

**Hollywood Representations of Political Power:  
Imagined Presidencies**

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## INTRODUCTION

(Her presidency will be so ineffective) "...she'll make Jimmy Carter look like Martin Sheen."

*The Gilmore Girls*, "Haunted Leg," 2003

Television writers and filmmakers have conjured up some compelling characters to serve as prime-time Presidents of the United States. *The West Wing's* Jed Bartlet (played by Martin Sheen), *24's* David Palmer (played by Dennis Haysbert) and *Commander in Chief's* Mackenzie Allen (played by Geena Davis) offer television audiences three versions of the noble leader, the honorable Chief Executive. Their names and faces have become part of the popular imagination, in the U.S. and worldwide.

These characters are the creation of Hollywood. As such, they reveal the attributes of presidentiality (Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 2006) as defined by an influential cadre of cultural elites. But, to be accepted as credible by an audience (a requirement of commercial television), primetime presidents must also satisfy the expectations of the viewing public. In this respect, the roles they play in their fictional worlds serve as both an "imitation and expression of public thought" (Farrell, 1986). These representations (what Farrell calls rhetorical

resemblances), "live" outside of the widely-researched contexts of political campaigns and the news.

The presidency, arguably the most symbolically meaningful branch of government, is the only one that is embodied in a single person who functions as a virtual stand-in for the federal government in the minds of many Americans (Greenstein, 2000). Internationally, the president represents America to the world, serving a communal and plebiscitary function. The president also serves as a "signifier," according to Norton, who notes that the president represents "the mythic and historical associations that attach to the office and to its past and present occupants" (Norton, 1993). The frames used to construct presidentiality in entertainment programming reveal how these associations take shape in American popular culture. They also illustrate the president's significance "as a cultural force in U.S. political life" (Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 2006).

This exploratory study focuses on a single research question: How are fictional American presidents portrayed in prime-time television? Our purpose is twofold: first, to identify and compare the characteristics and decision making processes of three iconic prime-time presidents; and second, to propose avenues for further research that will

inform our understanding of the relationship between fictional pop culture presidents and American political culture. We do not argue that show creators intend to reproduce an authentic version of the presidency – the time limits within which worldwide crises must be solved prevent that. Nor are we suggesting that the prime-time presidents become “real” to the audience. We are more interested in the representational value of the prime-time presidency – what it tells us about our shared understanding of who and what America’s President should be.

#### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Political communication scholars who study media texts focus mainly on messages conveyed through news and public affairs programming. However, in light of recent developments in entertainment technology and program content, researchers have begun to recognize the importance of other sources of political information in the formation of public opinion (Mutz, 2001). This change reflects the recognition that citizens gain their understanding of the political world through popular culture as well as through “news culture.” Nir and Mutz (2005), for example, argue persuasively for the inclusion of fictional programming in studies of political opinion. They conducted an experiment that identified differences in the way viewers perceive the

criminal justice system based on whether this institution was portrayed negatively or positively on the fictional drama, *Law & Order*.

Over the past seven years, television writers have developed dramas that focus specifically on political life in Washington, DC. The concept of priming has been usefully applied to research on one such program, *The West Wing*. A 2001 study found that viewers valued the traits the authors call "engaging," and that the evaluations of real presidents improved after viewers watched an episode of the program (Holbert et al., 2003).

In a subsequent article, Holbert et al. (2005), argued that "the picture of the American presidency offered on (*The West Wing*) is qualitatively distinct from the messages citizens engage when consuming news content" (Holbert et al., 2005 p. 509). They identified "principled" and "engaging" character traits of the president, and associated those traits with three roles: chief executive, political candidate and private citizen. In this experiment, "roles" were equated with "frames," as defined by previous political communication studies. Although this research represents an advance in the study of non-news texts, it is somewhat constrained by pre-defined characteristics and categories.

Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles (2002, 2006) studied first the entertainment media and the Clinton administration, and later examined the role of *The West Wing* in shaping U.S. nationalism. Their thesis is that "the drama reflects the ideological history and contestations of U.S. nationalism from the country's inception through its contemporary conflicts." They analyzed the first four seasons of the show in order to "situate the drama in the sweep of commitments to nationalism prevalent in U.S. history and politics." They also used gendered, racial and militaristic theories of nationalism as "a critical lens through which to examine this political text." By reading the text in such a way, the authors sought to demonstrate "how popular culture sustains and challenges existing conceptions of U.S. nationalism through presidential depictions, shaping the meaning of what it means to be an American and the identity of America as a nation-state" (Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 2006).

