

Prime Time Presidents: Images of Politics on *The West
Wing* and *Commander in Chief*

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Political Science Association.

Images of presidents loom large in American culture. Portraits of current and former presidents adorn the walls of classrooms in schools throughout the country -- any number of which are named in honor of presidents. We celebrate Presidents Day, name our airports after presidents and our currency provides a constant reminder that presidents are our national unifying figures, the “symbol-in-chief” if you will of American politics. Images of presidents, real and fictional, appear regularly in the world of popular culture. Presidential images are invoked in advertising to promote products. Films feature narratives about both real and fictional presidents. One hesitates to think where the country’s comedians would be without presidents as a source of inspiration for jokes and satires. Finally, and most significantly for the purposes of this paper, images of presidents appear on entertainment television.

How our political leaders are portrayed in the stories we immerse ourselves in for entertainment can have an influence on perceptions of the overall political process. Images of presidents are particularly important to understand because presidents are the chief symbolic (and actual) representation of American politics. Portrayals of presidents reflect the understandings of politics that are implicit in our popular culture. The portrayals of presidents in popular culture have not been consistent over time, nor even during the same time period. At various times, and in different contexts, presidents have been portrayed as heroes, villains, saints, sinners, geniuses and fools. Cynical times tend to be reflected in less than flattering portrayals of the nation’s leader. When we, collectively have more “trust” in our government, our fictional presidents take on a more heroic flavor.

Entertainment television has been a ubiquitous presence in American life since the 1950s and elected officials have populated television programming from its early days. In addition to presidents, governors, mayors, senators, congressmen and even supreme court justices have

made their way into the story lines of the prime time programs that Americans turn to as forms of entertainment. Yet, the influence of entertainment television on politics is something that has not been explored often enough by political scientists. When studying the influence of television on politics, the emphasis tends to be on the influence of the news media and more recently the “new” media. Traditional news, talk radio, the internet and the advent of various forms of on-line communication are clearly important forces shaping our politics and our political perceptions and they should be studied. But it is well known that most people who regularly watch television are not glued to network news, CNN, FOX news, MSNBC or, heaven forbid, CSPAN. Even regular viewers of the nightly news on the networks (an ever shrinking segment of the population,) still spend most of their TV time watching prime time entertainment programming, not public affairs oriented shows.

There are obviously a host of methodological issues that arise in determining just what political impact popular culture in general, and entertainment television in particular, have on our perceptions of politics. There have been some efforts to explore the connection empirically in the political socialization and political communication literature. David Jackson, for example, has argued that we need to expand our notions of the “agents” of socialization to include not just television, but all of popular culture if we want to get a more complete picture of the forces influencing the political perceptions of young adults. (Jackson, 2002) He, and others, offers credible empirical evidence to support this case.

Empirical studies seeking to identify the patterns of behavior and the political perceptions that can be associated with exposure to various genres of popular culture are also important and provide additional evidence that Political Science ought to pay more attention than it does, to the intersection of entertainment and politics. What follows, however, is not an empirical study, it is

an interpretive analysis of the portrayals of politics and elected officials that have appeared on prime time television over the past seven years with a particular emphasis on two recent popular prime time television dramas: *The West Wing* and *Commander in Chief*. The interpretation is presented by someone whose academic roots are in political philosophy and American politics and who has probably watched more television than she was good for her, over the last fifty years.

Most of entertainment television is not explicitly about “politics” particularly if we associate politics with governance and elected officials. This may well be part of the reason why students of politics often assume that there is little value in systematically examining the politics of prime time. Yet, almost twenty five years ago, in an early study of the overall influence of television on politics, Austin Ranney offered some speculation about the political significance of prime time programming. In exploring the question of “bias” on television he stated that while he knew “. . . of no systematic study of the matter,” he still believed “. . . that entertainment television also has a distinct antipolitical bias. Most of the live politicians that appear in situation comedies and dramas are portrayed as pompous, windy, hypocritical, and self-seeking buffoons.” (Ranney, p. 59)

Inspired in part by Ranney’s comment, I pursued this question in the late 1990s and found that, by and large, Ranney’s observation could be substantiated if one looked at the depictions of elected officials on entertainment television. During the 1950s and 60s, those elected officials who appeared as characters in entertainment television were generally shown in a positive light. They were hard working, intelligent individuals serving the public as best they could. However, this pattern changed in the post Watergate era when the dominant portrayal of

fictional elected officials on television during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s was more or less as Ranney had suggested. Elected officials on television during those decades were more likely to be senators and mayors rather than presidents, but the general characterization one found in both prime time and daytime was that elected officials were either incredibly stupid or criminally evil, and sometimes both at the same time. (Gladstone-Sovell, 2000)

