

Presidential Candidates

By Wade Wingler

First, I have to say that commenting on the 2008 Presidential candidates this early in the race is sort of like eating chocolate chip cookie dough. There are tastes that are sweet and textures that are familiar, but it's not quite like the real thing and you can't help feeling a little silly and worrying about getting poisoned by bad eggs!

That being said, if you've read any of my columns before, you've learned that I'd rather tell a story than rant on about current events. I'm sort of a political misfit and I often find myself confused and somewhat detached from politics. In light of those facts, you might find it interesting that my all time favorite television show was NBC's "The West Wing".

For the uninitiated, "The West Wing" starred such revered actors as Rob Lowe, Bradley Whitford, Stockard Channing, and Martin Sheen as President Josiah "Jed" Bartlett. It ran for seven seasons and won twenty-six Emmy Awards and two Golden Globes.

Although it clearly portrayed the more liberal side of American politics and was even sometimes referred to as "The Left Wing" by cynics, it had a tremendous social impact and was lauded by critics, political science professors and former White House staffers. It served as a wake-up call to many Americans, especially young liberals, to pay more attention to the White House and the office of the President.

Ironically, despite my disinterest in politics, it's not hard to understand why I loved that show so much. Unlike the recent YouTube debates on CNN, "The West Wing" allowed its viewers to get an up close and personal look into the person, as well as the office, of the President. It allowed us to see President Bartlett as a father figure, a strong older brother, a valiant protector and cherished friend. In one of the most memorable episodes, President Bartlett is alone in a church following the funeral of one of his dearest friends when he rants aloud in Latin and refers to God as a "feckless thug" before lighting a cigarette only to stamp it out, in rage, on the pristine marble floor. In other episodes we see him watching movies, kissing his grandchildren and blustering endlessly about the merits of Notre Dame Football.

This fictional President was created by Hollywood and provided us clever glimpses into the most private moments of his political and personal life. We found truth in his strengths that were heralded in lofty campaign speeches and witnessed his weaknesses exposed during crises. Most importantly, we got to know him as a human being with familiar faults and fears.

So far, in 2007, we have a vague field of Presidential candidates before us. We have a former first lady, a young black man, and a trial lawyer. We also have a former New York Mayor, an actor, and a war hero. The field is starting to narrow, and we're slowly learning more about each of them as we read the papers and watch the debates. Over the next several months we'll see more alliances and posturing than we find on our favorite reality television shows. However, I don't think that we'll ever find a way to get into the

hearts and heads of these candidates and truly understand what makes them tick—let alone judge their ability to lead our nation either further into or out of war. There's too much at stake for these candidates to be completely open and honest. We're a society who looks for faultless heroes among politicians. Our relationship with them is mediated by a sometimes vicious press that's too often motivated by tragic and juicy stories about common human mistakes made by people who seem larger than life.

When I asked my ten-year-old daughter about the current candidates, she simply said "Well, Daddy, I don't really know much about those people, but I think it's about time we had a woman for a President." So, whether it's Hillary Clinton in 2008 or Katie Wingler in 2048, I hope we find a way to close the distance between the American people and our candidates. We need to know as much about the character of our leaders as we know about the leading characters on our television shows.

"'We hold these truths to be self-evident,' they said, 'that all men are created equal.' Strange as it may seem, that was the first time in history that anyone had ever bothered to write that down. Decisions are made by those who show up."

--Martin Sheen as President Josiah Bartlett