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## A Field Guide to Teaching Agency and Ethics: *The West Wing* and American Foreign Policy

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## **A Field Guide to Teaching Agency and Ethics: *The West Wing* and American Foreign Policy**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Though political science undergraduate courses reflect a rich theoretical tradition, they typically lack opportunities for students to express intangible concepts through the interpretation of creative works, a standard exercise of critical analysis. Educators can address this dearth in many ways, such as through utilization of popular culture texts. We employ the television series *The West Wing* to ground debates in American politics, specifically American foreign policy. Although this show has been off air since 2006, Netflix and Amazon have recently released the entire series for streaming, significantly reducing the hassle and monetary cost of using this source in the classroom. Using *The West Wing* as our guide, we enhance political science pedagogy using agency, structure, and ethics as our guiding concepts.

**Keywords:** politics, television, *The West Wing*, foreign policy, decision making, agency, structure, ethics, critical analysis, United States

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Though political science undergraduate courses reflect a rich theoretical tradition, they typically lack opportunities for students to express intangible concepts through the interpretation of creative works, a standard exercise of critical analysis. In addition, political science courses, particularly American foreign policy, often appear internally disjointed; jumping from the role of Congress to the significance of the Cold War and then to democracy building can be dizzying for students and teachers alike. To address these challenges, we propose a two-fold solution. First, we recommend a renewed focus on the agency/structure problem and the ethics of decision making in political science. Emphasizing these elements throughout an entire course can provide continuity for discussions of disparate topics that is otherwise often missing. Second, we offer a guide to explore these themes throughout a course by utilizing the television series *The West Wing*. We provide an in-depth assessment of an episode, “A Proportional Response,” and two detailed lesson plans that we have used successfully in our undergraduate classrooms. Although this show has been off the air since 2006, Netflix and Amazon both recently have released the entire series for streaming, significantly reducing the hassle and monetary cost of using this medium in the classroom. By focusing on a common problem and a proposed solution for a specific course, we present a guide that is both practically and pedagogically valuable for instructors of political science and related disciplines.

*The West Wing* contains ideal case studies for American politics for several reasons. First, *The West Wing* series presents students with fictional foreign policy scenarios that typically stem from real or plausible events. Though imagined, these storylines provide students with common sources for discussion that they can address without the prejudices attached to historical events. Second, the focus on individual characters allows for the study of actor-centric decision making, which introductory political science courses often black-box. The interplay between characters’ lives and foreign policy decisions highlights the simultaneous importance and insignificance of individuals on the international stage. Finally, the series introduces numerous ethical and philosophical questions relating to American politics that are both relevant in current contexts and accessible to student audiences. Included in the article are several conceptual frameworks and lesson plans regarding agency, ethics, and *The West Wing* that have been used successfully in our own classrooms.

The conceptual framework described in this article stems from a desire to incorporate thematic approaches to the teaching of American foreign policy. American foreign policy syllabi commonly cordon off realism from liberalism or war making from peacekeeping. Of course, some of this division is necessary. For example, discussing the basics of liberalism and realism separately is a prerequisite for comparing and contrasting them. Yet including only cursory overviews of international relations theory or domestic sources of American foreign policy creates syllabi that “reveal a surprising degree of distance between the subfield of American foreign policy and the theoretical debates and issues within international relations,” political science, and the humanities (Hurrell 101-111). Taking domestic politics as an example of one such approach, a syllabus might spend one week overviews the presidency’s impact on foreign policy and then another week on Congressional influence, but, in reality, discussion of Congress influences foreign policy for more than just that one week of the semester. Likewise, realism does not cease to exist once liberalism has been introduced the next week. While keeping these theories in conversation with one another throughout the semester is ideal, instructors can also use underlying themes to create a comprehensive and coherent picture of American foreign policy.

We offer a guide for teaching American politics at the high school and undergraduate level, particularly issues relating to American foreign policy, using the agency/structure debate and ethics as organizing concepts.<sup>1</sup> Attributing agency to a particular actor implies that the actor chooses his/her actions and that those

[1] The framework included in this article is primarily aimed at undergraduate students; however, the authors have also used it with high school students.

actions have an impact on the world, whether a small influence on a few close neighbors or a major impact on an entire society. Structure, on the other hand, suggests that forces outside of an actor's control—whether economic, cultural, or social—are the primary drivers shaping world events. For use in the classroom, the study of ethics broadly can be conceptualized as the analytical determination between right and wrong. Although there are many creative ways to examine foreign policy, such as using memoirs or film (Deibel 128-138; Simpson and Kaussler 413; Engert and Spencer 83), we explore agency/structure and ethics as guiding concepts systematically through *The West Wing*. The value of using *The West Wing* and other television series or films in the classroom is well established in pedagogical literature (Beavers 213; Engert and Spencer 83; Simpson and Kaussler 413; Peace 265; Bostock 454; Valeriano 52). Creative interpretation of this material allows students to explore some central issues, such as first image accounts of foreign policy decisions that are often difficult to grasp with traditional literature (Beavers 213). Our guide couples this proven medium with a thematic focus while capitalizing on recent online streaming capabilities.

