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The West Wing: a fictitious dramatization of American idealism

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to investigate the reasons behind the origins of the ideal American society and its embodiment in the television series *The West Wing*. To this end, the factors that led to the success of the series will be explored, at the precise moment when the public's viewing habits began to change, as they started demanding more complex and ambiguous dramatic characters. In this context, the article examines the way in which Aaron Sorkin, the creator of the series, approached the writing of the episodes, avoiding overly naive idealism without renouncing the aim of building bridges with the foundations of the American past. The study analyses the most important plots of the first four seasons and their links to the society that emerged in the New World. Despite the problems inherent in such an undertaking, the conclusions show how Sorkin's dramatic skills managed to dramatize idealism in order to bring the series closer to 21st century audiences, avoiding the cynicism that was starting to take hold in society at that moment, yet at the same time adapting the conflicts of the plot to the level of complexity required by the audience. Moreover, the prestige of the series has outlived the years in which it was produced, as it is still viewed today, at a time when the innocent point of view has decisively disappeared. Among the findings of the study, one interesting fact is that the fictional president, Josiah Bartlet, was given the name of a senator who actually signed the Declaration of Independence.

Keywords
Ideal society, founding, drama, television, president, conflict.

1. Introduction

The year 1999 was a turning point in the audio-visual sector and, more specifically, in the US television industry. That year saw the premiere of two series that would mark the beginning of the third golden[1] age of the medium: *The Sopranos* (David Chase, 1999-2007); and *The West Wing* (Aaron Sorkin, 1999-2006). These two completely different series were examples of the quality television being offered on the threshold of the 21st century.

American television had previously explored new narrative structures, as in the case of anthologies, which gave way to episodic series, and these were later succeeded by series in

[1] According to Cascajosa Virino in his article "The New Golden Age of American Television", in 2003 the French magazine *Cahiers du Cinema* published a twenty-four-page special entitled *L'Âge d'Or de la série américaine*, on the occasion of the premiere of *The Sopranos* four years earlier and the cultural impact that the series that followed it had.

which the plot could span several episodes, and even continue from one season to the next. However, the new television narrative at the dawn of the 21st century spurred innovation in a still unexplored dramaturgical aspect: the creation of a new type of dramatic character, "these were characters that, in their day, American public television would never have allowed to settle in the living room: unhappy, morally questionable, complicated, deeply human… men harassed, annoyed, worried, and frustrated by the modern world" (Martin, 2014, pp. 17-18). Thus, in the first decade of the 21st century, television screens were filled with anti-heroes. These characters helped focus the television audience on ambiguous plots full of cynicism and wrongdoing, in series like *The Sopranos*, *The Wire* (David Simon, 2002-2008), *Deadwood* (David Milch, 2004-2006), *24* (Robert Cochran and Joel Surnow, 2001-2010), *Mad Men* (Matthew Weiner, 2007-2015), *Breaking Bad* (Vince Gilligan, 2008-2013), and *Better Call Saul* (Vince Gilligan, 2015-2022).

In this context, the series created by Sorkin was thrown into the struggle for audience share by relying on an idealistic hero of high moral character, by using a genre previously unknown to American television: the political drama. Undoubtedly, what was offered by *The West Wing* was not very different from the series that had been programmed in previous decades, which were full of heroes and heroines, if not consummate idealists, or at least characters eager to find justice and healthy coexistence in the society in which they lived. All of them comprised a stereotypical, dramatic character that instilled optimism and inspiration to do the job properly, not only for themselves, but also for the well-being of their environment.

Nevertheless, against all odds, "during its first three seasons *The West Wing* became the most outstanding drama on American television thanks to being an unexpected ratings success, a favorite of the critics, and an authoritative winner of all kinds of awards, garnering nine *Emmys* after its first season, and achieving four consecutive *Emmys* as best drama of the year" (Cascajosa, 2005, p. 167). From the beginning, NBC's choice to compete for audience share from a genre unexplored until then in television was clear, placing a bet on Sorkin's scripts that were "full of memorable dialogues and references to high culture [...], with a refined sense of humor that was capable of making even the dullest plot cliché appealing" (*Ibid*., p. 167). Moreover, the series was launched "at a time when the political class was being discredited, and in a country with high levels of voter abstention" (Tous, 2009, p. 248). The aim of this article is to try to find the reasons behind the success of a series that became a key pillar of the third golden age of television, when it was clearly sailing against the wind of the television that was starting to be offered to society. To do so, four key objetives are set forth to guide the development of the discourse as follows:

a) The first is to find the origin of the fascination felt by American society toward its presidents.
b) The second one is to determine whether *The West Wing* represents a recovery of the American mind-set that proceeds from the idealization of its founding era.
c) The third one is to discover how Sorkin has managed to make the series attractive and interesting to a less naive and innocent public than in previous eras.
d) The final goal is to establish links between the ideals that emanate from *The West Wing* and those that the Founding Fathers set out to achieve when they gained independence from Great Britain.