As is often the case when we decide to finally put an idea down on paper, just as the page proofs arrived, NBC announced the premier of *The West Wing* which, with its critical and popular success, altered this pattern. Much has been written about *The West Wing* in the seven years since it made its television debut. There have been numerous analyses in the popular press as well as scholarly works in journals from a range of disciplines. Television critics have praised the program for its writing, acting and production achievements. In the popular press, critics have complained that the program is both too liberal (Luntz, 2002) and that it is not liberal enough (McKissack, 2000.) Scholarly works have been published studying the show including extensive quantitative content analysis has been undertaken by communications scholars examining both the priming and framing effect of the program. (Holbert, et. al., 2003, 2005) And discussions of how the program can serve as a pedagogical tool in the political science classroom. (Beavers, 2002) Most important of all, *The West Wing* developed a loyal audience, especially during the four seasons of the show that were written by series creator Aaron Sorkin.

By all standards used to evaluate television drama: ratings, awards, scholarly attention and celebrity status for its stars, *The West Wing* was both a critical and popular success. This means that large numbers of Americans have regularly spent time with the Bartlet administration over the past seven television seasons. This leads to questions about what the success of the program tells us about the American public at the start of the twenty-first century and to

speculations about the kind of impact it might have had on its viewers. Of particular concern here is the image of the president and the picture of politics and governance that the show put forth. This topic is especially interesting because *The West Wing's* portrayal of presidents and politics presented a counterpoint to the previous pattern of presidential portrayals on television.

What was it about the President Bartlet and his staff that grabbed the attention of viewers, scholars, television critics, political columnists and even political scientists alike? One of the more common reactions to *The West Wing* is that it made the viewer “feel good” again about American politics. It reinvigorated their optimism about what was possible in the White House and in public affairs in general. Jim McDermott summarizes this reaction in noting his response upon first encountering *The West Wing*.

In contrast to the steady stream of self-interest and scandal presented on the news, the men and women of "The West Wing" were single-minded in their pursuit of the good. They argued, they agonized, they teased. They could be arrogant and self-righteous. Yet their decisions were directed by the clear conviction that despite the many obstacles and inadequacies of the system, it is not only possible for us to make the world a better place, it is our responsibility. Their struggles to achieve that goal lent them nobility.
(McDermott, 2006)

Why did *The West Wing* invoke this sort of reaction? Much has been made of the fact that President Bartlet is a liberal Democrat, but that alone does not explain its appeal. For example, in its last two seasons, one of the more intriguing characters was the Republican presidential candidate, Arnold Vinick. The election story of the last two seasons reinvigorated the program after it lost some steam when Aaron Sorkin left after season four. If the show had been renewed, the intention was to have Vinick win and continue the basic premise of the show with a Republican president. The combination of the death of actor John Spencer (who played Leo McGarry, former Chief-of-Staff and current Vice Presidential candidate,) and NBC's decision to cancel the show after seven years, led to a different electoral outcome, but there is little doubt

that the basic approach of *The West Wing* could have continued with a Republican in office. (Richmond, 2006)

So there is more than partisan politics at work here. In addition to being criticized for being the “left wing,” others have chastised the show for being too “idealistic.” Given that the campaign slogan from the first Bartlet run for the White House was “Practical Idealism,” it is fairly clear that presenting a positive, inspiring, vision of politics was an integral aspect of the show’s concept. From the beginning, Aaron Sorkin made it clear that this was a self-conscious decision on his part.

"I wanted the show to define patriotism as something other than a bumper sticker," Sorkin recalls. "I also wanted to give a little sex appeal to the idea of trying to do the right thing. We were used to our leaders being portrayed in popular culture as either Machiavellian or complete dolts. It was nice, I think, to see them once a week as extremely capable, hard-working, dedicated public servants who thought about the country before they thought about themselves. And they were funny. In its own way, it was very romantic." (Richmond, 2006)

As Sorkin suggests, the more accurate characterization might be better to see the show as romantic, rather than idealistic, but a clear ideal is at work in Sorkin’s vision which continued in the years since he left the show. The main characters on *The West Wing* are not perfect, they make mistakes, (sometimes big ones,) they are not always likeable, they lose their tempers and they have a tendency toward arrogance. Yet, with all the flaws, we still admire their dedication, commitment and passion. This is part of the “ideal” that *The West Wing* embodied: the notion that public service, especially at the presidential level, was an honorable undertaking and that those who worked for the president did so for principled reasons. The privilege of serving in the White House was a recurring theme throughout the series. This was highlighted in the “Documentary Special” where scenes from the show were interspersed with interviews from past Presidents and former White House staffers. One of the points that was made a number of times

in that episode by former White House staff, who served both Republican and Democratic presidents, was the incredible honor and privilege it was to serve in the White House. There were any number of episodes where the regular cast stated, with pride and humility, “I serve at the pleasure of the president.”