In this article, we provide multiple solutions for improving teaching political science. We critically examine one particular episode from *The West Wing*, “A Proportional Response,” as an avenue for exploring agency/structure and ethics. We then detail two sample lesson plans that we have used for incorporating *The West Wing* into undergraduate classrooms. The first plan uses the previously examined episode, “A Proportional Response,” and the second uses a series of episodes from a later season that addresses the decision to assassinate a foreign leader. Additionally, we provide a larger list of episodes matched to specific issue areas so that instructors may easily choose episodes appropriate for their own classroom use.

The starting point for this analysis is the agency/structure debate. Although the agent/structure debate is abstract, this continuum is a flexible and accessible analytical tool that can be used in both high school and undergraduate classrooms. At the beginning of our American foreign policy courses, we ask students to score the extent to which they agree or disagree with statements such as, “As an individual, I am in full control of my life.” (See table 1 for additional examples of discussion questions.) Though this declaration may seem transparent, as students ponder it and the other statements, considering their own lives and experiences, they begin to grasp what “agency” and “structure” mean. One former student likened structure to his mother's rules and expectations. Though this might not be quite what political scientists mean by “structure,” it illustrates the reach of the concept. After pushing students to struggle with the statements, we then reframe the questions in terms of individual leaders, such as the president of the United States or US senators. Understanding these dilemmas in everyday life before applying the analytical constructs to political examples help students assess agency versus structure in various social interactions.

Beginning the course with this framework allows students to examine issues related to individual-level decision making as well as to explore broader theoretical approaches to American foreign policy and political science more generally.<sup>2</sup> Focusing on agency forces students to grapple with questions such as

- Who/what has agency in this scenario?
- How is power constrained?
- Do other actors limit options?
- How does the structure of the international system limit a decision maker's options?
- How much leeway does the decision maker have in this scenario and, by extension, similar scenarios?

Systematically focusing on agency and structure is a way of 1) addressing American foreign policy in conjunction with more traditional structural theories of international relations and 2) making policy conversations accessible and relevant to students.

[2] Hurrell notes that American foreign policy syllabi at the undergraduate level are highly disjointed and could benefit from a predetermined framework for analysis. We present one possible framework here with agency/structure and ethics (101-111).

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**Table 1. Student Questionnaire: Agency and Structure**

Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
-2	-1	0	1	2
<i>Respond to the following statements using the scale provided.</i>				
1. As an individual, I am in full control of my life.				
2. Individuals understand the implications of their actions.				
3. Constraints on individuals play a limited role in decision making.				
4. I live in a world that is not of my own choosing.				
5. We might be able to change small things, but, overall, individuals have little impact on the way the world works.				

The second element of this guide is the formal consideration of teaching students how to scrutinize ethical issues. Though the study of decision making itself is certainly not unusual to formal analyses of foreign policy (Hudson 1-30), what *is* more unusual within the field at large is a formal consideration of ethics. In the middle of the last century, the positivist movement within the social sciences swept out normative considerations from research. The pursuit of a scientific approach to politics nearly silenced ethical concerns over foreign policy decisions for fear of losing objectivity.

Scientific objectivity is a worthwhile goal, but pursuing it by sacrificing discussions of ethics carries a hefty cost. First, there is a problem with ignoring the insights of philosophers and historians of the past (Bull 361). Second, the bias in the field toward pushing past the first image discussion—the tendency to focus on institutions and states rather than on people—obscures responsibility for mistakes and poor judgments (Krasner 159). We cannot leave the people out of politics.

Our American foreign policy discussions should not shy away from ethical considerations and evaluations because we are training future policymakers and voters. Assessing ethical motivations behind policy decisions and discerning ethical questions regarding politics are skills that students must hone, and instructors should recognize the responsibility for addressing these challenges. Collective fears of losing objectivity are tenuous because we can limit formal instruction to *descriptive* ethics and leave *prescriptive* ethics for student-led discussions.