2. Methodology

The methodology used analyze Sorkin's series through tools of dramatic writing, such as structure, sequence, scene, character construction, etc. Instead, the plots were examined based on the dramatic effect of American idealism on the main figure of the series, President Josiah Bartlet. To do this, I have resorted to the study of the characters' conflicts based on the tools analyzed in film script manuals –internal conflict, personal conflict and extrapersonal conflict–, as McKee points out in his book *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles*

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of the Screenwriting, and it have been used to analyze the contradictions generated by idealistic decisions, linked to the founding past, with the pragmatism of current political decisions.

In this sense, the article aims to show how the American people have a strong emotional attachment to the Founding Fathers and to the figure of the president, that comes from the beginning of independence to the present day, as can be found in the numerous bibliography studied for this article like Magnet's book *The Founders at Home: The Building of America 1735-1817*, Adams' studies collected in his book *The Epic of America* or Toqueville's memoirs *Democracy in America*. For this reason, it is interesting to analyze how Sorkin uses this situation to create a television series to join the past with the present and, at the same time, eliminates the barrier that separates the real world from the fictional realm.

For this reason, the genesis of the concept of the American Dream, a symbol that truly reflects the idealization of American life, has been explored. In this way, the article analyses the origin of the ideal society and who its true heroes were. The challenge Sorkin had to face was finding a way to dramatize idealism, thereby making content that was optimistic, and nearly quixotic, interesting for the public, and to avoid disdain and aloofness by viewers who might see it as too innocent and pleasing. Sorkin's skill lies in achieving it this difficult balance between creating dramatic interest and bringing the audience closer to presidential decisions from an idealistic perspective.

3. The birth of idealism in American society

Countless studies and theories have been developed throughout history aimed at devising the best form of government. Rivers of ink fill libraries around the world and, with regard to the period when the United States was founded, they range from ethical implications of politics developed by Plato and Aristotle, to the theories of natural law and the first approaches to the social contract provided by the English and French Enlightenments with Locke, Montesquieu and Rousseau at the forefront. In any case, all of them have an irrefutable, common idea that underlies the background of all thought oriented toward this field of philosophy: the need for humans to form groups of people led by someone capable of ensuring the happiness of the rest.

In this context, it seems necessary to justify the origin of the notion of idealism in the collective imagination of American society. Along these lines, Guardia establishes its beginning in the relationship created between the Founding Fathers and the currents of political thought that preceded the American Revolution:

> American republicanism drew from multiple sources. On the one hand, the revolutionaries quoted extensively from authors of the classical world. Greek philosophers and historians such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Herodotus, and Thucydides were mentioned in pamphlets, letters and other writings… The passion of the liberationists for the history of Rome from the period of the civil wars, […]. For them, there was a clear similarity between their own history and that of the decline of Rome […]. In their writings, the revolutionaries vindicated the simple values of the colonies as opposed to the luxurious and decadent customs of the metropolis. Authors such as Tacitus, Sallust and Cicero, who wrote when the principles of the Roman Republic were under serious threat, were the favorites of the Founding Fathers. They also frequently quoted John Locke and authors belonging to the Scottish and French Enlightenments… Their influence is seen in the correspondence and writings of all the American revolutionaries (Guardia, 2009, pp. 50-51).

Three fundamental issues came together in the right place at the right time to bring about the first government in human history to emerge from a democracy. First, there was the recent bad experience under a monarchical regime; secondly, there was the existence for approximately one century of liberal philosophical currents which, among other reasons, affirmed that "society and the state are born of natural law, which affirms that as all men are

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equal and independent, no person can cause others any harm to life, health, liberty and possessions, that is to say, the right to life, the right to liberty, the right to property, and the right to defend these liberties constitute natural rights" (Reale & Antisteri, 1988, p. 444). Thirdly, there is the theory of the social contract that defines the government of the nation, as set out in the treatises of the French Enlightenment, with Rousseau at the helm. American independence resulted in a democratic Constitution, based on the ideals proposed in the Declaration of Independence, the implementation of which brought with it the attempt to create an ideal society.

In the same vein, historian Joseph Ellis identifies the three liberal principles that guided the Founding Fathers in their work to build a modern nation *ex novo*:

> The democratic principle that the sovereignty of any government resides in the citizenry; the capitalist principle that economic productivity depends on a free market; and the judicial principle that all citizens are equal before the law, and their rights, therefore, must be defended by the state to which they belong, whether the abuse comes from the state, or from any other citizen (Ellis, 2007, p. 4).

In Ellis's view, "This formula has become the preferred recipe for political success in the modern world, defeating the European monarchies in the nineteenth century and the totalitarian regimes of Germany, Japan and the Soviet Union in the twentieth" (Ellis, 2007, p. 4). The direct consequence of the struggle to impose these constitutional principles has resulted in the encouragement of individual, or private initiative, which has been called the "American Way of Life".

