



The Star-Ledger

'West Wing' writers are looking like prophets

Tuesday, January 08, 2008

BY JOHN WEINGART

The television show "The West Wing" was criticized by some for painting an unrealistically positive portrait of life within the White House. A smart, talented, well-informed president surrounded by a similarly qualified staff grapple with complex issues and do a pretty good job of arriving at policies and strategies in the best interests of the country.

Others thought the show captured government at its best even if it romanticized how often those admirable moments occur. But the final year of "The West Wing," centered around the campaign to succeed President Jeb Bartlett (Martin Sheen), did seem just an entertaining fairy tale, valuable perhaps for showing how far modern politics has strayed from some ideal but not a useful frame of reference for anything likely to happen.

Yet if the latest polls in New Hampshire showing Sens. John McCain and Barack Obama in the lead are confirmed today and those choices are endorsed by voters in the primaries and caucuses to follow, "The West Wing" writers are going to seem like modern-day Nostradamuses.

The television campaign began during the program's penultimate year in 2005 and concluded with its final episode in May 2006. On the show, a tall, lanky, charismatic, Hispanic congressman with no national experience unexpectedly overcomes much better-known and more experienced opponents to win the Democratic nomination.

The Republicans select a significantly older senator who is considered a maverick with wide national appeal though he is distrusted by many within his party's base.

The candidates, Matt Santos and Arnold Vinick, are played by Jimmy Smits and Alan Alda. The physical resemblance between Smits and Obama is stronger than that of Alda and McCain, but the political profiles of both characters are strikingly similar to those of the apparent front-runners in New Hampshire.

Once nominated, the two candidates agree to run a civil, issue-oriented campaign and then, amazingly enough, that is what they do. They even confer during the fall when they fear their advisers may be tamping down their best instincts.

How does the campaign end? Well, it is very close. By all accounts, the writers had a change of heart and altered the planned outcome after the sudden death of John Spencer, the actor playing the part of Matt Santos' running mate, Leo McGarry. In the end, viewers experience Santos winning by a narrow margin, but the real surprise comes when the president-elect then asks his opponent to serve as secretary of state. After some hesitation, he agrees.

Of course, that was all just a television fantasy. With the screen writers still out on strike, who could even imagine such a plot in real life?

John Weingart is associate director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University. This essay first appeared on NJVoices.com.

© 2008 The Star Ledger

© 2008 NJ.com All Rights Reserved.