For use in the classroom, the study of ethics broadly can be conceptualized as the analytical determination between right and wrong. Descriptive ethics, then, allows us to examine 1) how decision makers view various choices in terms of right and wrong and 2) whether or not these considerations impact their final decisions. As a way of introducing these concepts to students, in conjunction with Table 1, we ask students to rank the extent to which they agree and disagree with ethical statements such as “I should always strive to do what I deem ‘morally right.’” (Other statements are included in Table 2.) Discussion of these moral choices in students’ everyday lives gives them a primer for examining ethical issues in foreign policy. After asking students to discuss these ethical questions for themselves, we pose the question, “What about national leaders? Are they, too, always bound to do what is morally ‘right?’” This sort of focus lends itself to myriad questions. For the purposes of this article, we choose to focus on one aspect of ethics—the notion of state responsibility, a concept that is accessible to students but often underutilized in teaching American foreign policy. In his survey of 69 undergraduate American foreign policy syllabi, Hurrell argues that these courses too often reflect an arrogance of superpower and a lack of critical discernment (101-111). One possible angle through which to incorporate ethical discussions and to address the ambiguity of decision making is the concept of state responsibility. Hastedt argues that responsibility is one of the three pillars of American foreign policy analysis

(along with power and national purpose) but that analysts and scholars often neglect it, despite American political rhetoric that is often heavy with references to authority and obligation (11-16). Analyzing the state's conception of responsibility is key because evaluating how leaders understand international obligations is a precursor to evaluating how they distinguish right from wrong. Additionally, right and wrong must be weighed with a metric that asks right and wrong *for whom*? Responsibility can fill this often-neglected gap in political science and foreign policy analysis.

**Table 2. Student Questionnaire: Ethics**

Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neutral	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
-2	-1	0	1	2
<i>Respond to the following statements using the scale provided.</i>				
1. I should always strive to do what I deem "morally right."				
2. In most situations, there is a moral "right" and "wrong."				
3. There are some situations in which choosing the morally "wrong" choice is the "right" thing to do.				

Instructors might choose to deploy these two themes through case studies, current events, popular culture, or a variety of other avenues. Likewise, when teaching political science at the secondary and postsecondary level, instructors can incorporate media from popular culture, ranging from Jon Stewart clips to introduce current events or satire as a genre (Trier 424) to political cartoons as a way of critiquing hegemony (Ellefritz 125). Instructors have systematically incorporated television, such as *The Wire* or *The Simpsons*, in college courses to teach writing and critical analysis of texts while increasing student interest in material (Duchaney 81; Parke 2013). In light of these works, we have incorporated the television series *The West Wing* into political science courses at the high school and undergraduate level.

Rather than attempting to analyze *The West Wing* series in its entirety for this article, we present a critical reading of the episode "A Proportional Response," written by series creator Aaron Sorkin. Limiting the scope of this section clarifies how an instructor might use a single episode for analysis. Using the questions and concepts in table 3, we also provide a guide to discuss the implications for agency and ethics found in this episode. Then, we provide a sample lesson plan that we have used to accompany this episode. Finally, to show the breadth of the show, we provide a sample lesson plan that we have used for a separate set of episodes, as well as a larger chart that outlines the myriad American foreign policy discussions covered throughout the series.

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**Table 3. Episode Analysis**

<b>Guiding Questions: Agency</b>	<b>Episode example</b>	<b>Real-world example</b>
Who/what has decision making power in this scenario?		
Does the structure of the domestic system constrain the actor(s)?		
Does the structure of the international system constrain the actor(s)?		
<b>Guiding Questions: Ethics</b>	<b>Episode example</b>	<b>Real-world example</b>
Do decision makers' personal ethics/feelings of responsibility impact decision making?		
Do concerns over ethics or responsibility make an actor pursue a choice he/she/it might not have otherwise?		
To whom does the actor feel ethically responsible?		

The following critical analysis illustrates how an instructor could lead a discussion of agency, structure, and ethics regarding an episode of *The West Wing*. First, throughout “A Proportional Response” (season 1, episode 3), characters face structural constraints and frustrations on international, domestic, and personal levels. The primary plot, concerning the president’s reaction to an American plane being shot down, and secondary plots present accessible and realistic depictions of decision making and structural constraints on characters’ actions. In the previous episode, the Syrian government shot down an American military plane carrying doctors visiting a teaching hospital in Damascus; President Bartlet’s personal physician and friend was also on board.<sup>3</sup> In response, the fictional president wants to retaliate disproportionately—to “blow them [the Syrian officials responsible] off of the earth with the fury of God’s own thunder” (Sorkin). Despite the focus on the presidency during this episode, and through all seven seasons of the show, the viewer quickly realizes that the president is not an omnipotent Commander in Chief. Instead, virtually all of the decisions the president makes face some degree of constraint—whether from bureaucratic politics, Congressional approval, or international public opinion.<sup>4</sup>