The present study builds on this previous work by identifying patterns in the ways primetime presidents are framed on three different shows. Our goal is not to hypothesize the effects of such framing, but rather to identify the components of fictional political characters as a way to understand the cultural ideal of the

presidency. Our use of the term frame differs from that of Holbert et al. (2005). We do not consider a pre-defined role as the frame; rather we identify the set of personality traits that define the President and argue that the totality of these characteristics comprises the "presidential frame." We discuss our findings and their relationship to framing in the final section of this paper.

### **Methodology**

To analyze the characteristics of fictional presidents in primetime dramas, we chose the three most highly rated political dramas of the past decade that deal with the presidency in some way. *The West Wing* and *24* present the president as one among several main characters; *Commander in Chief* focuses on the president as the central protagonist. Initially, we analyzed the first season in which the president was featured as a primary character: season one of *The West Wing* and *Commander in Chief*, and season two of *24*. We later added material from the second season of *The West Wing*, because we discovered that the show's creator initially intended the president to be a minor character. The personality of President Bartlet was really developed in season two. The goal of this qualitative study was to develop a complete description of each president, and to identify patterns that would give

specificity to future analyses.

For the seasons chosen, every episode of the three series was analyzed scene by scene. One of the authors studied *The West Wing*, the other studied *24* and *Commander in Chief*. We identified demographic information and any elements of the presidents' personal histories that revealed something significant about their personalities. The latter factors included information such as professional achievements, political causes and religion. We also coded for character traits – virtues as well as flaws – and for the characteristics of any moral choices the presidents make under pressure.

Within the fictional worlds of these dramas, the president can be known in different ways. We can observe the appearance, demeanor and attitude of each president. We can find out about their own desires and fears through their conversations with other characters in the show. When their actions match their words, we know they are honest. If other characters like, trust and respect them, we are inclined to do the same – at least in the absence of contrary evidence. And their interactions with family, friends, employees, etc. tell us something about their integrity.

## Findings

"I don't know if I could perform this role to my best ability if this character did not have integrity and honor... I like to believe that should be a part of any presidency... this is kind of a "how to" performance I'm trying to give... and I think it is real. I think it can be real. I think we can have honor in the presidency. We can have integrity. We can have a person who is so selfless as to put the country before himself."

– Dennis Haysbert, *24 Exposed*, part 1

The persona of any television or film character is crafted partly by the writer and director, and partly by an actor's performance. The person of integrity and honor that is described by Dennis Haysbert (President Palmer in *24*) is clearly identifiable in his own character as well as in the characters of Jed Bartlet and Mackenzie Allen. All three presidents are framed as heroes, often faced with impossible choices in an effort to do what is best for the country.

But the fictional worlds of each president vary considerably, as do their roles within their respective series. The requirements of storytelling account for most major differences. *The West Wing*, for example, has multiple protagonists – Jed Bartlet is just one of them. This means that conflict does not necessarily involve the president at all, but may arise from circumstances faced by members of

his staff. On 24, the protagonist is Jack Bauer – President Palmer is significant only in relation to Jack’s nation-saving adventures. The primary conflict is always about Jack, and the challenges that Palmer faces interest us because they affect Jack’s story. It is in Palmer’s reactions to Jack that we discover his character. In contrast, *Commander in Chief* deals with the conflicts, personal and professional, that President Allen faces day-to-day. She is the central focus of every episode, and every conflict involves her in some way.

*The West Wing* debuted on September 22, 1999, seven months after President Clinton was acquitted of impeachment charges brought by the House of Representatives. The show depicts the inner workings of the White House, focusing on the adventures of an energetic, smart, Democratic and relatively idealistic West Wing staff as much, if not more, than President Josiah, “Jed,” Bartlet. In fact, the show’s creator and principal writer, Aaron Sorkin, originally cast the president as a guest star but turned him into a series regular after the taping of the pilot because of Sheen’s significant contribution to the show. Throughout the series, President Bartlet remains a central, well-developed character.