The staff was with clearly dedicated to the president and his agenda. It was rarely, if ever the case, that staff appeared to be promoting personal agendas and/or following their own ambitions. They clearly had political principles and policy stands, but they were not seeking to advance their own personal wealth, power and/or celebrity. It is worth noting that there were at least two note worthy occasions where Republicans were brought in to serve in the White House. They agree to do so largely because the prospect of working for the President in the White House was more important than any partisan agenda they might have had. Which is not to say they changed their partisan affiliations. In the exchanges between conservative Republican Ainsley Hayes and liberal Democrat Sam Seaborn, it was always the case that both were presented as intelligent and thoughtful advocates of their ideological perspectives. The message being sent was that it is possible for Democrats and Republicans to work together without having to abandon their basic values in order to serve the larger interests of the nation. Is this idealistic? Possibly. On the other hand, it is not unheard of for presidents to ask members of the opposing party to serve in the cabinet or in other administration positions. It may be idealism to think that partisan affiliations can be put aside for issues of national concern, but it does happen “in real life.” Seeing such behavior depicted on television serves as an antidote to the general cynicism about public service that is regularly found in the news media’s portrayal of public officials.

The West Wing has also been criticized, at times, for its lack of “realism.” Again, this position only holds up on further examination if one holds to the idea that a competent, dedicated

White House staff is somehow unbelievable. Many aspects of the series are so realistic that many political scientists like to use clips from the program to open discussions of everything from specific policy issues, Supreme Court nominations, the intricacies of political polling, the relationship between the president and the press, not to mention the most obvious, the structure and nature of the White House staff. Unlike the other political dramas that have aired since *The West Wing*, it is much more realistic to think that a president is a liberal Democrat than it is to think that a president, or vice-president, could have no party (*Commander-in-Chief*) or no discernable party (24). It is also the case that serious, and mundane, policy issues are, and should be, of central concern among White House staffers.

It is also true that at times, the timeliness and reality-mirroring nature of the show was both slightly ahead of its time as well as self-consciously of its time. The first African American national security advisor, was not Condelezza Rice in the Bush administration, it was Nancy McNally in the Bartlet administration. When McNally first appeared (October 2000,) some may have thought it unlikely that a black woman could be the national security advisor, but at that time Rice was advising then candidate George W. Bush on these very issues. Before Scooter Libby had to deal with a grand jury indictment related to an unauthorized national security leak to the press, Toby Zigler resigned from his position for a similar reason.

Another aspect of realism reflected in the Bartlet administration White House staff is that the staff are workaholics. They have no social lives, rarely see their families (if they have one), are very smart, and justly earn their reputations as “policy wonks.” Anyone who thinks that working in the White House is a 9 to 5 job, would be seriously deluding themselves. On the other hand, those who work in Bartlet administration, including the president himself, are not perfect. There are certainly plenty of problems, scandals and dramatic confrontations both personal and

political that they regularly confront. The generally realistic portrayal of the inner working of the White House staff was certainly helped by the inclusion of a number of former Democratic and Republican White House staff members as writers and consultants on the show. Democratic pollster and consultant Patrick Caddell, former Clinton Press Secretary DeeDee Myers, former Reagan Administration speech writer Peggy Noonan all contributed at one time or another to *West Wing* scripts and story lines.

In the end, the picture of the White House that emerges clearly resembles what Thomas Cronin once described as the “Textbook Presidency.” (Cronin, 1980) The textbook president is the president we wish we had, the scholars version of how the president, as well as his (or her) staff should operate. In the Bartlet White House there is no group think. The Chief-of-Staff regularly risks angering the president by questioning the wisdom of decisions and making sure the president gets the “bad news” that he needs in order to make good decisions. The President is regularly told when he is making mistakes. The staff is well managed and organized. There are clear lines of responsibility and authority and the president is willing to make unpopular decisions if finds them warranted. President Bartlet is even willing to bring smart Republicans into his administration in order, among other reasons, to be sure that he is aware of the best arguments the opposition can make. In short, Bartlet is the presidential scholar’s dream president – the ideal of what the president should be.

