Film and television have been influential in the remaking of the American self since the traumas of Vietnam. We undertake readings of class, gender, ethnicity and race focusing on the roles of Martin Sheen and his two ‘crews’ in Apocalypse Now Redux and in the television series The West Wing. We argue that despite the appearance of a more progressive America as represented by the Bartlet White House it remains within a long tradition that represents the US in discourses of innocence and pureness of will and is largely blind to the kind of violence perpetrated by Willard and his crew in Apocalypse Now Redux. We suggest that the capacity of the US repeatedly to ‘forget’ its use of certain kinds of violence marks the limits of self-sacrifice of the American self and provides the discursive possibility for the eternal return of innocence.

It is hard not to think about the military flavour of American political desire when you sit, as we did one balmy Toronto day in August 2001, engrossed for more than three hours in the remarkable Apocalypse Now Redux (ANR). The film centres on the bravura performance of Martin Sheen as Captain Benjamin Willard, but one finds oneself seeing in the young Sheen Jeb Bartlet, US President in the popular political drama, The West Wing. As we reflected over a beer in a downtown pub on the film we had just seen, we began to wonder about the kind of America for which Sheen’s performances provide bookends. ANR and The West Wing mark out two crucial moments in the American imperium. Vietnam is synonymous with the decline of American power, seemingly the point at which the United States not only exceeded the limits of its reach but also degraded itself in places like My Lai and Cambodia. The West Wing, by contrast, is a vision of America resurgent in which the post-Cold War United States bestrides the globe and, significantly, is recommitted to a liberal vision of the American Dream as it looks toward the twenty-first century. Two terms of the Clinton presidency of domestic prosperity and cautious commitments to multilateralism stood between the Gulf War and that August afternoon and seemed to herald a US more at ease with itself and less restless in international affairs. Moreover, there seemed every reason to be optimistic that the emerging but bumbling Bush presidency of classical US isolationism and unilateralism would endure for just one term. In short, despite the policy and moral
failings of the Clinton presidency, it seemed plausible to imagine that American voters were moving in a direction of reconciling themselves to an America of less grandiose imperial vision than had characterised the Reagan and Bush senior years. We had no idea what lay just around the corner.

Now the United States is in a more bellicose mood than perhaps ever in its history. After September 2001 Republican unilateralism took on an all-encompassing aspect with Bush’s neat division of the world between those who would follow an American lead and those who would place themselves against the United States. Rather than emphasize its commitment to the path of grey, patient, forensic police work to establish responsibility for the 9/11 attacks and to interrupt the flows of finance, money, people and materiel that sustain terror networks, the Bush administration, unsurprisingly, declared war on terror and threatened it upon states it deemed in any way supportive of terror. The inevitable and early invocation of discourses of identity, self-sacrifice, moral righteousness seemed instantly hyper-real yet far from frivolous. Ominously for those perceived as enemies by the United States, its vengefulness was characterised by an unsubtle mix of innocence wronged and a gunfighter nation seeking dead or alive justice. Arguably, the attacks on New York and Washington represent significant steps in the re-imagining of innocence lost in revolution, civil war, slavery, murderous campaigns against indigenous peoples, and in Vietnam. While innocence lost cannot be reclaimed, nationalist discourse often attempts to do just this by effacing the violence of nation-making and emphasizing glorious sentiments and deeds in the Sisyphean project of establishing the uniqueness and (moral) purity of nations.

It is the relationship between moral innocence and the capacity for self-sacrifice in its protection that is of interest to us in our analysis of the Americas depicted by Martin Sheen in that brief moment when his two most significant roles, the assassin, Captain Benjamin Willard, in ANR and President Josiah Bartlet in The West Wing, existed simultaneously in everyday popular cultural awareness. The complexities of this relationship should not be underestimated. Citing Gore Vidal, Mark Lacy argues that the twin desires of the United States to dominate global affairs and yet to be seen as completely innocent leads to distortions of history and the forgetting of its lessons. Moreover, it is a matter of some irony that the issue of sacrifice has become so central to the US Presidential campaign underway as we conclude final revisions on this article. That is, from the vantage point of September 2004, it appears that Democratic candidate John Kerry’s Vietnam War record has successfully been used to attack his credibility by an incumbent President who, it is clear, used family connections to avoid military service of almost any kind, let alone a tour of duty in Vietnam. To this end, George W. Bush’s arriving on the US aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln (arguably a president with a significant understanding of sacrifice in defence of principle) by fighter plane
and dressed as an airman to announce the end of major combat operations in Iraq in May 2003 suggests a simulacrum of self-sacrifice. It is also indicative of the way in which sacrifice remains contested in contemporary American electoral discourses and points to the relevance of analyzing its representation in popular culture. As Lacy argues, cinema and, we propose, popular culture more generally, is important in the active forgetting and active production of history. Moreover, representations of the two ‘crews’ that surround Sheen in ANR and The West Wing tells us much about issues of gender, race and class in American politics. On the surface there seems little to connect the men who accompany Willard up river in ANR with those who support Bartlet’s journey through the American presidency in The West Wing. However, despite the obvious differences between the seemingly impoverished grunts on Willard’s mission and the powerful, educated and wealthy men of Bartlet’s inner circle in The West Wing, there are enduring themes in the ways that gender, class and race are represented.