“A Proportional Response” begins with the vengeful president impatiently waiting for bureaucratic outputs and estimates needed to plan the counterstrike. Here, a viewer notes the first hint of structural constraint. The president is helpless in the hours passed between hearing of the downed military plane and briefings by the heads of respective agencies. In line with Graham Allison’s bureaucratic politics model (143-196), bureaucratic organization shapes both the timeline of the response and the options presented to the president. This is especially evident in the president’s meeting with the National Security Council, when

[3] Shooting down a plane is a violent act. At the time of this writing, the conflict in Syria is still ongoing. Although there is some potential for students to be upset by violence in the episode echoing the violence on the news, the downing of the plane occurs off-screen in the episode. However, it might be a good idea for the instructor to note the violent actions portrayed in this episode.

[4] In light of recent debates over American intervention in Syria, this is an especially relevant episode. While the circumstances surrounding the fictional intervention on one hand and an actual intervention on the other are very different, all actors are choosing the best among “bad” options. Seeing the dramatic portrayal of shaky intelligence briefings or sleep deprivation has direct implications for understanding current policy dilemmas.



his military officers and officials from the Defense and State Departments only present him with a single option: to destroy a few highly-rated military targets in Syria, thereby promising to cripple the Syrian defense ministry with few civilian casualties. The commanders assure the president that the intelligence is reliable, that the targets are as far away from civilian population centers as possible, and that the military is poised to make the surgical strike. The United States military is perfectly capable of carrying out such a mission. The multiplicity of actors within the bureaucracy has spoken with one voice in favor of a proportionate and politically palatable response.

Yet, Bartlet—still reeling from the death of his friend and the prospect of his first military action as Commander in Chief—cannot stomach such a weak option. Rather than be resigned to the path before him, the president exercises his power in ordering the National Security Council to come up with a new plan: a *disproportionate* response. With this instruction, the NSC then proposes a more aggressive plan that would bomb more targets, incur more civilian and military casualties, and present a show of force in the volatile region.

Several hours later, after cooling down, weighing the costs and benefits of his options, and listening to his chief of staff, the president decides that his initial instinct was an overreaction and that the proportional response is the only viable option. In his next meeting with the NSC, the president nods his head, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Fitzwallace, walks to a phone and gives the attack order for the proportional response. In this moment, the president's power seems absolute; he nods his head, and on the other side of the world, buildings crumble. But it is a false moment of power—a false choice. In effect, anticipated perception of the international community and other structural considerations influenced the president's ultimate decision to carry out a proportional response.

From an analytical perspective, Bartlet is caught in an “agent-structure problem,” and structural considerations prevail. Throughout the episode, the discussed “virtue” of a proportional response is partially an ethical one, but the episode also illustrates just how few options a decision maker has in a given situation. To his dismay, Bartlet realizes that in some ways, being a superpower is an illusion (Ferguson 21). The United States cannot simply demolish any town in which an American citizen is killed. In order to exercise that kind of power and control, “You’re going to have to kill everyone,” as his chief of staff remarks. Though the president's expressed purpose is to inflict retribution on Syria, the structural factors—the position of the U.S. in the world, as well as domestic and international public opinion—effectively restrict his options to a single, seemingly half-hearted response. Although he is the Commander in Chief of “the most mighty military force in the history of mankind,” he must also behave “the way a superpower ought to behave” (Sorkin). He knows that retribution for the downed plane would “be seen at home and abroad as a staggering overreaction by a first time Commander in Chief” (Sorkin). Of course, theoretically, Bartlet *could* have made the call; he *could* have ordered a disproportionate response. But the international system rendered that choice both unfeasible and unwise.

The options President Bartlet weighs throughout the episode—the disproportionate and proportionate responses—are distinct for two reasons. First, as discussed above, the international structure (in the form of reigning norms of warfare and public opinion) produces a proportionate response, whereas the agent initially prefers the disproportionate response. The second distinction between the two options stems from competing notions of responsibility. For any given choice, a decision maker must frame the decision by acknowledging *to whom* he is responsible, i.e., who is the *referent* in the scenario.

In the main plot of the episode, the president must decide between personal and public referents. His task is deciding how to respond to the calculated downing of an American plane and, with it, his friend. His initial, gut response is to act on behalf of his emotions, adopting an inward or personal referent. In contrast, Leo, his chief of staff, urges the president to respond objectively:



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PRESIDENT: It's been 72 hours, Leo. That's more than three days since they blew him out of the sky. And I'm tired of waiting, dammit! This is candy-ass! We are going to draw up a response scenario today, I'm going to give the order today, we're going to strike back today.