Bartlet is a Catholic Democrat from Connecticut who, in the model of Plato's philosopher-king, possesses both "a once-in-a-generation mind" and keen political instincts. Charismatic and handsome, he graduated from Notre Dame, won the Nobel Prize in Economics and served as a three-term congressman and two-term Governor of Connecticut before ascending to the presidency. Sorkin portrays President Bartlet as highly capable, politically dexterous and deeply religious - he is caring and compassionate, believes strongly in the principles of equality, and promotes higher education as a platform. He chose to introduce Bartlet at the end of the pilot episode by having him respond to a question with a recitation of the First Commandment. Bartlet's first line in the series - at once reverent and witty - captures the essence of his character: "I am the Lord your God. Thou shalt worship no other God before me. Boy, those were the days, huh?" Later in the series, Bartlet confides to Press Secretary C.J. Cregg that he considered becoming a priest before he met his wife, a strong, smart physician named Abbey. Yet Bartlet is also a career politician, a first-rate intellectual and a member of the Liberal elite. The steady tension between his secular-political interests and his religious faith often provides drama for the series.

The pressure of the presidency and its impact on the Bartlet family also create dramatic tension. President Bartlet is publicly and privately devoted to his family, often using personal, familial anecdotes to drive lessons home to his staff and constituents. On a personal level, the presidency strains the otherwise healthy relationship between Jed and Abbey when they disagree on political issues - especially when they do so in public. Also, Bartlet loses sleep over the new security concerns facing his daughters, particularly his youngest, Zoe, a rising freshman at Georgetown University. Though the Zoe-Jed relationship is the most developed of the series, all three of the Bartlet daughters are involved in storylines regarding the simultaneous honor and burden of being a First Daughter.

Bartlet's soaring intellect, political skill, religious conviction and love of family cast him as a heroic figure, but he is far from perfect. He can be short-tempered to friends and strangers, impatient, reactive, slick, self-righteous and cerebral to the point of abstraction. Most seriously, in contrast to his superior mental faculties, Bartlet's physical health - and political future - is severely compromised by multiple sclerosis (MS), a condition he hides from the American public

throughout the first season. His attempt to dissemble reveals his two greatest flaws - his physical weakness and his willingness to lie. To Bartlet, the ends justify the means, at least when it comes to all of the people, some of the time.

In *24*, we watch President David Palmer over the course of a single day. However, the experiences are so intense, and the pressure is so constant, that we get to know him almost as well as the fictional presidents who live their television lives over the course of a year or more. In the first season of the series he is a senator campaigning for the presidency. After two attempts on his life, he goes on to win the national election and become the first African American U.S. President. Palmer has a formidable presence, physically and morally. He is articulate, politically savvy and intelligent - this president not only inspires respect, he demands it.

In the first episode of *24*'s second season, President Palmer calls Jack Bauer and asks him to help the Counter Terrorism Unit (CTU) thwart an imminent attack against the U.S. Until this phone call, Jack has refused to get involved again with the CTU. But when his president and friend asks him to help, he joins the search for a terrorist-controlled nuclear bomb that is on U.S. soil. As

Bauer searches for the bomb, the president struggles to keep members of his administration from triggering World War III. In the face of overwhelming opposition, he continues to follow his instinct and trust Bauer to deliver the crucial information that will save the day.

President Palmer has the most complicated family situation of the three prime-time leaders. During the first year of the series he is married to Sheri, a woman who is politically shrewd, calculating, manipulative and deceitful – and possibly the person most responsible for his rise to the presidency. This marriage ends in divorce, but Sheri is still a major character on *24*. She offers to help the president during the second season's terrorist crisis, and he accepts her assistance. Ultimately, his trust proves misplaced.

The two Palmer children are adults, no longer living at home. Consequently, the president's interactions with his son and daughter are minimal. We see his son only once at the beginning of season two when he and his father are on a fishing trip. The trip is interrupted by news of the crisis, and we never see them together again.

