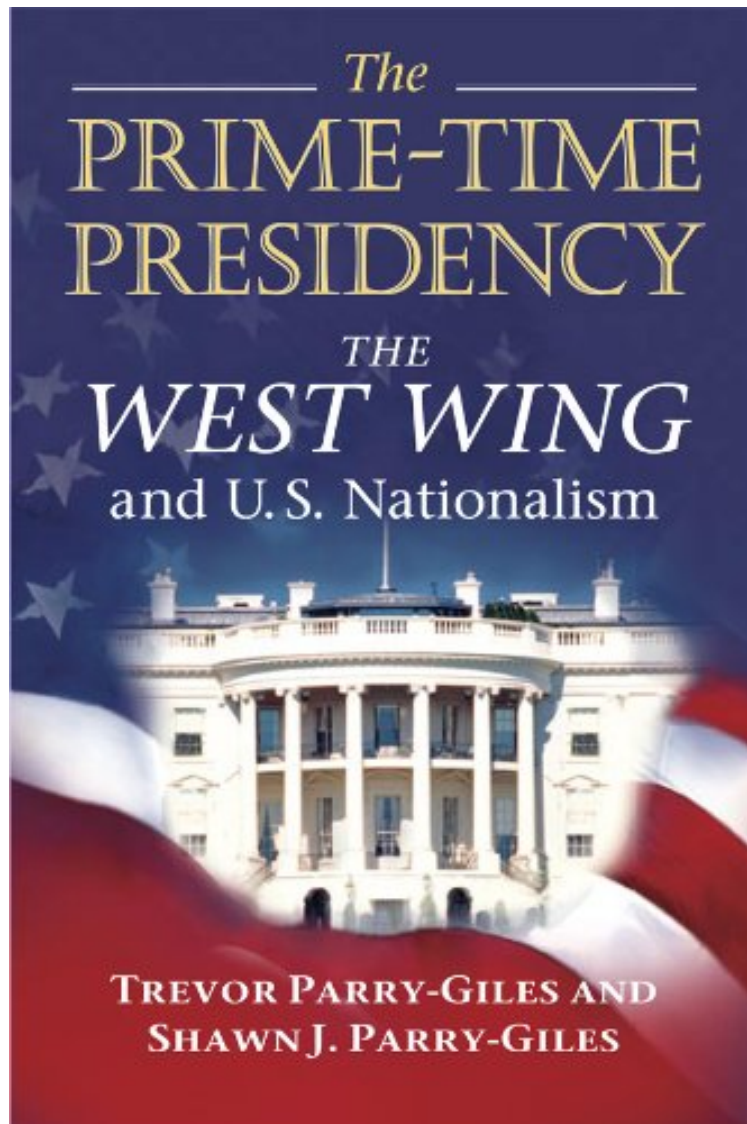


(Download pdf) The Prime-Time Presidency: The West Wing and U.S. Nationalism

The Prime-Time Presidency: The West Wing and U.S. Nationalism

Shawn J. Parry-Giles

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Shawn J. Parry-Giles : The Prime-Time Presidency: The West Wing and U.S. Nationalism before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Prime-Time Presidency: The West Wing and U.S. Nationalism:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. The Prime-Time PresidencyBy Freeborn JohnIn large part the reason for the success of the television show The West Wing (hereafter TWW) is its capacity to present a realistic although still idealistic vision of politics, argue Trevor and Shawn Parry Giles. Both of the authors who are based in the Department of Communication at University of Maryland rely in The Prime Time Presidency on Thomas Farrell's argument that "rhetoric is the only art responsible for the imitation and expression of public thought" (p. 3). The