In providing this reading, we seek to add to the growing scholarship on popular culture and (international) politics. While neither would seem to be a particularly convincing representation of their particular realities, ANR and The West Wing have, respectively, profoundly influenced popular understanding of the Vietnam War and the workings of the presidency. For example, with a viewing audience of more than 18 million viewers per week, The West Wing reaches more Americans than any regularly scheduled news broadcast. On the one hand, as former Clinton press secretary and consultant to The West Wing Dee Dee Myers argues: ‘Pop culture is a pretty good barometer of what resonates with the people… When you tune into Jay Leno and hear a joke about Clinton getting a haircut on the tarmac, you know that isn’t good.’ But on the other hand, the popularity of The West Wing is in part based on admiration for the saccharine morality of the Democrat Bartlet and a sentimental desire to negate the odious aspects of the Clinton presidency. Moreover, there has long been an understanding between Hollywood and the US government (and its various agencies) about Hollywood’s capacity to manufacture support for US war efforts. Indeed, in the wake of September 11, George Bush’s senior aide, Karl Rove, met with Hollywood’s top brass to enlist its help in prosecuting the war in Afghanistan. In a more general sense, the electronic media, especially television, introduces another layer of experience for the subject that complicates the possibility of ‘truth’. Electronic mediation and repetition of particular images destroy the relationship between sign and referent leading to a condition of hyper-reality in which images take on a distinct existence and meaning. On this view, ANR and The West Wing provide examples of the way that mediated communication draws upon and transcends particular realities. For example, Members of Congress test policy ideas through The West Wing’s scriptwriters guaranteeing both their airing and ‘intelligent mulling…more perhaps than [they] might be assured in the real world.’ Therefore the underlying assumption of this article is that popular culture
matters and provides the basis of what many people believe about the world in which they live.

‘The Horror, The Horror...’

Conventional wisdom has it that the war in Vietnam marked an end to American innocence and forever changed US attitudes to international conflict. While this simple approach overlooks the possibility that the loss of innocence is a recurrent feature of US politics and identity discourse, it is a useful reminder that forgetting or externalizing responsibility for past violence is integral to the making of national identity. In other words, innocence can only be lost once but the active forgetting of its loss creates the conditions for its being lost over and again. This repetitious loss of innocence has left its marks on the US polity. For example, some argue that one consequence of the so-called Vietnam Syndrome is reluctance on the part of the US to use military force. However, even prior to large-scale offensives against Afghanistan and Iraq, the US proved itself willing and able to perpetrate violence against other countries. The Syndrome is perhaps more accurately associated with an unwillingness to suffer casualties — violence is fine, but not American body bags. The supposed corollary of the Syndrome is rapid technological development in military affairs enabling the US to wage war with minimal casualties although films as different as First Blood and Black Hawk Down seem to suggest determined human beings can triumph over technology. A willingness to deploy military force necessarily implies at least the possibility of casualties even in the asymmetrical conflicts that characterise recent American military operations, so consideration of the limits of the United States incapacity to act and what it is and is not willing and able to sacrifice are important.

It seems possible to locate the precise moment of the death of American innocence and the birth of the Vietnam Syndrome in ANR. Colonel Walter E. Kurtz (Marlon Brando) deranged and waging a private war using Cambodian-based Montagnard tribesmen recites the eulogy for the young United States towards the end of the film, explaining to Willard why it cannot win the war.

We went into a camp to inoculate the children. We left the camp after we had inoculated the children for polio, and this old man came running after us and he was crying ... We went back there and they had come and hacked off every inoculated arm. There they were in a pile ... a pile of little arms. And I remember I cried. I wept like some grandmother. I wanted to tear my teeth out. I didn't know what I wanted to do. And I want to
remember it. I never want to forget it. I never want to forget. And then I realised ... like I was shot. Like I was shot with a diamond. A diamond bullet right through my forehead. And I thought my God, the genius of that. The genius. The will to do that. Perfect, genuine, complete, crystalline, pure. And then I realised they were stronger than we. These men who fought with their hearts, who had families, who had children, who were filled with love, but they had the strength to do that. If I had 10 divisions of those men our troubles here would be over very quickly.