LEO: I wish you wouldn't say "him," Mr. President.

PRESIDENT: What?

LEO: "Three days since they blew him out of the sky." Of course that's fine while it's just you and me, sir, but in there with Fitzwallace and the Chiefs, I hope you say "it" or "the airplane," not "him."

PRESIDENT: You think I'm taking this personally.

LEO: I think-

PRESIDENT: Why the hell shouldn't I take this personally?

(Sorkin)

Through most of the episode, President Bartlet continues to support a *personal, domestic referent* and to advocate a disproportionate response, which would please both himself and the American public. Leo and Fitzwallace, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, continue to push for an *international referent* and to support a proportionate response, in accordance with international norms. The factor that finally sways the president is the threat to international civilians that a disproportionate response would entail: his national security team estimates that the disproportionate response would create thousands of civilian casualties and severe humanitarian problems. With the acceptance of these facts, the president moves from a personal referent to a public, international one. He realizes that, in this scenario, American foreign policy must place its referent outside of the state, in the international community. Leo comforts him later in the episode by reminding the president that this is "the way a superpower ought to behave" (Sorkin).

Utilizing episodes of *The West Wing* can illuminate issues of agency, structure, and ethics, but using television in the classroom can present some practical considerations for instructors. First, using clips or full episodes does not necessarily mean that an instructor needs to show episodes in class. Given the accessibility of Netflix and Amazon, instructors can treat the episodes as a "textbook" for the class. Students can purchase individual episodes (\$1.99 each via Amazon Prime) or stream the entire series at home (via Netflix) and come to class ready to discuss. The episodes are generally cohesive wholes, and the themes of agency and ethics underlie the non-foreign policy subplots as well.

Second, the series covers many additional issues of foreign policy and national security; the storyline of "A Proportional Response" comprises only one example of *The West Wing's* potential for examination of agency/structure and ethics. This episode focuses specifically on retaliation strikes, but the series as a whole incorporates an enormous range of issues suitable for an undergraduate American foreign policy course or related political science classes at the high school level. While not comprehensive, table 4 contains a list of episodes matched with substantive themes ranging from US-China relations to foreign aid.

**Table 4. Suggested Episodes by Theme**

Themes	Description	Ep.	Title
Brinkmanship, US/China Relations	The US and China engage in brinkmanship over Taiwan while president engages his staff members in games of chess.	3.15	"Hartsfield's Landing"
Cuban Embargo, Congressional Politics	When details of secret talks with Cuba leak to members of Congress and the press, the president must decide whether to overturn the embargo or give in to domestic pressures.	6.19	"Ninety Miles Away"
Globalization	As an international trade summit approaches, the administration learns that the negotiated agreement will jeopardize thousands of American jobs.	5.19	"Talking Points"
Human Security, American Propaganda	The renewal of an air base in a Middle Eastern country without women's rights frames a broader discussion of human security. Staffers grapple with the implications of imprecise language in a UN treaty on prostitution, and the president must decide how to handle a potential outbreak of mad cow disease in the country. Also, WWII veterans protest a Smithsonian exhibit on Pearl Harbor that they deem Anti-American.	3.9	"The Women of Qumar"
Human Security, Development, Congressional Politics	When the administration loses a key vote in support for a foreign aid bill, the staff spends the day trying to find another vote. The side stories are also applicable to development: a service member on food stamps delivers a personal request to a staffer, and the president has a photo op with a goat for Heifer International.	4.12	"Guns Not Butter"
Humanitarian Intervention, Bureaucratic Politics	In the run-up to the inauguration of his second term, the president must decide whether to intervene in a genocide in Africa. Anticipating resistance, he bypasses the Secretary of Defense to obtain a force depletion estimate for a potential mission.	4.14	"Inauguration: Part One"
		4.15	"Inauguration: Over There"
Israel/Palestine	After a terrorist attack in Gaza kills several American officials at the end of the fifth season, the administration convenes peace talks with Israelis and Palestinians at Camp David.	6.1	"NSF Thurmont"
		6.2	"The Birnam Wood"
Nuclear Weapons, Iran, US/Israel Relations	An unclaimed nuclear explosion over the Indian Ocean surprises the president and his staff. With little intelligence to rely upon, the administration assumes that Iran is to blame and prepares for military strikes. Staffers debate the merits of unilateral strikes versus multilateral negotiations. Due to a lucky break, the administration realizes in time that the culprit is actually Israel.	5.13	"The Warfare of Genghis Khan"
Nuclear Weapons, Iran, US/Russia Relations, Media, Saudi Arabia	On the eve of a summit with the new Russian president, satellite imagery reveals progress on a nuclear weapons facility in Iran built with Russian technology. Also, the communications director debates the merits of credentialing a Russian journalist for the upcoming trip, and the press secretary speaks out against the treatment of women in Saudi Arabia.	3.2	"Enemies Foreign and Domestic"
Political Asylum, US/North Korea Relations	A celebrated pianist from North Korea attempts to defect once he reaches the White House. The president must decide whether or not to jeopardize ongoing negotiations by granting political asylum.	5.4	"Han"
Political Intervention	When protestors flood the streets in Saudi Arabia, the president debates the merits of political intervention with two former presidents while on their way to a state funeral.	5.1	"The Stormy Present"
Targeted Killings	This trio of episodes follows the president's decision making process regarding the assassination of a foreign leader.	3.21	"The Black Vera Wang"
		3.22	"We Killed Yamamoto"
		3.23	"Posse Comitatus"