The Founding Fathers are all the politicians in the English overseas colonies who strove to make the dream of a new country a reality. Specifically, the term refers to the fifty-six delegates representing the thirteen colonies who signed the Declaration of Independence, and risked their lives and those of their families to do so, given that "the Declaration was an expression of the ideas proposed by John Locke and the Enlightenment regarding the role of government in the social contract" (Bosch, 2005, p. 24). Subsequently, once independence was achieved and the Constitution was drafted, the inclusion of the Bill of Rights, which comprised the first ten amendments to the Constitution, put into practice the ideals contained in the Declaration and provided the inhabitants of the newly created nation with the greatest conferment of rights and liberties that a state had ever ordained: "The Declaration of Independence is a forceful yet extraordinarily concise summary of the best of several generations of Whig[2] ideology. More importantly, it had a highly dynamic beginning. It is hard to think how the first two paragraphs could be improved" (Johnson, 2001, p. 157).

The ideal society of the Founding Fathers is the model of the American state that has been handed down so eagerly from one generation to the next, up to the present day, and which the television series *The West Wing* seeks to update and recapture.

4. Aaron Sorkin: The dramatic perspective of a contemporary idealist

Sorkin defines himself as an idealist and a romantic[3]. His vision of the world leads him to create characters with a moral purpose. As such, he develops the plot of his scripts by focusing on individuals who offer the best of themselves to achieve their purposes. In fact, in most of his work he uses the characters' behavior to show the ethics he would like to see in the individuals who carry out their professional duties in any of the fields he depicts in his stories. In this way, Sorkin tries to create dramatic conflict through contradictory truths, because when he writes fiction, he is genuinely interested in the honorable and honest objectives of

[2] This refers to the British Whigs who opposed the Monarchy during the English Restoration that began in 1660.

[3] Commentary included in the audiovisual interview *What's character got to do with it?* Last retrieved on October 6, 2023, in https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eucVNYQNGAs

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all the characters: "I don't write about the difference between right and wrong, but about the difference between good and better" (Harris, 2012). For this reason, there are very few antagonists in the New York author's scripts. The moral fiber of most of the characters in his scripts, as well as the ideals that define them, create a kind of *Sorkinian* archetype that is very close to that of Frank Capra's characters. Both directors perfectly reflect the unwavering and optimistic spirit of the protagonists to improve the society in which they live: "Both Capra and Sorkin are clearly in search of the purest ideal of America where honesty and intelligence are valued above the machinery of government and big business. Moreover, both of them also place honest men in situations where most people would take the easy path to bypass the law, or pretend to comply, and then assume that those moral men are going to do the right thing" (Ringelberg, 2005, p. 95).

However, when comparing the obvious influence of Capra's comedies on Sorkin's work, the latter acknowledges that even though he is enlightened by Capra's films, his true source of inspiration is Don Quixote[4]. Sorkin defines his vision of idealistic characters in his own words: "You've got somebody who's a good guy. He's doing things well. He's not breaking any laws. He wants people to like him; he's popular. He tries not to make enemies. And then you get him to take a risk and try to go even higher" (Harris, 2012).

5. Political idealism in the dramatic construction of the presidential figure

Unlike other approaches that have been made to *The West Wing* that place the focus on themes more oriented to sociology and communication than to drama, as the studies called *"The West Wing": a Treatise on Institutional Political Communication* (Rodríguez Vidales, 2010); *"The West Wing": the Kingdom of the Word. Gender and Reality in Political Drama* (Tous, 2009) or even *"The West Wing" and the Psychology of Democracy* (Alcoriza & Romero, 2011), which is, the work that comes closest in its genesis to the present article by converting the dramatic tools of the scriptwriter into a reason for analysis. However, none focuses on the presidential figure and his decision-making as the axis of the study.

The president of the United States is the main character of the series, and the focal point around which all the others revolve. Moreover, the fictional protagonist, Josiah Bartlet (Martin Sheen), is the direct descendant of a politician who lived through the turbulent years of the American Revolution and who signed the Declaration of Independence as governor of New Hampshire. In fact, it is no coincidence that he owes his name to a similar historical figure. In addition, like his real namesake, the fictional Bartlet was also governor of the same state before becoming president in the series.

Despite the devotion that Americans have historically had for their highest representative, until 1999, which is the year the series premiered, the President of the United States had barely held any prominence on television. For this reason, NBC's CEO at the time, Garth Ancier, defends the decision to make the country's chief executive the protagonist of a television show, based on the unwavering enthusiasm that American society has for the position held by the program's protagonist. This confirms the intentions of the series' creator: "The characters in the show have honest goals and try to do their best. And that's what we want to believe our representatives are doing" (Weinraub, 1999).

The most important biographical fact with the greatest dramatic impact in the series is that the fictional Bartlet had never had a good relationship with his father due to the rigorous demands and constant pressure by the father on the intellectual development of his son. Furthermore, it should also be mentioned that the President is in his late sixties and is married to Abigail Bartlet (Stockard Channing), with whom they have three daughters: The first is Annie, who is married and has given her parents their first granddaughter; Next is

[4] Commentary included in the audiovisual interview *What's character got to do with it?* Last retrieved on October 6, 2023, in https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eucVNYQNGAs