In Kurtz’s view, the purity of intention animating violence is all-important. The US’s problems stem not from an unwillingness to employ violence, rather, the US has lost its moral compass rendering its violence ineffective and a measure of its lassitude and corruption: it is unwilling and unable to make the kinds of sacrifices that are necessary to succeed.

We suggest that Kurtz and Willard in ANR provide an important gloss on the Vietnam Syndrome. The issue is not that the United States is unable to kill, main or otherwise perpetrate violence. It is clear that the United States, in Vietnam and afterwards, was more than willing and able to perpetrate violence. Rather, it is the sacrifice of the self, particularly the moral self that is missing in the United States. Kurtz recognises the need to act in ways that the US military does not and cannot permit; he takes it upon himself to do what his country cannot do, and it costs him himself. Willard, sent by the US military to kill Kurtz, comes not only to understand Kurtz’s choice and its costs, but also capable of the same sacrifice. His voyage up the Nung River leads to his own moment of choice, in which he must sacrifice himself to kill Kurtz. Willard recognises that he cannot murder Kurtz and remain within the US military, even though it was that military that sent him to do the job: ‘They are going to make me a full major for this, and I’m not even in their fucking army anymore.’ Willard’s removal of himself from the army is more than simply a decision to leave; it is the sacrifice of himself just as it was before him for Kurtz. At the very beginning of the film, Willard exposes how completely his self is merged with the military: ‘I took the mission ... what the hell else was I going to do?’ The moment of sacrifice is, therefore, a moment poignant with Willard’s own self-awareness and his recognition of the (institutional) self-delusion of the US army, earlier confirmed by a young Colonel (Harrison Ford) informing Willard that the mission to assassinate Kurtz does not exist nor will it ever exist.

Kurtz and Willard mark the boundary of the (im)possible for the United States because they are willing to sacrifice their moral selves to what they think/know needs to be done. The self-sacrifice of Kurtz and Willard occur outside the United States because the latter is unable to confront itself in acts of murder, which are, of course, inconsistent
with the self-delusion that the US is an indivisible and honourable force for good. The Vietnam Syndrome is now supposedly expunged, but if the Syndrome rests in the incapacity to sacrifice the moral self to what is necessary for action, it is an open question whether it has been overcome. Certainly, the United States is willing to act internationally, but as has been remarked, not at the cost of large numbers of American lives. Does the aversion to self-sacrifice run deeper than this, however?

Seen as a profound hesitation in the capacity to lose the moral self of the United States, the Vietnam Syndrome has recently played itself out in a very public discussion of the legacy of the war. In April of 2001, the New York Times reported that Senator Bob Kerrey had committed war crimes while in charge of a small group of Navy Seals in Vietnam. While he denied his culpability for war crimes, he did admit to killing civilians with the consequence that, ‘...in the senator’s own words: “I went out on a mission and, after it was over, I was so ashamed I wanted to die.”’ Not surprisingly, when this story broke the news media turned, among others, to Kerrey’s colleague in the US Senate, Senator John McCain, a man who had spent years in a Vietnamese POW camp, and who had, the year before, run unsuccessfully for the Presidency. In his defence of Kerrey, who he argued was a war hero, not a criminal, McCain made it clear that he, at least, had come through his own voyage up a Vietnamese river to a hellish camp with his capacity for the sacrifice of the moral self very much intact:

McCain argues that Vietnam was the kind of war that required its participants to hate the enemy, and he unabashedly makes a combat virtue out of hate. In his words: ‘I hated my enemies even before they held me captive because hate sustained me in my devotion to their complete destruction and helped me overcome the virtuous human impulse to recoil in disgust from what had to be done by my hand.’

For his part, Martin Sheen in his incarnation as President Jeb Bartlet must also grapple with the relationship between identity and action and cannot step outside ‘this man’s army’ as Willard did. The question of moral sacrifice is confronted directly in an episode entitled ‘A Proportional Response’ from early in the first season (aired 6 October 1999). In this episode, Bartlet must make his first decision as Commander-in-Chief, and in doing so confronts directly the limits of the possible in the capacity of the United States for self-sacrifice. When an American aeroplane is shot down in the Middle East and American lives are lost, it is clear to the President and his staff that the United States must respond. The military sets out the options for the President, a series of ‘proportional responses’ of the kind with which we are familiar: taking out an airport or a military base. Bartlet rages that it is not sufficient and that for the crime of killing Americans (including his personal doctor who had a young wife and child), the full
weight of the United States tremendous power should be visited on the perpetrators. What was needed, he exclaims, is a disproportionate response: the use of extravagant violence to make a point.