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Third, instructors can incorporate the episodes into their syllabi to complement existing considerations of concepts and issues of American foreign policy. We have included two sample lesson plans to illustrate how we have used *The West Wing* to teach American foreign policy in our undergraduate classrooms. Sample Lesson 1 involves using the previously analyzed episode, “A Proportional Response.” This episode was incorporated into a week of classes covering decision making in American Foreign Policy and discussions of U.S. responses to surprise attacks. Sample Lesson 2 is an example of using clips of multiple episodes to talk about a particular issue (in this case, targeting killings). Given that that this theme also crossed multiple days, we have also included suggested reading assignments for three class days (or one week) of material.

**SAMPLE LESSON 1: “A PROPORTIONAL RESPONSE”**

The episode “A Proportional Response,” like many episodes of *The West Wing*, has great potential for classroom use. While many ways of using “A Proportional Response” in the classroom exist, we will show the way we have used the episode in our undergraduate classes when discussing foreign policy decision making. Given the importance of decision making in this episode, the instructor reviewed and introduced concepts such as rational choice, prospect theory, losses frames, and groupthink along with agency, structure, and ethics before watching the episode.

In the following 50-minute class, the instructor showed the full episode (42 min.) of “A Proportional Response” after briefly introducing the series and providing a short recap of the previous episode. During the third class, the instructor developed questions of agency and structure outlined in this article as well as additional key terms discussed previously in the class:

- How much agency does the president have in this situation?
- What constraints—whether personal, domestic, or international—are at play?
- Is this an example of rational choice? Why or why not?

Using “A Proportional Response” as a starting point, the students were able to make connections to agency, structure, and ethics as well as see a clear connection to historical and contemporary issues in American foreign policy. For instance, after discussing the fictional scenario, the instructor introduced students to similar cases ranging from the Lusitania to the Lockerbie bombing. Given the in-depth portrayal of foreign policy decision making in *The West Wing*, students were able to frame those historical events from foreign policy leaders’ points of view. Table 5 provides a sample three-day lesson plan for using this full episode in class.

**Table 5. “A Proportional Response”**

<p><b>Day 1: Background</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Students need to be familiar with terms such as decision making, rational choice, prospect theory, loss frame, and cognitive bias.</li><li>• Students also need to be familiar with institutional constraints on the presidency (such as bureaucratic politics and the role of Congress in foreign affairs).</li></ul>
<p><b>Day 2: “A Proportional Response”</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Instructor provides a brief recap of the previous episode.</li><li>• Watch episode (42 min.)</li></ul>
<p><b>Day 3: Discussion and Extensions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Discussion of the episode: “How much agency does the president have in this situation?” “What constraints—whether personal, domestic, or international—are at play?” “Is this an example of rational choice? Why or why not?”</li><li>• Discussion of similar historical events: sinking of the USS Maine, sinking of the Lusitania, the Tonkin Gulf crisis, Pearl Harbor, 1983 Beirut barracks bombing, Lockerbie bombing, 1998 embassy bombings, USS Cole, September 11 attacks, and recent embassy bombings in Libya.</li></ul>

**SAMPLE LESSON 2: TARGETED KILLINGS, AGENCY, AND ETHICS**

We have also incorporated *The West Wing* into our classes by showing selected clips rather than entire episodes. One of the topics for which this strategy works well is the discussion of assassinations, targeted killings, and the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs, or drones). A trio of episodes from the end of Season 3 of *The West Wing* finds President Bartlet wrestling with the idea of secretly assassinating a foreign diplomat purported to support terrorism. This legally and ethically precarious decision opens the door to a larger classroom discussion on US use of targeted killings during the post-9/11 era.