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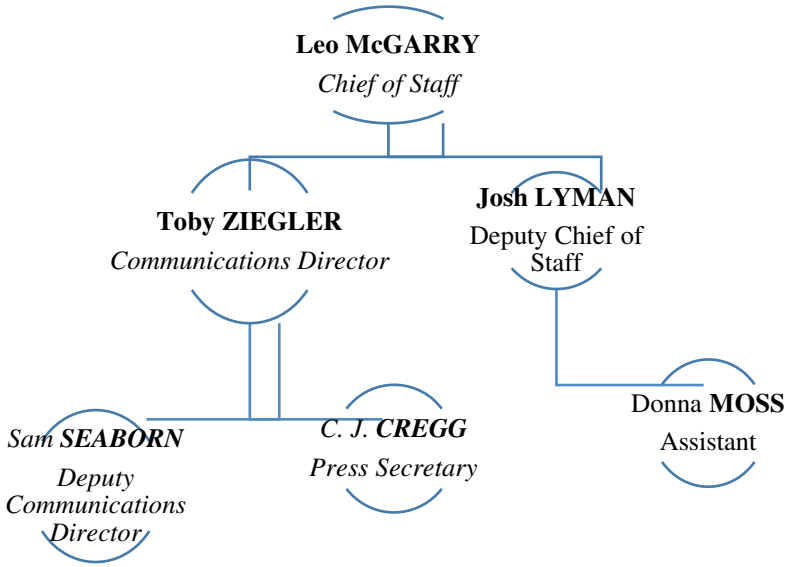
Zoey, whose college days at Georgetown University will continue throughout the first four seasons of the series; and Ellie, who is twelve years old. Bartlet went to the University of Notre Dame, where he earned a PhD in economics, and was awarded the Nobel Prize in economics in the past. He later entered politics and became governor of New Hampshire for two terms before running for Congress in the same state, a position he held for three consecutive terms. He professes being a Catholic, and in addition to practicing and trying to live according to his faith, he also has in-depth knowledge of the Bible and nearly all its passages, a result not only of his orderly life, but also of his interest in ancient books. He is also quite interested in literature and everything related to the arts. In short, as a result of the education he has received, he is a cultured and intelligent person, in line with the rest of the main characters in Sorkin's filmography.

Unfortunately, however, Bartlet suffers from multiple sclerosis, which was diagnosed during his time as governor of New Hampshire. Nevertheless, he enjoys basketball and chess, which he often plays with one of his advisors. His personality often displays a rather ironic sense of humor, which sometimes perplexes members of his administration. One of his favorite pastimes is to enlighten his staff with his knowledge on issues related to society, history, nature, food, literature, and others. These sermons are often not well received by those listening, and sometimes give rise to comical situations.

While serving in the House of Representatives as a congressman from New Hampshire, Leo McGarry (John Spencer), who would later become his chief of staff, proposes that he become the Democratic candidate for president. During the campaign, Bartlet displays a serious and clear commitment to social justice, and he develops a program in which he places people at the center of all his decisions. This cornerstone of his ideology, which he expresses in a meeting with war veterans at the beginning of his presidential campaign, which was endorsed by the decisions he had made as a congressman, leads Josh Lyman (Bradley Whitford), Toby Ziegler (Richard Schiff), Sam Seaborn (Rob Lowe), C. J. Cregg (Allison Janney) and Donna Moss (Janel Moloney), who later become the core of his presidential cabinet, to join the electoral campaign to reach the presidency of the nation from that moment onward.

Table 1. Organization chart of the Bartlet Administration during the first four seasons (1999-2003).



Source: Own elaboration.

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The initial premise of *The West Wing* is that of characters who, despite their imperfections, have made it their goal to achieve an ideal society. Therefore, even though the efforts of the Bartlet Administration are idealistic, Sorkin does not fall into the trap of creating fairy tale archetypes, with which he finds commonalities, but instead endows the idealistic crusade of his characters with many doses of reality that help to enhance the dramatic complexity of the plots. The result is that "one great strength of the series is its ability to put a human face on interesting political debates, showing that politics can be accessible and enjoyable" (Beavers 2003, pp. 175-176). Consequently, in this situation, dramatic construction can only be achieved through "witty writing and intelligent dramatization of politics" (*Ibid*., p. 175). In this sense, what stands out at the procedural level is the intelligent and rapid style of dialogue used by Sorkin to introduce the dramatic conflict of his characters.

The analysis below examines the first four seasons in which Sorkin participated as creator and scriptwriter of all the episodes, before leaving the show due to creative differences at the beginning of the fifth season. In line with the mainstream American spirit, Sorkin structures many of the plots around the duties that the Constitution confers on the president, so while "watching *The West Wing*, it seems as if viewers are trying to return to the promises of their historical foundations" (Finn, 2003, p. 110). In the analyses of the plots that follow, some of the most important conflicts between idealism and pragmatism will be examined. Among all the conflicts that the series has, priority has been given to the analysis of those that give relevance to the Constitution and the legacy of the Founding Fathers.