At Bartlet’s direction, the Pentagon draws up a list of possible targets whose destruction would inflict far higher costs. The problem, of course, is that such a large-scale response would cause massive ‘collateral damage’, hundreds of civilian deaths. Here then is the moment at which the contemporary United States must face its capacity to sacrifice its moral self, to will itself to the kind of murderous actions undertaken by Kurtz and Willard in ANR. However, when faced with the need to make this sacrifice of the moral self of the United States, Bartlet hesitates and ultimately refuses. He searches for justification, asking why it is that the United States makes a proportionate response, must always make a proportionate response. It is Leo McGarry (John Spencer), his Chief of Staff, who answers him: ‘because that is what we do’. He could as easily have said: because that is who we are. The identity of the United States is intimately tied with these kinds of responses, imposing limits on the possibilities of action because of who the United States is. In The West Wing, therefore, Sheen’s actions are again influenced by the limits of the American (im)possible.

The ‘we’ of The West Wing remains the ‘we’ of the self-limited United States unable to do what was necessary to win the war in Vietnam. Nonetheless, the limits of this moral self still allow for terrifying violence directed against others. The Pentagon and the White House decide what violence is permissible – how much violence is ‘proportionate’ – and in this respect the US’s understanding of itself as an innocent power is delusional. Thankfully, the US did not bring the full weight of its power to bear in Vietnam, or more recently in Afghanistan, given that the nuclear option was canvassed by more extreme elements among the US citizenry in both cases. The severity of even a limited response, however, for those on the receiving end was dramatically demonstrated in 2003’s invasion of Iraq. Here a US force, deliberately kept smaller than some analysts demanded, but pointedly involving US ground-forces from the outset, wreaked heavy destruction on Iraq and Iraqis.

The loss in Vietnam, which occurred in a way that called into question the capacity for sacrifice, also called into question American masculinity, in part because military violence in particular has long been intimately connected with the production of masculinity. For example, Kurtz’s transformation from ‘a tough motherfucker’ that completed gruelling Green Berets training aged 38 to obesity suggest an intimate link between an America unable to sacrifice its moral self and an America grown flabby and corrupt in the comforts of its continental isolation. Recovering from Vietnam, therefore, has entailed a reconstitution of American masculinity much of which has
occurred in popular culture.\textsuperscript{23} Arguably, the murder of ANR’s Kurtz contributes to the end of the angst-ridden masculinity of the counter-culture era and foreshadows the reinvention of Hollywood defined masculinity in the Reagan era. The contrast between Brando’s Kurtz and another Vietnam veteran turned ‘irregular’, Sylvester Stallone’s John Rambo, could not be starker.\textsuperscript{24} To explore questions of American masculinity, we now turn to a more detailed examination of the people around Sheen on the Nung River and in The West Wing.

**Men, Blacks and Servants in America**

Linda Boose\textsuperscript{25} observes that American men of the Vietnam generation squandered an opportunity to define their masculinity away from the battlefield. Had they done so, they would have been the first generation of 20th century men who had proven themselves around the home, rather than far from it. Many followed willingly in the footsteps of their grandfathers, fathers and uncles who had served in the American civil war, two world wars and Korea. But others were conscripted to fight in Vietnam, greatly sharpening American public unease about the justice and morality of the war in Vietnam. Moreover, the war in Vietnam raised questions about American masculinity in part reflected in films like *ANR* and *Platoon* that showed the destructive effects of extraordinary violence on ordinary men. Whether remembered as wimps or baby-killers, Vietnam veterans seen as having brought shame upon themselves and their nation, were treated scornfully by supporters and opponents of the war alike although narratives of vilification underwent revision in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War.\textsuperscript{26}

In the Reagan era, Hollywood’s struggle to reconstitute masculinity had particular effects in cinematic representations of the male body with a simple, muscular, no-nonsense, white masculinity increasingly common.\textsuperscript{27} Through Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, and Bruce Willis, among others, heroic figures were created to reaffirm a traditional if infantile version of masculinity and to liberate it from Vietnam. These muscular ‘hard bodies’ resort to physical aggression and intimidation in their engagement with others and problems in their cinematic worlds.\textsuperscript{28} One, Stallone, even returned to Vietnam to rewrite the ending: ‘Do we get to win it this time?’\textsuperscript{29} Another, Schwarzenegger has taken at least the language of his ‘tough guy’ persona from screen to electoral politics, not hesitating to imply that the unflinching characteristics with which he is associated animate his search for solutions to political problems and impasses.\textsuperscript{30} For now, he enjoys significant support among sections of the Republican Party more for what he represents than what he has thus far achieved. The new hard men of the 1980s literally and figuratively filled the screens of the 1980s, the number of roles for women falling sharply.\textsuperscript{31} Interestingly, films that construed themselves as anti-war tended to be peopled with smaller men such as Michael J Fox, Tom Cruise, Chris
If the Vietnam generation asked provocative and unanswerable questions about modern American masculinity, it was Stallone and Schwarzenegger, corporeal metaphors for a beefed up American foreign policy promoted by Reagan and the Republican right that provided the answers. Indeed, when uniformed veterans protested outside a Boston opening of Rambo in the mid-1980s: ‘According to the teenagers screaming at the vets to go home, it was Sylvester Stallone – a real man – who was also a “real veteran.”’