After the initial success of *The West Wing*, there were a few efforts by both NBC and other networks to create dramatic series in a political setting that tried to capture the same audience but without the “stigma” of a clear ideological stance. The effort to create a successful non-partisan political drama was undertaken by ABC and CBS in two remarkably bad, and thankfully short lived, series about the Supreme Court: *The Court* (ABC, 2002) and *First*

Monday (CBS, 2002) Both shows featured a newly appointed Supreme Court justice who was neither liberal or conservative and had to try to negotiate between both sides on a sharply divided court. Why either network thought that it was possible to create a successful drama about the Supreme Court is something of a mystery to anyone who knows anything about how that institution operates. Supreme Court justices spend their time reading, writing, thinking and arguing about rather complex, often esoteric, issues – clearly a significant enterprise, but not the best setting for a television drama. To compensate for the not very dramatic aspects of actual Supreme Court operations, both shows tried to interject a bit of personal drama in order to create an audience. Despite the star power of its cast, (Sally Field) *The Court* only aired three times and *First Monday*, (starring James Garner) was cancelled after the initial thirteen episodes.

Trying to build on the success of *The West Wing* NBC offered *Mr. Sterling* in 2003. *Mr. Sterling* was created by Lawrence O'Donnell, both a former West Wing writer and consultant as well as a former Democratic operative. If you never heard of this show, there is a reason, it only lasted nine episodes. The basic premise of *Mr. Sterling* was that the son of a beloved former Democratic Governor of California gets appointed (by the then Democratic Governor,) to serve out the remainder of the term of the state's recently deceased Senator. The problem is that, once appointed, we find out that Mr. Sterling is not a Democrat, or a Republican, he is independent. While this might have allowed O'Donnell to explore issues from a range of perspectives, as he noted when interviewed about the premise, the scenario wasn't particularly realistic. For whatever reasons, the show never developed much of an audience and was fairly quickly removed from the schedule. (Tomashoff, 2003)

No new dramas in a governmental setting aired until the 2005-2006 television season when ABC tried again with *Commander in Chief*. The premise of *Commander in Chief* was both

quite novel, and remarkably familiar. We are all familiar with the novel dimension of *Commander in Chief*: we finally get our first female president. Because of this, as well as its star power (Geena Davis,) the show initially received a good amount of attention in the popular press and fairly good ratings. It was hailed as a forerunner of things to come by political activists, (Wilson, WashingtonPost.com) featured by both *Cosmopolitan* (Trench, 2005) and *O, The Oprah Magazine* (Wilson, 2005) and pointed to as a thinly disguised vehicle for promoting the presidential ambitions of Senator Hillary Clinton. (Allen, 2005) Geena Davis received a Golden Globe award for her performance. In her inspirational, (if fictional) acceptance address she claimed the show had influenced young girls who now thought that they too could grow up to be president.

But the promise implicit in the basic premise of the show quickly diminished as it went through a number of crises that included serious production delays and cost overruns as well as a multiple changes in the writing, creative and production teams. The story lines lost whatever continuity they had at the start, ratings fell, critics began to point to the show's failings, the audience was disappointed and quickly went elsewhere for their dramatic fixes. ABC eventually put all concerned out of their collective misery and cancelled the show at the end of its first, and only, season. It is certainly the case that the behind the scenes troubles were an important factor in the failure of *Commander in Chief*, but how it portrayed politics may also have contributed to its demise.

Presenting the public with its first female president is notable, but in terms of television depictions of elected officials, *Commander in Chief* fell into very familiar patterns. The most obvious was to try not to "offend" a portion of the potential audience by having a clear partisan orientation. The consequence is that you have a program that tried to depict politics without

having to deal with ideological and policy differences. Like all recent political dramas that aired since *The West Wing*, *Commander in Chief* studiously avoid the partisan dimension of American politics. Mackenzie Allen may have been a woman, and some might argue that it is unrealistic to think a woman could become president at this point in American history, but the real “fiction” in *Commander in Chief* is the idea that someone (male or female) could become vice president without an identifiable partisan identity. Unlike Jed Bartlet, Mackenzie Allen was not a liberal Democrat, but neither was she a Republican (conservative or moderate,) she was something truly unknown at the presidential level -- an independent thinker without a party affiliation. In addition, she is an accidental president, attaining office after the sudden and unexpected death of the President.