5.1. *Season 1: the road to idealistic exaltation*

Of the four laws that Bartlet pushes through, which are backed by the Constitution, only two will achieve their purposes: Law 443 (of which only the registration number is known); and the Banking Act. Very little is known about these two laws, as Sorkin prefers to develop the drama of the other two laws, which provides the plot with more conflict and creates more interest. On the one hand, there is the gun bill, through which Bartlet aims to eliminate the sale of guns to private citizens and has announced the bill's passage at a meeting with Democratic Party benefactors. However, once the president's speech is over, news arrives that five Democratic congressmen are not going to vote in favor of the bill. This situation compels the president to tell his team that they must regain the five votes that will allow the bill to pass during the remaining seventy-two hours of the voting session in the chambers of Congress.

Lyman and McGarry assume the responsibility of going to each congressman and asking them to vote in favor of the bill. In the end, only one of the five congressmen resists, and for this reason they must enlist the help of Vice President Hoynes to get the last vote they need. The rebellious congressman stands by his decision to vote against the bill because he is following his conscience. With 240 million guns in the hands of the US population, he wants one to defend his wife and daughter. Finally, Hoynes manages to win back the congressman's vote by assuring him that one day he, Hoynes, will be president, and that at some point the congressman might need a favor.

Despite the final passage of the bill, Bartlet and his staff remain skeptical of the achievement because the media have pointed to Hoynes, rather than Bartlet, as the man most responsible for the gun law moving forward.

In addition to Bartlet's team being defeated by the media, Sorkin dramatically complicates the situation by posing a conflict between Ziegler, the cabinet's communications director, and Bartlet himself, during which the White House media officer assures the president "that there is no way to make a strong defense for this law," because despite the difficulties in achieving its ratification, the most important and idealistic section headings of the document were suppressed for fear of suffering a major defeat. This is the first confrontation between the two characters, which will determine the course of the first four

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seasons. Through this encounter, Sorkin emphasizes the importance of the dramatic conflict between Ziegler's idealistic mentality and Barlet's lukewarm principles, now that he has become president. The strategy of the new idealism proposed by Bartlet is referred to as pragmatic idealism by the politician himself, in order to justify his more realistic stance.

The fourth law is also a failure for the Bartlet administration, and consists of the regulation of ethanol. Sorkin's dramatic development of this plot brings to the forefront some of the idealism that Bartlet hopes to achieve. The law is an initiative by the president to control gas emissions that damage the atmosphere. After being drafted, the bill is sent to the Senate for ratification, as mandated by the Constitution. However, the vote is a tie among the senators, and the vice president must break the tie with his vote. Everyone knows that Hoynes voted against a similar bill in the past, and Bartlet's closest staff is initiating contacts to change the vote of another senator in order to prevent the vice president from having to make the deciding vote. However, true to the founding principles, Bartlet chooses to follow the Constitution and accepts Hoynes' dissenting vote, thereby overruling the votes of senators who have altered their decision in exchange for some political compensation: "The halls of power are full of compromise, worn-out idealism, selfishness, and deal-making, yet in Sorkin's writing, like the Socratic dialogues of *The Republic*, he speaks through dilemmas to bring us closer to an idea of virtue" (Nein, 2005, p. 198).

The argument made by the president in accepting the vice president's reasoning brings him closer to the idealism he proclaimed when he ran for president of the United States. On this occasion, Sorkin approaches the conflict by showing that despite losing strength and credibility in Congress among his supporters for being unable to obtain ratification of the law that was nearly passed, due to the change of position of some congressmen, Bartlet is nevertheless strengthened in the eyes of most of the population because the responsibility for not passing the law has not fallen on him. Thus, despite the idealism displayed in the series, it is far from being naive. As such, "at a time when American entertainment has consciously avoided moral complexity, Sorkin has embraced it" (Nein, 2005, p. 202).

5.2. *Season 2: the betrayal of idealism through contradictory truths*

Throughout the 22 episodes of the second season, only one law, the salvaged Arms Act, is strongly promoted by the president. The reason that Ziegler decides to take up the issue again is to get it passed in the most ideal way possible, which the communications director himself tried to do in the previous season. However, C. J. Cregg warns him that any move he makes to modify the law will be seen by society as self-serving and opportunistic, as they would see it as a result of the attack on the presidential motorcade in the last episode of the first season. Ziegler's final idea, apart from regulating firearms possession and the subsequent amendment to the Constitution, is to try to insert into the law the possibility of tracking violent people without them knowing they are under surveillance. On the first point, he argues that the Founding Fathers allowed the use of guns in the Constitution because when it was written there was no militia to defend the nation. Therefore, the document needs to be updated and brought into line with reality. However, Ziegler's idea of creating a list of suspects for surveillance does not meet with the approval of his cabinet colleagues, as this would violate the right to privacy. As such, deputy communications director Sam Seaborn, defends honoring the privacy of citizens.

However, during "The Midterms" S2-E3, an idealistic viewpoint emerges from the dramatic conflict over the Arms Act between Ziegler, Cregg and Seaborn. The communications director expresses the ideal of nationhood through the following comment to his colleagues: "What would you say about a government that protects even those who want to destroy it?". At this point, a connection is made between the series and the ideal society envisioned by the Founding Fathers, and the set of freedoms they intended to grant to everyone living in the United States: "Perhaps this is the purest idealism, but Sorkin has not

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reached this point easily. [...]. He has not eliminated the country's problems, but he has highlighted them dramatically" (Nein, 2005, p. 206).