*Commander in Chief's* MacKenzie Allen is the quintessential underdog in her role as the first woman and the first Independent to hold the office of President. She

was recruited by her predecessor to run on his Republican ticket as the vice presidential candidate, and she becomes president under somewhat controversial circumstances. When President Bridges suffers a stroke during his first term in office, he asks "Mac" to resign before he dies so that someone who shares his vision of the country can take over the presidency. That "someone" is Nathan Templeton, who becomes President Allen's Congressional nemesis.

At first, Mac decides to accede to the wishes of a dying president. However, when confronted by Templeton, who makes an offensive remark about a Nigerian woman Mac is trying to grant asylum, she changes her mind and takes the oath. She then has to face a White House staff that is somewhat hostile, and a Republican daughter who thinks her mother should step down. One by one she deals with the criticisms and takes control of her presidency. Her performance as the nation's chief executive and as a wife and a mother is seen through her interactions with family, friends, the press, Washington insiders and heads of state. She faces various challenges every week – most of which are settled in the 45 minutes of airtime allotted for each episode. These challenges are sometimes world crises, and sometimes interpersonal conflicts with high stakes. She wrestles with them all under the pressure of being an

unelected president.

Mackenzie Allen's credentials match those of Jed Bartlet. She is also an economist, and has at least one Nobel Prize. Her career has taken her through a brief stint in Congress and a prestigious post as chancellor at a major university. Her husband, Jim, is a lawyer who serves as her chief-of-staff in the vice presidency, and eventually as her chief advisor in her role as president. Much of the conflict in the series results from Jim's highly uncertain role as the First Gentleman. While tradition dictates that he fulfill ceremonial duties, his strong preference is to be a central part of the policymaking apparatus of the administration.

The prime-time presidents are very different physically, yet all consistently exhibit internal strength by acting decisively and rising to the challenge at times of crisis. In addition, all three remain faithful to deeply held convictions. Mac and Bartlet demonstrate their strength in a variety of contexts - domestic, international and political - whereas Palmer is portrayed as strong primarily in the context of national security, which also informs his unwavering belief in Jack Bauer. All three presidents successfully stand up to fearsome political competitors, but they use different means to do so. To

counter Templeton's claims to the presidency, Mac gracefully defers to the Constitution. Bartlet refuses to let a rival congressman's vicious allegations destroy Leo's career and stain his presidency, and uses his staff, the press and knowledge of his political enemies to defang the threat. Palmer's show of strength against his political foes is dramatized by the betrayal of one of his own confidants and the show's terrorist plot, making his success all the more impressive.

Showing that the president is strong and decisive builds the audience's trust in the character. For example, President Palmer's demonstration of strength during the crisis situation proves, in a dramatic fashion, that he is worthy of trust and advances the plot of the show. It is essential to the second-season storyline of *24* for the audience to be able to trust Palmer, but without a developed back-story, he has more ground to cover - and is given far less screen time - to earn that trust. Further, unlike *Commander in Chief* and *The West Wing*, *24* does not focus on the presidency, but on Jack Bauer's attempt to prevent a devastating terrorist attack. Palmer's moral certitude and clarity of conviction reflect both the context of existential crisis that drives *24* and the conventions of storytelling.

At the micro-level, there are multiple examples of the decisiveness of each president. All are politically determined and refuse to cave in to domestic political pressure. Mac nominates the new vice-president that she wants, despite the challenges she must face. Similarly, Bartlet nominates an unconventional jurist in lieu of the highly favored candidate to the Supreme Court, and Palmer stands behind Bauer regardless of what his advisers tell him. They show themselves willing to take calculated risks when they stand behind their choices. But again, differences lie in the nature of the choices they make. Palmer is often racing against the clock, forced to make critical decisions with only seconds to spare. Mac is more likely to demonstrate her convictions in defense of the voiceless - a pregnant woman on death row in Nigeria or a Russian journalist imprisoned in a modern-day gulag. Bartlet too has strong convictions for humanitarian causes. Interestingly, he seems to compensate for his physical weakness by displaying vigorous intellectual and moral strength. Like Mac, he is not intimidated by world leaders, but, unlike Mac, Bartlet does not use the bully pulpit to rescue specific individuals; rather, he tends to speak out in defense of the grander American principles of freedom and democracy.