As the season progressed and Allen was given more of a “back story,” we learn that she was once a member of the House of Representatives who retired from office and left the party based on her frustration with the influence of money in campaigns and the failure of congress to enact meaningful campaign finance legislation. She heroically stands by her principles in the face of extreme pressure by the party leadership and becomes, of all things, a university president. Then, more or less out of nowhere, conservative Republican Teddy Roosevelt Bridges asks her to be his running mate in an attempt to win, as one character put it, the “soccer mom” vote. While it is conceivable that a presidential candidate could decide to choose a female running mate in order to appeal to a particular segment of the electorate, it strains credulity to think that a Republican would not have been able to find a woman from his own party, more “moderate” than he, to share the ticket.

A large part of the frustration one got from watching *Commander in Chief* no doubt stemmed from the effort to avoid serious discussions of public policy issues. As a consequence,

the story lines usually focused on the “personal” story of the first family, turning the show into more of a family rather than a political drama. As such it wasn’t very compelling. The first family just wasn’t all that interesting. While there were some funny lines and moments that centered around the prospect of a first man, (particularly from the woman who was in charge of protocol at the White House,) those story lines were never pursued as fully as they could have been and were treated more as serious drama rather than played for comedic effect. Eventually, after some conflicts and soul searching, Allen makes her husband a member of the White House staff largely because he is the only person Allen can trust “to have her back” and turns the job of First Lady over to her mother who seems more than up to the task.

In addition, the stories associated with the teenage twins were just not that engaging. The WB and FOX do teenage angst much better than ABC. In fact, it is worth contrasting the family dimension of *Commander in Chief* with *The West Wing*. The first family aspects of *The West Wing* were never the central focus of the show, but when they were highlighted, the problems faced were more complex and intriguing than anything presented in *Commander in Chief*. The stories surrounding Zoe Bartlet’s life as a college freshman, were much more interesting, not to mention better written and acted, than anything that happens to the Allen twins. And did they have to make her daughter conservative? Aren’t there enough mother – daughter conflicts during the teenage years, to have avoided that particular cliché?

One of the biggest problems facing *Commander in Chief* was portraying a president who does not have a partisan identity. Without party and ideology, what issues could be addressed, what approach taken to solving them? One of the tacks taken to deal with this was to emphasize international and national security issues over domestic policy concerns. The result was, as James Poniewozik noted, the show was “apolitical to a fault.” Allen takes

. . . tough, principled stands almost no one could disagree with. She's against the repression of journalists in Russia and the stoning of women for adultery in Nigeria, and dammit, she doesn't care who she offends! "I'm the first to admit that in some ways, this is a fantasy President," says Davis. "We want and dream of a President who will make the right choices for the right reasons and not based on pleasing factions of their party." (Poniewozik, October 2005.)

This desire on the part of the creative team to avoid partisan and ideological positions, resulted in a view of politics that makes all conflict about power and none about policy issues. Critics of *The West Wing* often observed that it focused more on governance than it did on politics, on the other hand, *Commander in Chief* turned virtually all governance questions into a struggle for political power. Consequently, the characters and their story lines were usually without nuance and painted in incredibly broad strokes. This may well be the most intriguing, as well as the most disappointing, aspect of *Commander in Chief*. Unlike the textbook presidency of the Bartlet administration which spend much of its time on substantive policy issues, the main story lines in *Commander in Chief* focused on power politics. The “inside story” of the Allen administration is about the manipulation and power struggles between the president and the Speaker of the House. The subtext, and, at times, the text, of *Commander in Chief* appears to be *The Prince*.

At one level, you have to love Republican Speaker of the House Nathan Templeton, played so wonderfully over the top by Donald Sutherland. Critics referred to this character as everything from “vile” (Poniewozik, September, 2005) to “Luciferian” (Garvin, 2005) and describe him “Snidely Whiplash without a mustache.” (McCollum, 2005) It would seem the more appropriate description would be to identify him as Machiavellian.* This was very clear from the outset of the show when one of the first confrontations between Templeton and Allen

* It is worth pointing out that a documentary about Machiavelli and *The Prince* that is available from Films for the Humanities is narrated by Sutherland. Coincidental? A good prince would never tell.

take place. By all accounts, including Templeton's, Allen should have resigned when the president became ill and Templeton should have been the person to replace Bridges after his death. This view was shared by the President who, from his death bed, asked Allen to resign so that Templeton, another conservative Republican, can become president. While Templeton clearly shares Bridges' partisan affiliation and political ideology, his main motivation appears to be power. He wants to be the most powerful individual in the world because he knows how to use power and Allen does not.