In the final episodes of this season, specifically between E18 and E22, the main conflicts surround the reason why the president hid his illness from the population during the election campaign that brought him to the presidency. In a way, his decision not to reveal his multiple sclerosis is a result of questioning his own idealism. In fact, as Ziegler tells the president, "You're cheating the system and keeping people from voting freely." Once again, the most idealistic of the presidential advisors confronts Bartlet and criticizes his failure to live up to the principles for which he decided to become president. For Ziegler, this matter is a betrayal of the type of government he believed in when he decided to join Bartlet's presidential campaign. Despite the severity of the situation and the difficult consequences that could follow, Ziegler's stubbornness prompts him to advise the president to take the initiative and go public with his illness. If he were to do so, the president would face impeachment which, as the Constitution states, would disqualify him from holding office and could lead to a felony conviction. In this way, Sorkin shifts the dramatic conflict to the very foundation of the idealism that sustains the Bartlet Administration: the nation's president. Somehow, Sorkin is showing how Bartlet's idealism has been built upon the secrecy of his illness. Moreover, it becomes clear through the conversation with Ziegler that although he does not want to deceive society, he considers the separation between his private life and his public life to be legitimate, although the media's view is that he is simply afraid of losing the elections. Thus, Sorkin "dramatizes moral ambiguity and complicates the situation by establishing different levels of connection between the public and private spheres" (Lane, 2003, p. 32).

During the season, Sorkin also includes two important plots that illustrate the search for the American dream. They occur consecutively in the eighth and ninth episodes. In the first, entitled "Shibboleth" (S2-E8), he presents the case of numerous Chinese citizens who have fled their country to seek asylum in the United States because they profess faith in Jesus Christ. On the other hand, in "Galileo" (S2-E9), Sorkin addresses space exploration through the search for life on Mars.

In both cases, presidential idealism is confronted with reality, because in the first situation, China has requested the return of its citizens, and in the second, the signal from the probe sent to the red planet has been lost. "Shibboleth" sparks a debate on whether to take in the exiles and create a political conflict with China by not complying with China's extradition order to repatriate the refugees, because Bartlet is certain that they will be executed if they return to their country. The Chinese nationals have pursued the American dream during a difficult two-month journey that has taken them in the hold of a ship across the Pacific Ocean to their destination. They long for the freedom to profess their faith, which is the goal they hope to attain in the United States. Bartlet resolves the drama between the idealism projected by the nation over which he presides, and the reality that always threatens to thwart the path to the ideal society, by ordering the law enforcement agencies that have detained the Chinese citizens to stop guarding them, thus allowing them to escape from the place where they are being held. In this way, he will show the Chinese government that sending them back to their country is impossible. Furthermore, at the beginning of "Shibboleth," Seaborn compares the situation of the Chinese citizens to the pilgrims, who later made the birth of the United States possible, because they came to America from Great Britain in search of a better life in accordance with their faith, thus establishing the first American dream.

The space race is the other plot of the season related to the American Dream. As Seaborn makes it clear: "[Mars] is next... because we came out of the caves, looked over the hills, and discovered fire; then we crossed the ocean, colonized the west, and soared to the sky. The history of man is a chronology of exploration, and this is the next frontier." On this occasion, the fulfilment of the American dream is Bartlet's own goal, and it takes the form of a strong push to explore the universe by using the probe sent to Mars. However, even though the signal

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is lost, the American dream is kept alive, because the message sent to society is that in the United States, the land of opportunity, mistakes are allowed, but for this to happen there must be initiatives to keep the dream of finding new challenges alive.

In another episode, "Somebody's Going to the Emergency Room, Somebody's Going to Jail" (2.16), Seaborn has to restore an elderly war veteran by giving him a medal. However, he discovers that this person was engaged in counter-espionage for the KGB, so he concludes his investigation by preventing moral and institutional redress for the ex-serviceman. Seaborn's reasons are directly linked to the idealism of the Founding Fathers: "This country is an ideal that has enlightened the world for two hundred years. To betray it is not only a crime against the living. It is a crime against all the people who died for it. They gave what Lincoln called the 'Last Full Measure of Devotion'... their Loyalty."

5.3. *Season 3: the difficulty of imposing idealism on society*

During this season, setting in motion the investigative committee to clarify whether the president lied to the nation during the time he kept his illness a secret runs parallel to the state prosecutor's investigation into the same facts. However, there are two very plausible differences between the two processes. First, the state prosecutor belongs to the constitutionally mandated branch of the judiciary and, as such, is an independent body that takes action against citizens who have broken the law. In this case, the President of the United States is a citizen just like any other, and he must answer to the law as well. Thus, the mechanism put in place by the Founding Fathers to control abuses of power that occurred in the absolute monarchies of Europe becomes one of the major plots in the third season. The aim is to clarify Bartlet's possible abuse of power.

In the episode entitled "100,000 Airplanes" (S3-E2), which follows on from the plot related to the resolution of Bartlet's illness, Sorkin again introduces the president's fear of showing his idealism to the public. In other words, he again pits idealism against pragmatism. This time, however, he does not create the outbreak of the crisis through external conflicts, but instead transfers the critical event to Bartlet's own psyche, thereby highlighting the real reasons that have prevented the president from putting his ideals into practice based on his inner conflict.