The crew of the small river patrol boat in \textit{ANR}, Chef Hicks (Frederic Forest), Lance B. Johnson (Sam Bottoms), both white, Mr Clean (Laurence Fishburne) and Chief Phillips (Albert Hall), both black, are the kind of men and veterans that so upset the Boston teenagers. In individual ways they are cast as victims of the US military, rather than the conflict itself. All of them would willingly go home, but, as Willard observes: ‘Trouble is, I’ve been back there, and I knew it just didn’t exist anymore.’ This suggests the psychological dissonance each of the crew experience is fed by their at least partial awareness that the US is in the midst of a profound identity crisis and unsure about its feelings and obligations to its soldiers. None of the crew, with the possible exception of Chief, the boat’s captain, is overtly muscular. Rather each has the lean body of youth, albeit worked over by the US military’s training programs. Of Clean, Chef and Lance, none has interest in, or aptitude for, the conflict in which they find themselves. Only Lance, a champion surfer from southern California, and Sheen’s Willard, survive the arduous journey up river. But Lance’s survival is entirely fortuitous. Moreover, Lance’s disengaged recklessness contributes to the deaths of Clean and Chief. Lance smokes dope, skis behind the boat as it travels up river, murders Vietnamese civilians aboard a river boat in a moment of panic (also involving Clean), takes LSD and, as the film reaches its murderous climax, is seen to be on the brink of ‘going native’ and losing touch with his militarised ‘self’. Lance could easily have met the random deaths of Clean and Chief, but his ability to avoid lethal fire might be Coppola’s way of reminding the audience about the disproportionately high numbers of blacks who were at the front lines of conflict in Vietnam. Arguably, Lance’s narcissistic selfishness is presented as evidence of the moral failings of 1960s youth culture, of which, as a surfer, he is part. The absence of conscience – his main attachment throughout the film is to a puppy ‘orphaned’ by his murder of its Vietnamese owner – suggests alienation, not only from his duties as a soldier, but also himself.

Paradoxically, Lance is valorised by Lt. Col. Bill Kilgore (Robert Duvall) whose uncompromising prosecution of the war with Air Mobile is intertwined with his endless search for good surfing beaches. Kilgore, seemingly respected by his men, displays no obvious reverence for the institutions of the military, ignoring his responsibility to cater to the needs of Willard’s mission in favour of discussing surfing with Lance. Kilgore’s
matter of fact, unyielding toughness is in stark contrast to Lance’s wide-eyed naiveté and self-preservation instincts yet both are curiously detached from a broader view of the war, the military itself and US foreign policy goals. Thus the ‘authority figure’ Kilgore, who routinely uses racist epithets and seems addicted to the pleasures of war, the second most senior officer we encounter in the field after the deranged Col. Kurtz, gives succour to the ill-disciplined narcissist Lance. Willard’s ambivalent admiration for both Kilgore and Kurtz highlights his recognition of the unconventional means necessary to successfully prosecute the conflict and his detestation of the ersatz morality of the military hierarchy in whose employ he is. All three clearly understand that the US’s struggle with the idea of its continuing innocence is delusional. Yet all three have created individual moral realms that sufficiently distance themselves from those that they must kill (and have killed) and that enable them to do so.35

Chef is different to Lance and Kilgore, ‘wrapped too tightly for Vietnam’ observes Willard, ‘probably wrapped too tightly for New Orleans’ he adds (New Orleans being Chef’s home). Of the five men making their way into the Cambodian heart of darkness, it is Chef who exists on the brink of psychological disintegration. His fear and loathing are rarely far below the surface of his brittle exterior and we learn of his training as a saucier: both occupation and character serve to feminise Chef. In a moment of temporary unravelling Chef shrieks ‘I want no part of it, you can kiss my ass’ indicating his awareness of the moral abyss the war has become. Yet for his psychological stress and palpable fear, it is Chef that is the best of the crew. Unlike Lance and Clean, Chef does not engage in undisciplined acts of violence against Vietnamese civilians. Perhaps ironically, Chef dies at the behest of Kurtz, both of whom are gravely affected by the pressures and moral contradictions of the war in Vietnam. In having him murdered, Kurtz takes the life of the one-crew member who has not directly contributed to ‘the horror’ as Kurtz describes it at his own moment of death.