Allen does not resign for principled reasons – the American people chose her for the job and no one, including the former president, has the right to ask her to refuse to do her job. Throughout the show's run, the one recurring story line is Templeton's efforts to manipulate Allen and her usually successful efforts to trip him up. Although she is not portrayed as being motivated by power, she is very smart and recognizes what Templeton is up to. She is not naïve, and generally manages to out maneuver Templeton with an annoying amount of regularity. The end result is that we are presented with a picture of presidential politics that is something like a modern day morality tale of good and evil. Power is suspect and evil, but good always triumphs in the end – making the Snidely Whiplash characterization all too appropriate. The culmination of this conflict between ambition and principle was supposed to be the upcoming election. Templeton makes it clear he intends to run against her and Allen intends to run without campaigning – proving her commitment to “clean” politics by firing her campaign consultant – another character for whom winning and power was what politics was all about. How this would have played out, we will not see unless the much discussed television movie becomes reality.

Templeton clearly represents the long seen television stereotype of elected officials: ambitious, amoral, manipulative, and power hungry. We have no idea what he believes in, just

that he wants to be president because he knows how to manipulate and make deals. At times, Allen herself is not above using his skills when she thinks the country will benefit from them. When she is confronted with the challenge of trying to rescue a disabled American submarine trapped in North Korean waters, he is brought in to help negotiate with the Chinese. When Allen asks what can be done to get the Chinese to help, he notes that there is always a “deal” that can be struck if you know what the other side wants and are willing to give it to them. At the successful conclusion of the incident (all challenges are resolved in one hour on *Commander in Chief*), Allen is pleased that she managed to save the sailors and prevented an international incident, but Templeton is pleased with a deal well struck.

One final aspect of *Commander in Chief* deserves some mention, particularly in contrast with *The West Wing* – Mackenzie Allen is just too good to be true. She has no flaws, always does the right thing, never loses her temper, never gets flustered, stands up to evil, manages to balance her family issues with her position and *always* looks good. (Although there were some snide comments about the color of her lipstick on the first few episodes.) She displays no human imperfections, one thinks of Wonder Woman – the president as super hero(ine.)

Think back to the initial episode of *The West Wing* when the president is introduced as a character. He has just had an embarrassing bicycle accident caught on film. The first time we see him he is on crutches, the media are having a field day, and his staff is trying very hard not to laugh at him. Through the years, Bartlet displayed all sorts of human flaws, including letting his political ambition cause him to fail to disclose to the American public that he suffered from MS. One likes him better because he quarrels with his wife, has issues with his daughters and reacts emotionally at times to events and situations. The worst thing that happened to Allen when she was introduced was that her daughter spills juice on her blouse on the way to address the nation

and Congress upon taking office. No problem, the ever fashionable Allen covers the stain with a well placed scarf, conveniently provided by her speech writer. If we really had a president as perfect as Allen, Jon Stewart, Jay Leno and David Letterman would have a much harder time finding material for their monologues.

So where does this leave us, what if anything, can we learn about the impact all of this on the American public? What might we expect from future television depictions of elected officials in general and presidents in particular. If *The West Wing* was about the presidency scholars wish we had, *Commander in Chief* was a vision of the presidency, (and probably of elected officials in general,) that some television writers think we want: an apolitical president. President Allen is above politics, personal ambition, and has no desire to use her power to do anything other than what is “right” for the American public. Create a president whose very existence is history making and then write a narrative where no one takes issue with her policies. Consequently, no one is offended and audience numbers should rise.*

The problem is that in reality, what is “right” for the American public is rarely all that easy to discern. Allen’s heart may be in the right place, and she may be very smart, but without the give and take of politics, how is she going to know what the right thing is? The American public, in rejecting *Commander in Chief*, may well be smarter than all the television executives who tried to mimic *The West Wing*. The partisan Bartlet Administration lasted seven seasons, the Allen administration less than one. Partisan politics and presidents with character flaws make for more engaging television than do idealized visions of perfection. The unanswered question is what the future will bring? Unless I missed something, there are no new elected officials slated for the new season. Whether or not this is a good thing, only time will tell.

* This is reminiscent of the rise of the standard of “objectivity” in journalism, expand the readership by taking a neutral rather than a partisan approach.

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