As one can see, the dramatic progression of the conflict with Bartlet's idealism has followed a downward spiral that finally brings him face-to-face with himself in the third season. The trigger for re-examining the dramatization of idealism stems from Ziegler's suggestion to the President that he should take advantage of a pre-campaign rally in Illinois to offer his views on affirmative action. Ziegler wants the president to take advantage of the event to clarify the position of the White House policy on racial discrimination. However, the scene suggests that Bartlet has missed the opportunity to make his position clear on the issue. Again, the fear of getting too close to the nation's ethnic minority voters could alienate the white electorate. Bartlet's lukewarm attitude incites Ziegler, and the two end up arguing in the Oval Office about the reasons why the president often finds it difficult to state his ideals clearly. Bartlet counters by saying he has no problem in this regard, which is backed by the fact that the Declaration of Independence was signed by one of his direct ancestors, who put his ideals before death itself. Ziegler, however, takes the conversation further than anyone has ever dared, questioning the president's ideals as he has never done before. In doing so, he discloses to Bartlet his conclusions about the physical and psychological abuse that the president's father inflicted on him during his childhood and youth. Thus, it is revealed to the viewer that the father figure demanded the maximum output from his son not only in his studies, but in all areas of life. Ziegler thereby uncovers the president's darkest secret. The two Bartlets battling inside the president is the situation that most worries his administrative staff. On the one hand, there is the private man, who is a cordial, affable and idealistic president. But on the other hand, when it comes to conveying and clarifying his ideals to the

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public, he is lukewarm, fearful and fragile, "because Sorkin shows that Bartlet's humanity is an integral part of the presidential institution" (Crawley, 2006, p. 193).

This inner conflict forces Bartlet to request the services of a psychologist to determine the extent to which his father's actions have affected his personality. This conflict is resolved in "Night Five" (S3-E14), when the doctor who has treated him determines that "Bartlet aspires to be the next Lincoln, but that he doesn't make the decisions that Lincoln made because he is afraid of losing votes." Thus, Sorkin exposes Bartlet's inner conflict and, from a different perspective, he shows the difficulties of putting into practice the same idealistic spirit that guided the Founding Fathers when they achieved independence.

5.4. *Season 4: the Triumph of Idealism in Society*

During the fourth season, Bartlet's attempt to impose his ideals on reality fails on only a few occasions. Once again, it is the political context that opposes the attempts to create new scenarios according to Bartlet's noble ideology. On the one hand, he promises to enact a law against the greenhouse effect, which is opposed by the Secretary of Commerce (whom Bartlet himself appointed), claiming that the automobile industry would lose many millions of dollars. On the other hand, Bartlet's team is trying to gather the necessary votes to pass an international aid bill. On this occasion, the Bartlet Administration does not achieve its objective because it refuses to reach an agreement with a senator who asks for 150,000 dollars for a study linking prayer to people being healed who receive prayers from others. Nevertheless, as evidence of what Sorkin attempts to propose and achieve during the fourth season, in the latter situation it could be argued that the president's idealism prevails in not subordinating the loss of one ideal to the achievement of another.

The two major international conflicts that Sorkin develops in this season result in praise for Bartlet's ideals, without having to exchange them for pragmatic action that might cast doubt on the virtue of their achievement. Moreover, both have parallels with reality: the radical Islamic terrorist attack that struck the United States in 2001, and whose leader Osama Bin Laden was being hunted at the time; and the Rwanda ethnic conflict that ravaged that country during the 1990s. The first of these conflicts is linked to the Bartlet administration's assassination of Shareef in the previous season. In this regard, the Qumar government fabricates false evidence suggesting that the plane crash was in fact an Israeli attack. Thus, the US avoids being blamed for the Qumari leader's death, but helps Israel to avoid war with the Arab country through a disinformation campaign indicating that Shareef is alive in Libya and refuses to return to Qumar because of disagreements with his own family, who hold power in the country. Bartlet thereby manages to avoid war between the two countries by voluntarily mediating a conflict, which did not require his presence, in theory, even though he was the trigger for the problem. In the same vein, the White House uncovers a Bahji terrorist group, which is operating with the support of the Qumari regime, when they stop a cargo ship heading to the Arab country to arm the terrorists. McGarry orders the seizure of all the cargo without yielding to any of the demands of the Qumari government, which denies any links to the Bahji group.

The other major conflict that highlights Bartlet's renewed effort to implement his idealism is the humanitarian operation in the Republic of Kundu, an African country ravaged by a bloody ethnic war. The civil war is resulting in the total annihilation of one of the tribes. In addition, the massacre by the government-led army is preventing various humanitarian agencies from entering the country. Bartlet, however, who is finally showing an outward and honest display of the American idealism inherent to his story, sends in the army and demands that the Kundunese ambassador stop the slaughter, without suggesting any compromise in his demands with the government of the African country. In fact, the president himself justifies his decision by claiming that although there have been hidden interests in US intervention abroad for many years, on this occasion they are taking action purely for

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humanitarian reasons. This time, the conflict is exacerbated by the emotional dimension, as the US army's entry into the African country means sacrifices that will certainly enhance the values of the ideal society through the heroism of its soldiers.