In addition to being intelligent, the presidents are all depicted as thoughtful, prudent and generally wise. Like the qualities of strength and decisiveness, this trait is most pronounced during times of crisis and often contrasts with the hasty reactions of the people around them. Palmer exudes coolness and confidence when making decisions and can clearly explain his reasoning. He does all he can to prevent scaring the public and refuses to be pressured into taking unwise military action by a zealous Cabinet. Bartlet initially overreacts to the Syrian strike on an American plane early in his term; he later follows the advice of the NSA and his chief-of-staff, opting for a measured, proportional retribution instead of outright vengeance. Mac calls on experts during a tense situation involving a U.S. submarine that is stranded in North Korean waters. The situation requires her to flex diplomatic muscle while warding off potential disaster. She does not react to international crises in emotional haste nor is she driven by ideological fervor; instead, she weighs the facts and makes careful, deliberate decisions after trying to understand all sides of the conflict.

The presidencies depicted in these primetime series all require a 100 percent commitment on the part of the Chief Executive. All three pop culture presidents are

dedicated, hardworking, diligent and virtually inexhaustible. Bartlet's signature line throughout *The West Wing* is, "What's next?" David works tirelessly for 24 hours straight, facing myriad threats to his own safety and the safety of the nation. Mac routinely returns to the residence after 11 pm and expresses her disappointment at not being able to have dinner with her family.

The humanity of the prime-time presidents is perhaps most vividly displayed in their compassion for others. Whether on a grand or intensely personal scale, the presidents' sensitivity makes them more sympathetic and human as characters. All three presidents show that they care about the people who work for them and regularly inquire about their wellbeing. They show that they are sensitive to the feelings of others on a daily (or, in *24*, an hourly) basis and make a personal effort to reach out to people. When Bartlet learns that his assistant Charlie Young's mother was a police officer who was killed on the job, he takes Charlie aside and shares his condolences. Bartlet also promises Charlie that he will work to take "cop-killer" firearms off the street during his term. Mac displays an extraordinary amount of compassion to Grace, the First Lady, after the death of her husband and tells Grace she is welcome to continue to live in the White House

for as long as necessary. Palmer stresses the importance of telling Bauer painful news personally, whether he is granting Bauer's enemy a pardon, or sending him on a virtual suicide mission.

On a more general level, the presidents show that they value human life. In three different, tragic plotlines involving Americans' heroic deaths, all of the respective TV presidents take their sacrifices to heart, and insist on knowing the names of these Americans who died for their country. Though the contexts and outcomes vary widely, the presidents give matters of life and death their proper weight. For example, both Mac and Bartlet agonize over enforcing the death penalty but choose opposite actions in their respective cases. Despite political pressure to show her toughness and strictly uphold federal law, Mac decides to stay the death penalty for a mentally retarded woman scheduled for execution. In contrast, Bartlet, acting against his own religious beliefs as a devout Catholic, does not use the power of his office to prevent the execution of a man convicted to death in a Mexican court. However, like Mac, he does not take the decision lightly, seeking counsel from many religious experts, including his childhood minister and the Pope, before making his choice. In 24, Palmer agonizes over the human costs far more than

the economic ones when determining which anti-terrorist option to choose. And in *Commander in Chief*, Mac mourns the late president, despite their political differences and his opposition to her succession.

The rhetoric of all three primetime presidents reveals extensive knowledge of history. They see themselves as part of a tradition, and they are very conscious of the contributions they will make to the history of tomorrow. Palmer and Allen are making the obvious contribution of being the first African American and the first woman to become president. Mac asks her assistant to find a copy of President Tyler's biography so she can give the book to Templeton as a subtle message that she, like Tyler, will not back down in the face of political opposition. Palmer refuses to give Jack permission to threaten the lives of a terrorist's family because "no president has ever ordered the execution of children" and he won't be the first one to do so. Bartlet demonstrates his knowledge of American and ancient political history on many occasions, drawing on predecessors like Franklin Roosevelt and Thomas Jefferson for inspiration and wisdom. When ruminating on America's reputation in the world, he refers to the Roman example: "Did you know that two thousand years ago a Roman citizen could walk across the face of the known world free of the

fear of molestation?" he asks Leo, adding, "He could walk across the earth unharmed, cloaked only in the words 'Civis Romanis: I am a Roman citizen.'"