It is tempting to link the survival of Lance and Kilgore to their amorality and ability to do what it takes (to survive). Neither is visibly affected by the suffering of the Vietnamese nor concerned by the extraordinary, technologically sophisticated violence that they use. Indeed, Kilgore’s lament that ‘some day this war’s gonna end’ indicates he is singularly untroubled by moral issues. Kurtz and Chef, however, not only see the ineptitude and hypocrisy of the US war effort, but also personally suffer the consequences of the US’s moral agonizing and the disintegration of its political will. Willard, Lance and Kilgore, alienated and seemingly motivated by self-interest, survive. Their individualism appears at odds with what is required for the US military to succeed in Vietnam and yet is oddly consistent with the broader ethos of American capitalism. In transcending the political failings of US policy in Vietnam and ‘doing what is necessary’, they embody its immorality.
It is Chef and Lance that Schwarzenegger and Stallone are produced to overcome. These are men of firm, directed, unquestioning action, certain of their rightness and wrapped in the US flag of Reagan era muscularity in foreign policy. Yet, by the late 1990s, their time had passed. Their successors, Josh Lyman (Bradley Whitford) and Sam Seaborn (Rob Lowe) are found in the White House of Jeb Bartlet. These are tertiary educated men whose masculinity is defined by sharp intelligence, lap-tops not guns and whose bodies bear no signs of acquaintance with gymnasia or weight-rooms. They are as self-assured, articulate, and morally and socially aware as their Vietnam forebears Chef and Lance, were not. They supposedly embody the rebirth of a Democratic America and its dreams of justice, equality and fairness. However, in our view, Bartlet’s White House suggests that there has been a systematic forgetting in the US since Sheen travelled up river to murder Kurtz, so that the United States of The West Wing is not the mature self, having integrated its loss of innocence, but rather an immature self who, in the decades since Vietnam, expunged its memory to (re)present itself as innocent.

The deaths of Clean and Chief Phillips in ANR leaves the story in white hands and blinds the surviving whites to the racist logic of Kurtz having a large Montagnard community under his spell. Bartlet’s White House is likewise notable for the absence of blacks in the inner circle, except of course, Bartlet’s ‘body man’, Charlie Young (Dulé Hill), whose role is to serve, to keep control over the domestic business of the White House, but not to think. Charlie is the liberal black ideal type. He is street savvy, understands the sense of belonging that inner city blacks get from gang membership and is ambitious. The little we know of his family suggests that they are model minority in so far as they have engaged in a good-natured struggle for self-improvement. Charlie is fatherless. We know this because when Charlie’s mother, a police officer, suffers a premature violent death ‘in the line of duty’ Charlie is orphaned. The absence of a father and the violent death of his mother also make Charlie a ‘typical’ black. Moreover, at the beginning of the series, he is not at college, but working because he is raising his younger sister.

Charlie is The West Wing’s attempt to show how far race relations have improved in the US since Clean’s own premature and violent death in the line of duty but it is largely a liberal illusion. One of the reasons Charlie gets the job as Bartlet’s body man is because of a sense of liberal noblesse oblige among the white staffers (Charlie originally applied for a job as a messenger and is insistent that that is what he is qualified and able to do when pressed by Josh and Sam to take on the job as the President’s body man). Charlie fulfils the ethnic fantasies of many liberals: a young, self-possessed, sober, drug free black man taking charge of his battered family and all the while bettering himself. This
is the kind of black man that liberals like Josh and Sam know they can whiten and integrate into their world. As Herman Gray argues: ‘African Americans are constructed as invisible and hence ordinary as long as they conform. They become “black” and thus dangerous when they transgress.’ On this view, Charlie proves to white Americans that their suspicions about blacks and black families were correct all along. That is, Charlie is living evidence that the experience of disadvantage does not have to determine one’s life. Individual will and responsibility for one’s self and one’s family are the keys to success and demonstrate that while all may not start off in ideal circumstances, all are afforded equal opportunity if they are willing to grasp it. Thus, The West Wing appears to endorse arguments long common in American society. For example:

In March 1965, Lyndon Johnson’s assistant secretary of Labor, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, published a Report on the Black Family which laid much of the blame for black poverty on the ‘tangle of pathology’ of the black family. He admonished African Americans to rehabilitate their dysfunctional families in order to achieve economic and social assimilation.