As one can see, idealism is not dramatized in this season, as in those of previous years. Instead, what is seen is a triumph of idealism; a clear commitment to honest work without hidden agreements. Furthermore, a remarkable event that links Bartlet's presidency to the ideal of the Founding Fathers occurs during his inauguration following his triumph in the elections. On this occasion, Bartlet claims to use the same Bible used by Washington when the latter took the oath of office as the nation's first president. In this way, Sorkin keeps Bartlet's principles clearly connected to those of the nation's founders.

6. Conclusions

Sorkin's challenge is to make his idealistic aims interesting without making the dramatic conflicts Manichean, nor so excessively fanciful as to eliminate any possibility of creating intellectual and emotional identification with the audience due to the lack of credibility of the plots. In this way, the dramatization of idealism is achieved for the following reasons.

It can certainly be argued that President Bartlet's idealistic character stems from the mentality that the Founding Fathers instilled in the nation during the difficult times when America established itself as a nation. The first evidence of this situation is the very idiosyncrasy of the protagonist created by Sorkin, who gave him the name Josiah Bartlet. This a conscious intent to establish a link between the era of the Founding Fathers and the present, because as we have seen, Josiah Bartlet was one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, and a direct ancestor of the fictional protagonist of the series.

In this regard, other indications of this circumstance include the frequent allusions to the nation's past, with explicit references to George Washington, such as the book on civic behavior that Bartlet reads, the Bible that the first president used to take the oath of office (with which Bartlet wants to do the same), and the permanent presence of Washington's portrait in the Oval Office. There are also references to Lincoln. Although not one of the Founding Fathers, he is generally considered to be one as such. The most important reference to Lincoln occurs in the third season with Bartlet's internal crisis, as he aspires to become a worthy successor to the nation's sixteenth president, which are signs of Sorkin's intention to link *The West Wing* to America's celebrated past.

Sorkin's knowledge of the US Constitution and its practical application to fiction allow him to use the legal mechanisms in force as a dramatic tool. Making use of the Constitution is essential in order to make the series as realistic as possible and to maximize its plausibility. The articles and sections that comprise the document created by the Founding Fathers in 1787 are used diligently in the plots of the episodes.

Sorkin molds a president with morally strong ideas, but who is uneasy about applying his principles. The dichotomy between idealism and pragmatism runs through the first three seasons as Bartlet struggles to implement his ideals in his environment. This is sometimes the result of Bartlet's own inner conflict, and at other times is due to external struggles. In other words, the creation of a complex reality with many interests at stake allows the dramatization of idealism, which also includes the very shaping of Bartlet's dramatic character. In this sense, as has been seen, the dramatic categories of character construction proposed by McKee have been applied in the article as tools to explore the dramatization of idealism. Sometimes, Bartlet has to face an internal conflict, such as the order he must give regarding the murder of Shareef; other times, he must confront his administration's own staff, as happens in the personal conflict he has with Ziegler, when he reproaches the president for not being sincere with the voters by omitting in the electoral campaign the terminal illness that he suffers. Finally, extrapersonal conflict has also been used when, for example, Bartlet must decide

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whether to intervene in the Civil War that the fictional Republic of Kundú is suffering to stop the ethnic massacre caused by one of the factions.

Conflicting truths become successive keys to the dramatic conflicts created. In order to avoid Manicheism, Sorkin does not create villainous archetypes in the series with the aim of emotionally manipulating the viewer. On the contrary, he dramatizes situations based on the clash between two or more counterposed options, both of which are equally defensible in terms of legality and ethics. In other words, Sorkin devises a type of conflict that is not a classic protagonist-antagonist confrontation, but more of overcoming an obstacle based on contradictory truths, or in other words, on conflicting opinions.

Making use of Ziegler's character, who is the true idealist of the series, as can be seen in episodes 18 to 22 of season 2 and in episode 2 of season 3, becomes another tool for dramatizing idealism, as Sorkin uses him to generate constant dramatic conflict with Bartlet. This occurs when Ziegler observes that the president has strayed from the path he has promised to follow and veers toward the road of pragmatism. As Ziegler trusts in the sanctity of the institutions and fully confers upon them the guardianship of national values, he repeatedly confronts the fear that grips Bartlet and prevents him from showing his true colors. As such, through the professional relationship of the two characters, the president's inner conflict is successfully addressed.

As a result, in the third season the president's dilemmas become the arena where the dramatization of idealism takes place, as the president has to face his own contradictions, or in other words, the conflict between idealism and pragmatism. To some extent, this confirms Sorkin's intention to offer idealism based on reality, rather than on a lofty and unrealistic level, like fairy tales about kings and castles. The moral conflicts presented in the series, such as the pardon of a death row inmate, the welcoming of Chinese citizens, the assassination of Shareef and others, not only allow the idealism of the president to be dramatized, but they enable his opinions to be humanized as well.

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