show treats the doings of the fictional US presidency of Josiah Bartlet, an obviously Clintonesque figure.

Produced by John Wells Productions and Warner Bros. Television—the same team responsible for the hit medical drama *ER* — *The West Wing* undoubtedly recreates the physical setup inside the White House with a considerable degree of accuracy. The dialogue and day-to-day activities of the Bartlet administration figures are probably not that far from reality. The problem with the program is the attitude it adopts towards these characters.

The creators of the show are evidently in awe of Clinton. The opening credits intercut color film clips of the series' actors with black and white stills of the characters deep in thought or gazing into space, reminiscent of shots of the Kennedy White House. One gets the feeling that they are seeking to impart to the Clinton administration and the Democratic Party a sort of magical, idealistic feeling that simply does not exist, except possibly in their own imaginations.

One of the more astonishing examples of the Hollywood liberals' fantasized view of the Clinton administration is a scene in which President Bartlet throws a group of Christian fundamentalists out of his office, and then goes on to denounce their views. This is pure myth-making in its depiction of the Clinton White House's relationship with the religious right.

There is scant reference to the existence of an American public outside the White House and Washington, DC. Those characters from the “outside world” are caricatures, whose appearances serve the purpose of reinforcing the program's message. There is the black military doctor who comes to the Oval Office to examine President Bartlet. The president looks at a picture of the doctor's new baby and speaks to him in a scene that is presumably designed to show his compassion, but comes off as patronizing. This doctor is subsequently on board a plane shot down in the Middle East.

Then there is the young black man who comes to the White House looking for a messenger's job, but instead gets recommended for the position of personal aide to the president. It turns out that he is not attending college because his mother, a local city cop, has been killed in the line of duty and he has to stay home and take care of his younger sister.

President Bartlet's staff exude self-satisfaction. The characters ponder and discuss their own importance. When the young man who has just been hired as the presidential aide comments to the Chief of Staff (portrayed by John Spencer), after observing the president at work, “I've never felt like this before,” the Spencer character replies: “It doesn't go away.” This during a television address in which the president announces a military attack against Syria.

Martin Sheen's portrayal of President Josiah Bartlet, a former governor of New Hampshire, is particularly offensive. As the series opens, he has just assumed office. He comes across as a self-righteous, but quirky character. The first two episodes were dominated by his character's response to Syrian forces downing a plane carrying medical personnel. Bartlet initially disagrees with the Joint Chiefs of Staff that the US should respond with a limited attack on a strictly military target: “What is the virtue of a proportional response?” He comments that the Syrians should be warned that if “you kill an American ... we come back with total disaster.” He toys with the possibility of a response that would involve “civilian casualties in the thousands,”

© World Socialist Web Site

but finally agrees to the Joint Chiefs' more “reasoned” proportional response.

No member of his staff questions the necessity of retaliation, it's just a matter of when and how much—this is something that the novice president needs to learn how to do.

This past week's episode dealt with gun control. The Bartlet administration is wrangling with Congress over passage of a measure which has been reduced to symbolic importance only. What is interesting about the campaign for the bill is that the presidential staff view it as being simultaneously the most important struggle of their political lives and fairly meaningless.

While the Chief of Staff appeals to a black congressmen to vote for the measure as part of the war to stop the violence against black youth—“An entire generation of African American men are being eaten alive”—another staff member comments later that it is a “crappy law”—“It's like fighting a war against tobacco by banning certain matchbook covers.” The Chief of Staff's wife leaves him because he is spending so much time on the bill.

This is supposedly an issue which the administration believes in. But when they manage to get the necessary votes to push the measure through, they are disappointed because it is the vice president, and not the president, who gets all the credit and media coverage. This scenario is probably not far from the truth. But why, then, are we asked to take it all so seriously?

The series depicts the obligatory scandal, with the George Stephanopoulos-like character (Rob Lowe) unwittingly becoming involved with a high-priced call girl. C.J., the press secretary (Allison Janney), is obsessed with image, and how such scandals, or this or that comment by the president, will "play" on the evening news. The Rob Lowe character tries to present the noble side of the affair—he “really likes” this girl and hopes that he can straighten her out. He challenges C.J., saying that she is “letting the character cops win because you don't have the guts, or the strength or the courage to say ‘we know what's right from wrong and it's none of your damn business.'”

One cannot help thinking of the Monica Lewinsky affair, and the Republican effort to remove Clinton from office. But the Clinton administration never did attempt to challenge or expose the reactionary political motives that stood behind the impeachment drive. *The West Wing* does not come anywhere near dealing with this. There is an anecdotal reference to a Jesse Helms-like congressman threatening that Bartlet should fear for his life if he visits his district, but this is brushed off as a joke.

It is unlikely that the creative team behind *The West Wing* have given much thought to these political issues. The layer of Hollywood liberals they are associated with make up a substantial portion of the rather narrow social base of the Clinton administration, but their understanding of the present political landscape—and the plight of the majority of the American population which has been bypassed by the economic "miracle" of the 1990s—is colored by their own self-absorption and worship of the cult of celebrity. The end-product of this outlook is a program which both idealizes the Democratic Party and at the same time complacently accepts the military violence of the ruling class as the only legitimate course of action.

The one service *The West Wing* does perform, no doubt unwittingly, is to expose the disdain and disregard that these politicians have for the American public. They are a million miles away from the lives of ordinary Americans. But the show seems to salute this cavalier attitude and pat it on the back.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site