This second lesson plan also covers three separate 50-minute sessions (though, of course, it could be adapted to fit different needs). For the first day, the instructor required students to read several background articles covering the development and efficiency of drones. (See table 6.) During this class, the instructor first lectured on the history of American policies regarding assassination and targeted killing and on the development of drones. She then opened a discussion regarding the assigned articles and the perceived effectiveness of drone strikes. Sections from this day's *The West Wing* episode, "The Black Vera Wang" (3.20), were then showed at the end of the class. (See table 6 for the specific clips shown.) These clips establish the storyline to be discussed in the next two periods. Essentially, the White House discovers that the defense minister of a fictional Middle Eastern state, Qumar, oversees a terrorist cell that has targeted American military establishments. Qumar is a formal military ally of the US, and the defense minister is traveling to the US to meet with the president in ten days.

**Table 6. Day 1: Background for Targeted Killings and Drones****Required Readings:**

- Byman, Daniel. "Why Drones Work." *Foreign Affairs*. July/August 2013. 32-43.
- Cronin, Audrey Kurth. "Why Drones Fail." *Foreign Affairs*. July/August 2013. 44-54.
- Kreps, Sarah and Micah Zenko. "The Next Drone Wars." *Foreign Affairs*. March/April 2014. 68-79.

**Class Activities:**

- Lecture: Targeted Killings, Assassinations, and the Rise of Drones
- Discussion: Effectiveness of Drone Strikes
- *The West Wing*: Sections of "The Black Vera Wang" (3.20)
  - 10:08-11:55
  - 18:39-21:17
  - 29:57-31:58
  - 38:09-39:59

For the second class, the instructor required students to read articles about drone warfare that were more personal in nature than the background articles from the first day. (See table 7.) These articles opened a class discussion on the ethics of targeted killings. From there, the instructor assigned small groups of students to read and analyze different statements from the Obama administration justifying the use of drones. The groups were tasked with summarizing their statements and assessing the validity of the justifications. Finally, the instructor ended the class with sections of the next episode of *The West Wing*, "We Killed Yamamoto" (3.21). These clips show the Bartlet administration assessing its options regarding the terrorist leader. Many structural considerations intervene to limit the president's choices. For example, the US cannot arrest the defense minister of Qumar without setting aside diplomatic immunity, but the US cannot set aside diplomatic immunity without permission from the country's leader, who also happens to be the defense minister's brother. Additionally, the US government cannot pursue a court case against the suspected terrorist because the main evidence against him was obtained through torture, making it inadmissible. The episode ends by pushing the idea that assassination is the only feasible option, though the president finds it ethically repugnant.

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**Table 7. Day 2: Wrestling with the Ethics of Targeted Killings and Drones**

**Required Readings:**

- Junod, Tom. "The Lethal Presidency of Barack Obama." *Esquire*. August 2012.
- Mazzetti, Mark and Eric Schmitt. "U.S. Militant, Hidden, Spurs Drone Debate." *The New York Times*. 28 February 2014.
- Power, Matthew. "Confessions of a Drone Warrior." *GQ*. 23 October 2014.

**Class Activities:**

- Discussion: Readings and Ethics.
- Small Groups: Reading and analyzing statements from the Obama administration about the use of drones.
- Recapping the crisis scenario from yesterday's *The West Wing* episode. What choices does the president have? How are those choices constrained?
- *The West Wing*: Sections of "We Killed Yamamoto" (3.21)
  - 0:37-3:15
  - 9:43-10:44
  - 11:58-13:29
  - 27:29-32:08
  - 39:56-43:00

On the third day, the instructor directed students to engage each other in a debate over current US drone policy. She divided the class into two sections and assigned one as "pro" and one as "con," and then she allowed each group time to structure their points. After the debate, the instructor opened the floor for discussion so that students could voice their own opinions on the issue and so that the class could discuss the day's readings. (See table 8.) Lastly, the instructor showed the final installment of clips from *The West Wing*, which came from the Season 3 finale, "Posse Comitatus" (3.22).

**Table 8. Day 3: Settling the Debate**

**Required Readings:**

- Shane, Scott. "The Moral Case for Drones." *The New York Times*. 14 July 2014.
- Kaag, John, and Sarah Kreps. "The Moral Hazard of Drones." *The New York Times*. 22 July 2014.
- Kaag, John. "Drones, Ethics, and the Armchair Soldier." *The New York Times*. 17 March 2013.