Loyalty is another prominent virtue of these presidents. They are, above all, loyal to their country – patriotism is a sine qua non for the office of president. But they are also loyal to their friends and colleagues. Bartlet refuses to accept the resignation of Leo, an old friend and his chief-of-staff, after news of Leo's time in a drug rehabilitation center comes to light. Nor does Bartlet fire staffer Joshua Lyman for losing his composure and offending the religious Right on a national TV show. Palmer stands by Jack throughout the ordeal, even when his loyalty threatens his presidency. And Mac refuses to fire people for honest mistakes.

All three fictional presidents have the ability to admit mistakes and apologize. Bartlet swallows his pride and tells Hoynes that he was wrong about a failed bill, and apologizes for his error. Whenever Bartlet is on the verge of acting foolishly out of anger – after his doctor's plane is shot down, or when a reporter violates the press policy regarding his daughter, for example – he is willing to step back and listen to his advisers. He admits when he is being overly emotional or irrational and moderates his response

accordingly. Palmer also apologizes, usually to his ex wife for judging her too harshly. Ironically, he later finds out that his judgments had been correct all along. Like David Palmer, Mac offers apologies most often in the context of her personal life. She apologizes, for example, to her husband for misjudging an incident in which he appeared to be drunk.

The flip side of apologizing is forgiveness. Each president has occasion to forgive offenses against them. However, these occasions bring out very different traits in each one. Politically, Bartlet forgives his main competitor in the Democratic Primary, John Hoynes, by selecting him as his running mate; yet, throughout his first term, Bartlet holds a personal grudge against Hoynes for his disrespectful behavior on the road to victory. "You shouldn't have made me beg," Bartlet admonishes Hoynes, revealing this lingering resentment. Mac forgives Templeton by not taking his actions personally. She even invites him to the White House to have Thanksgiving dinner with her family. Palmer also offers political forgiveness, asking those members of his cabinet who voted to remove him from office not to resign. At the same time, there are certain offenses that these presidents find unforgivable – Mac fires her NSC head for torturing a prisoner against her

orders; David fires his Chief of Staff for helping to organize the vote to oust him from office; and Jed fires the U.S. ambassador to Bulgaria for his indiscretions with the Bulgarian Prime Minister's daughter.

Honesty is a virtue that makes its presence felt in all three administrations – usually as something lived or aspired to, but once in a while as a missing element. Palmer, Bartlet and Allen all value honesty in others, and they try to tell the truth themselves. However, in the presidencies of Palmer and Bartlet there is often a compromising of truth in the service of end results. Palmer lies repeatedly to the press and to other heads of state; Bartlet neglects to tell the American people about his illness prior to the election. Interestingly, President Allen doesn't lie in any situation. She sometimes plays politics by trading favors – at one point she gains a senator's vote on a confirmation by offering this man's only credible home-state election rival a post in the administration. But she is perhaps the most honest of all three presidents.

Another difference among these presidents is the extent to which they play the role of "protector." President Palmer is constantly in that role, often referring to the American people as those whose lives he

must protect. To accomplish this he is willing to go to the extreme of authorizing the torture of his own friend and colleague. Mac is protective in her personal life, ordering the press to stay away from her children, but she doesn't seem to regard herself as a protector when it comes to the country – at least not vocally. Bartlet often extends his fatherliness to his staffers. He is said to think of C.J. Cregg “like a daughter” and thinks of Joshua Lyman as a son. Also, Bartlet acts as a protector to his constituents even when there is nothing he can do to save them. He calls the fleet commander of a doomed battle carrier group about to get sucked into the eye of a hurricane, and when the commander can't be found, Bartlet instead talks to the scared boy in the radio shack on deck, assuring him, “I'm going to stay right here, as long as the radio works, okay?”