Charlie represents the ideal black type envisaged in Moynihan’s report. Charlie might look black and occasionally even speak as a black (never like a black), but to all intents and purposes, his presence in the White House serves as constant confirmation to whites that ultimately, there are few insurmountable barriers to success. Charlie’s appointment to the inner-circle allows those with real political power to balance their commitments to the ethnic, class and gender disadvantaged with an equal belief in individual self-responsibility. Moreover, Charlie’s easy manner with and daily proximity to the President obscure the fact that he is a junior $600 per week employee of the White House.

If Charlie provides an example of a young black man earning a salary below the Washington average Sam and Josh represent the opportunities of post-Vietnam masculinity for white men. They embody much that is good about America, especially in their discourses of care for the American self (interestingly at odds with Rob Lowe’s earlier dissipated lifestyle). In their vitality, articulateness and boyishness they prove what care of the self can deliver, to individuals and to the nation. They see themselves as progressives and locked in perpetual struggle with their Republican nemeses. They profess care for the environment, for education, for the poor, for abortion rights, believe in redistribution of wealth through just taxation, gay rights, gun control, support the elevation of minorities to key posts, and express antipathy to the tobacco industry. Indeed, they provide relief from the disappointments of centre-left politics in real life!
Their banter is learned, their humour sharp, their manner pompous. Both strut, show off and are profoundly conscious of their power. As representations of liberalism perfected in the US, they are reasonably open-minded and routinely demonstrate a capacity to learn from errors and to be persuaded by sound arguments. Yet despite their education and rapier-like intelligence, they manifest fairly predictable white, male, middle class, heterosexual prejudices and are often forced to eat various kinds of (minority) humble pie.

Sam and Josh more than any other members of the cast are the living embodiment of America’s desire to believe in its innocence. While the nation may have sacrificed 58,000 mostly ordinary young men in Vietnam, in Sam and Josh we see the fruits of the nation’s care for young men of high aspiration and intelligence. They are the proof that America can do right by its young people and has learned from the needless sacrifice of men like Chef, Clean and Chief Phillips. Their national characters are complex though. They see themselves and are represented as good men, willing to fight for the things that they hold to be important. The manner in which they achieve their goals seemingly takes us a long way from the White House’s of Nixon and Reagan with their Watergate and Iran-Contra scandals. They also remove us from the unsavoury aspects of the Democratic White House of Bill Clinton.

But as the collective face of contemporary American masculine identity Sam and Josh conform to what Lynda Boose calls ‘the Boy eternal’. Here is an eternal innocence, a ‘boyishness’ that cannot take the crucial step to adulthood by turning and examining itself in a critical way. The United States as represented by two young insiders in the Bartlet administration confronts eternality in the way Nietzsche warned against:

What if a demon crept after you one day or night in your loneliest solitude and said to you: ‘This life, as you live it now and have lived it, you will have to live again and again, times without number; and there will be nothing new in it ... The eternal hour-glass of existence will be turned again and again — and you with it, you dust of dust!’ Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who thus spoke? Or have you experienced a tremendous moment in which you would have answered him: ‘You are a god and never did I hear anything more divine!’

Arguably, Sam and Josh embody the blindness of eternal American innocence to issues of race, class, sexuality and gender. Josh greatly benefits from the loving devotion of his aide, Donna Moss (Janel Moloney) but occasionally she is compelled to pull Josh into
line for his minor abuses of her. These take the form of sharp talking, forgetfulness, contradictory instructions, intolerance and other office politics misdemeanors. Consider, too, Josh’s realisation in negotiations with a gay Republican congressman who supports the Marriage Recognition Act (which will only recognise unions between men and women) that to be gay is not necessarily the defining characteristic of one’s life. As the congressman says to Josh, ‘My life doesn’t have to be about being a homosexual—it doesn’t have to be entirely about that.’ This is an epiphany for Josh who suddenly realises the narrowness of his thinking on gay issues. But, of course, being a good liberal, he learns and moves on.

Similarly, Sam’s Eliza Doolittle treatment of a call girl, Laurie (Lisa Edelstein), whom he falls for in the first season, betrays a similar insensitivity to otherness. While Laurie represents herself as making difficult but rational choices in her quest to put herself through law school, Sam takes upon itself to try and ‘save’ his lover from herself but ultimately fails as she refuses his overtures of financial assistance, choosing independence and control over her own destiny. Despite Sam’s best attempts to humiliate Laurie publicly, she rebuffs him and delivers him a painful lesson. Moreover, Sam’s professional loyalty to the White House Chief of Staff, Leo McGarry, leads him to accept Josh’s plan that they put the squeeze on Laurie for information about Republicans with whom she may have had sex.