**Recommended Readings:**

- Roth, Marco. "The Drone Philosopher." *n+1*. 7 August 2013.

**Class Activities:**

- Debate: Divide the class into two groups. Assign each group as "pro" or "con" for the use of drones.
- *The West Wing*: Sections of "Posse Comitatus" (3.22)
  - 0:35-5:50
  - 11:13-13:17
  - 15:07-17:08
  - 20:16-21:30
  - 35:21-37:36
  - 40:35-42:56
- Discussion of *The West Wing*: Did the president make the right decision? What do you think would happen in reality? Compare and contrast the policies of the Obama and Bartlet administrations.

After the conclusion of the episode, the instructor asked students to assess *The West Wing* story. Students rightly concluded that the show, like the Obama administration, makes the case that a less-than-ethical choice becomes ethical when no other options exist, combining the concepts of agency and ethics. Table 9 shows a side-by-side comparison of a statement from the Obama administration that students assessed on Day 2 with a passage from *The West Wing* episode shown on Day 3.

**Table 9. Day 3: Comparing the Obama and Bartlet Administrations**

<p><b>May 2013 Presidential Address at the National Defense University</b>  ...it is a hard fact that U.S. strikes have resulted in civilian casualties, a risk that exists in every war. And for the families of those civilians, no words or legal construct can justify their loss. For me, and those in my chain of command, those deaths will haunt us as long as we live... But as Commander-in-Chief, I must weigh these heartbreaking tragedies against the alternatives. To do nothing in the face of terrorist networks would invite far more civilian casualties... So doing nothing is not an option.</p> <p>(Obama)</p>	<p><b>Episode: "Posse Comitatus"</b></p> <p>PRESIDENT: It's just wrong. It's absolutely wrong.  LEO: I know, but you have to do it anyway.  PRESIDENT: Why?  LEO: 'Cause you won.</p> <p>(Sorkin)</p>
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Table 9 illustrates that although *The West Wing* aired prior to current debates in the Obama administration, the ethical dilemmas found in the episode are similar to real world debates. In the final discussion of this episode, students also pointed out that the episodes covered many other concepts from the class, including how politicians can use the blurred lines between peacetime and wartime to their advantage. The blurred lines give politicians a sort of ethical cover; killing in wartime has different actors and implications than killing in peacetime.

This article tackles a problem identified in the literature regarding the teaching of American foreign policy. Specifically, Hurrell (110-111) argues that American foreign policy syllabi tend to lack unifying themes, connections to the subfield of international relations, and opportunities for the development of critical discernment. Because of his survey work and because of similar frustrations with our own syllabi, we have developed a two-fold solution that is both pedagogically and practically valuable. First, we have suggested that instructors consider refocusing their courses with the themes of agency and ethics, both of which open discussions about the motives of decision makers. In addition to American foreign policy, these concepts can unify discussions in many social science courses, partially because they address human behavior generally and because they have no simple answers. To this end, we intend for other instructors to adapt our charts and suggestions to their classroom needs. Second, we suggest that instructors and students apply these concepts to analyzing the fictional world created by the television series *The West Wing*. Though fictional, the scenarios represented in this show often seem shockingly current, which allows students opportunities to discuss relevant issues without all of the preconceptions attached to actual foreign policy scenarios.

Finally, by combining these two approaches to teaching American foreign policy, we open a window to a world otherwise not readily accessible to students. At its core, American foreign policy revolves around human decision making, yet, to the casual observer, this process often feels opaque, as these choices are typically made behind closed doors in the nation's capital. By opening those doors to a fictional administration, *The West Wing* is unique as a piece of popular culture because it illuminates this strategic and secretive culture for the public, rather than simply reflecting back elements of the dominant public culture to them, as do most elements of popular media (Wright and Sandlin). With a foot in the door to this clandestine world, instructors then can push open the door more fully for their students by framing discussions with critical themes that disentangle the usual political rhetoric and traditional understandings. In the end, we are left with decision makers who are neither omnipotent nor powerless and decisions that are often neither clearly right nor wrong.

"A Proportional Response" effectively addresses these concerns towards its end. After Leo talks the president out of massive retaliation against Syria, the president is, perhaps understandably, dissatisfied. The chief of staff notes:



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LEO: We are not doing nothing. Four high rated military targets.

PRESIDENT: And this [option] is good?

LEO: Of course it's not good—there is no good. It's what there is.

(Sorkin)

If embracing themes of agency and ethics in our instruction helps students grasp the complexity of evaluating these decisions, then perhaps we *can* do something good.

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