Any credible depiction of political life within the Beltway must account for the news media and the role of the press as a proxy for the American public. Accordingly, Mac, Palmer and Bartlet regularly interact with the press, though in slightly different ways and with varying degrees of honesty. Mac and Palmer usually deal directly with the press, particularly during a crisis. When rumors circulate about Mac's refusal to resign the vice presidency, she

appears at a White House press conference and talks directly to the journalists, answering any and all questions they want to ask. Similarly, Palmer opts to talk directly to the press - against the advice of his staff - to quell rising public fears about a terrorist attack in Los Angeles. Both Mac and Palmer feel obligated to address the media, which they see as a rough proxy for the American people. However, unlike Mac, who is consistently straightforward in her dealings with the press, Palmer deliberately lies about the scope of the crisis and feels justified in repeatedly misrepresenting the threat. Because of Press Secretary C.J. Cregg's centrality as a character in *The West Wing*, Bartlet's interactions with the press are more often mediated or filtered than Mac's or Palmer's. C.J. fields most of the day-to-day questions during her press briefings. When the president deals directly with the press, it is usually through a formal address to the nation. When faced with a crisis that demands a direct public response, Bartlet is neither as unequivocally straightforward as Mac, nor as deliberately misleading as Palmer. Mired in his first international crisis after an American plane is shot down without provocation, Bartlet gives a passionate, if traditional, speech to Americans vowing to exact justice and punish the

perpetrators. Yet, in private, he expresses his frustration with the futility of his proposed measures, while conceding that there are no better options available. In general, Bartlet does not blatantly lie to the press when explaining policy, but he is often guilty of overselling.

### **Discussion and Suggestions for Further Research**

This description of the traits of primetime presidents is the first step toward understanding presidentiality in popular culture. While fictional dramas are created by writers and given life by actors, characters (and stories) must meet audience expectations and stay within the boundaries of credibility if programs are to be successful. In the case of *The West Wing*, 24 and *Commander in Chief*, the fictional worlds cannot be directly compared to the "real" world because neither writers nor viewers have a direct experience of the president's day to day life. We don't know, for example, how the president deals with his family, or when and to what extent he evidences compassion or experiences moral uncertainty.

Television offers its audiences a consistent, if nuanced, picture of the American President. We argue that these dramas succeed by tapping into a shared understanding of the presidential "right stuff." The qualities we

identified in these pop culture presidents transcend gender, race and personal history. They differentiate "good" presidents from bad ones. They are, in effect, part of the job description of the U.S. President.

We argue further that the reason these dramas succeed is that we look to stories for an understanding of our world. This is as true of entertainment as it is of journalism. A key difference, though, is that entertainment creates a whole world whereas journalism just gives us glimpses into the (presumably) coherent life and work of the president. In the fictional world we know not only what the president does...we know why she does it and how she came to her choice. In the "real" world we often know only the decision. Further, even though we know we are being led to our conclusions about the pop culture president by creative writers, we are still reaching those conclusions on our own. In contrast, we only know the "news culture" president in a fragmented way, through the lens of a journalist or pundit.

One promising theoretical approach to further understanding the president in political dramas is the theory of framing. Although the concept has been most often applied to studies of news programming, it has proven useful as a way to explain a number of different topics:

coverage of war and political crises (Aday, Cluverius, & Livingston, 2005; Baysha & Hallahan, 2004; Pfau et al., 2005), political events, institutions and elections (Ayish, 2002; DeVreese, 2004; Morris, 2005; Oates, 2004; Phalen & Algan, 2001), religion (Kerr, 2003), activist protests (Boykoff, 2006) and health care (Cho, 2006; Sieff, 2003; West, 2006).

We borrow from two political communication definitions of frames to propose further research on these three programs. According to Entman (1993), to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. Cappella and Jamieson (1997, p. 39) offer a way to identify the salient components of frames: "(framing) deserves study where particular frames carried by specific stylistic and rhetorical devices are reliably identified and consistently utilized."

Television frames characters on two levels: externally observable traits, and virtues or flaws that we can identify through a character's choices and interactions. In effect, "character is built by framing. These frames are

powerful because they walk and talk and carry all the power of image (Graber, 1996).

As a follow-up to this study, we propose the following two research questions:

- How do "news culture" presidents compare with television drama's pop culture presidents? This would include an analysis of the ways character traits are assessed of our own president vs. the pop culture president. Particularly important in a study like this would be to capture the modifiers used to describe the president in journalistic discourse.
- How do dramatic plots differ from news "plots" when the president is involved? Some differences are undoubtedly the result of storytelling demands; others reflect creative or journalistic choices.

Answering these questions would provide us with valuable insights on how Americans imagine the presidency, giving shape to a national collective memory that has significant implications for government, politics and public life.

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