strength of the West Wing lay in the way it promoted a certain national identity that has sufficient rhetorical resemblance to both the institution of the presidency as it is (TWW intersected both the Clinton and Bush II administrations) with a view of how it could be. TWW so it is argued is an exercise in mimesis in that it portrays an approximate reality "of the presidency that is persuasive and credible" (p. 4) while at the same time offering a "compelling and ideologically relevant reflection" (p. 5). TWW is not just a television show viewed in abstraction from the political climate; albeit fictionalised TWW is a representational drama, to take one example Bartlet's deception over his MS is analogous to Clinton's infidelities and the (bizarre) crisis of the presidency that ensued from this. In its nationalistic narrative TWW offers what is sometimes an ideologically progressive vision of the presidency but more often than not one in which cultural modes of oppression remain un-criticised and Bartlet is firmly within the mainstay of US public opinion (what the authors earlier referred to as mainstreaming); the heroic president, for Shawn and Trevor Parry-Giles is often the lesser of two evils (and I'll confess I am sympathetic to the claim). For this reason they conclude the book with these words portraying the presidential ordinariness of Bartlet: "Despite its backstage view, even with its physically infirm, self-doubting president, TWW is largely a duplication of the American presidency and the nation's dominant vision of itself (p. 171)." In order to substantiate the foregoing comment the authors focus on three facets of contemporary US culture and its bearing on national identity: race, gender and the military. For each face, which is allocated a chapter each in the book the authors analyse TWW's treatment of the issue as evidenced in Bartlet's first term of office as president (the first four seasons). In at least one - the issue of gender - and also to a lesser extent their discussion of race the authors' point are stretched. This is not to say however that the issues they raise are not real. The strength of the book, particularly as the third and fourth season deal with the post 9/11 America, is the way it does promote an US global hegemony as a positive ideal - as Josh labels it in one episode (I think in season 5 and therefore outside the scope of this book) as "mother Theresa with first-strike capability". Associated with this exporting of global justice is the way the book - in a way I had not really picked up watching the series - ascribes to Bartlet, albeit in nuanced form, the iconic lone hero status that has been so prevalent as an US myth (see Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero*, 2002; Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil*, 2003). Bartlet may be an unconventional hero; he is after all suffering with MS and, as is pointed out frequently, although Commander-in-Chief he has no military experience but what we do see in TWW is an anti-political and anti-bureaucratic message. For example, try as I might I can't think of a point when Congress (rather than individuals who run against the grain) is presented in a positive light. The authors are, I think, on to something when Bartlet's frequent "screw congress and established protocols" and "let's get the job done - aka 'what's next'" is only a refined version of the lone ranger fighting off the evil outside on his own; in short, Americans like their heroes - and leaders - to be arrogant, stubborn, and most of all independent. The Prime-Time President is an excellent glimpse into US politics - not so much the politics of TWW itself (although fans will find this interesting) but of the US intelligent culture to whom the TWW is aimed (as a commercial enterprise). If the authors' underlying thesis regarding the power of TWW's presidential mimesis is to be accepted then this book is an interesting expose of the hopes and more pertinently, the prejudices that drive this hope. Jed Bartlet may not be the ideal President, but he is a realistic one. 6 of 7 people found the following review helpful. There should be more books like this... By J. PORTER The West Wing (TWW) is my favourite television series so I was delighted that this academic book had been written about it. For me (a newcomer to Political/Social/Culture theory) the book served as a nice introduction to these, as an interesting look at the role of/perception of the president in the US and as a pleasant reminder of some of the many excellent episodes of TWW. The one thing that must be emphasised is that this is an academic book. Episodes are "texts" and the word 'reify' is used on (nearly) every page. If the words "mimetic verisimilitude" send you running for a dictionary you'll be fine as most of the book is much easier to read; if they terrify you perhaps this isn't a good choice; if you know roughly what they mean then it will be an easy read. I am skeptical of some of the interpretation of the episodes - but generally am of this sort of work. I certainly don't think it is as clear cut as the authors suggest in many instances and other episodes frequently contradict or at least balance some of the observations. But it really is an excellent book which most WW fans or student of the many disciplines covered should buy (if only to learn about TWW).

Contrasting strong women and multiculturalism with portrayals of a heroic white male leading the nation into battle, *The Prime-Time Presidency* explores the NBC drama *The West Wing*, paying particular attention to its role in promoting cultural meaning about the presidency and U.S. nationalism. Based in a careful, detailed analysis of the "first term" of *The West Wing*'s President Josiah Bartlet, this criticism highlights the ways the text negotiates powerful tensions and complex ambiguities at the base of U.S. national identity--particularly the role of gender, race, and militarism in the construction of U.S. nationalism. Unlike scattered and disparate collections of essays, Trevor Parry-Giles and Shawn J. Parry-Giles offer a sustained, ideologically driven criticism of *The West Wing*. *The Prime-time Presidency* presents a detailed critique of the program rooted in presidential history, an appreciation of television's

power as a source of political meaning, and television's contribution to the articulation of U.S. national identity.