Laurie is fair game in the mind of Josh and Sam because ultimately her relationship with Sam falls outside of liberal norms and so is stripped of legitimacy and privacy. The inability of Sam and Josh to accord the woman dignity and respect enables them to trample upon Laurie’s private life in the quest for political advantage over their Republican opponents. That is, when push comes to political shove, her subject position as a ‘hooker’ is rapidly exposed and becomes the site of mild zealotry on the part of Sam and Josh. Paradoxically, this occurs in an attempt to protect the dignity and privacy of the recovering alcoholic Leo McGarry who in turn strongly chastises the two younger men for pressuring Laurie and compels them to return to apologise to her because this is ‘not what we do’. Their ready willingness to disregard the public private distinction, often regarded as central to the liberal social contract, in the face of otherness is indicative of the limits of liberalism’s inclusiveness. While Charlie fulfills the ethnic ‘model minority’ stereotype of Sam and Josh and so ‘fits’ in Rawlsian terms, Laurie, the ‘whore’ does not and is pushed to the margins of liberal acceptability.

In neither of two significant scenes involving women in ANR are they seen to be in control of their circumstances. In one, Sheen’s boat happens across a dysfunctional medivac camp and he learns that two Playboy bunnies that had earlier entertained troops at a surreal and chaotic show at Hua Phat are trapped there. Caught in a
particularly unpleasant *cul de sac* of the war, the women are essentially sold into sexual service by their manager in return for the fuel that will enable them to leave the camp. The two women are in poor psychological states, but this does not prevent the crewmembers from falling upon them for episodes of quite fetishistic sex. Moreover, both the women are white and it is Chef and Lance who grasp the opportunity to have sex with them. Chief Phillips willingly bows out in a moment full of racial poignancy while Clean hovers alternately outside the helicopter and the hut in which the two white men are having sex but they ignore his pleas for inclusion. When one of the girls sees him through the window of the hut and cries out ‘Who’s that?’ Clean forewarns us of his death exclaiming ‘I’m next, ma’am’.

Women are incidental to the plot of *ANR* and are not visible in the context of the prosecution of the conflict. However Bartlet’s Press Secretary, C.J. Cregg (Allison Janney) is a woman (modeled on Clinton’s Dee Dee Myers) and plays an important role in the daily affairs of the White House. C.J is in regular face to face contact with the President and her opinion on key issues and decisions is often sought. As Press Secretary C.J articulates Bartlet administration policy for the media and public and filters and packages information for her male peers to enable them to protect the head of the household, the President. On this view, C.J is at the cusp of the public and private domains and is charged with securing the domestic space of the White House by neutralizing threatening issues before they reach the Oval Office. Nonetheless, the value of her job does not prevent her from being occasionally kept out of the loop by the central male characters, suggesting that she is excluded from the inner most workings of the administration. While Christina Lane takes a more positive view of the gender and race politics of *The West Wing* than we do, her reference to a scene in the episode ‘Let Bartlet be Bartlet’ in which campaign finance reform is at issue and which locates both C.J and Charlie as ‘essential reaction shots to the conversation’ (between Bartlet, Josh and Leo) is revealing. Lane notes that C.J and Charlie serve as visible reminders of the disenfranchised groups most affected by the problems of campaign finance in the US. In this respect, C.J’s (and Charlie’s) marginalisation as a citizen is in part replicated in the Oval Office itself.

Moreover, other women in *The West Wing* are cast in peripheral roles.

Sure, the show says, women have a place in the White House. But they serve the boys: they don’t initiate. The thinness of Kelly’s character further isolates C.J. as both the only major female character on the show, and the only woman within Bartlet’s kitchen cabinet. Her lack of female peers positions her as exceptional, an aberration from her sex, not its representative.
In other words, the women serve as protectors and nurturers of their men. This applies to Mrs. Landingham (Kathryn Joosten) – whose sometime matronly tone with the President reflects a relationship that dates back to Bartlet’s youth – Donna, with respect to Josh, and Margaret (NiCole Robinson), Leo’s secretary. Interestingly, it is the female characters that do not work in the immediate orbit of the men of the inner circle — Mandy Hampton (Moira Kelly), Amy Gardner (Mary-Louise Parker), Ainsley Hayes (Emily Procter), and Joey Lucas (Marlee Matlin) — that most ruffle and challenge them. Their appearances generally coincide with some kind of crisis or problem that the men cannot themselves resolve, suggesting perhaps that like black soldiers in Vietnam, there are far more women involved in the heat of political battle than meet the eye. Nonetheless, having fulfilled their designated task the powerful women of *The West Wing* are nudged off centre-stage.

Ainsley, as a brash young neo-conservative, simply refuses to accept that her career could be limited by her gender and candidly opposes the socially progressive programs advanced and defended by the younger men of the Bartlet White House. But one wonders whether characters like Ainsley and Joey indeed serve to undermine affirmative action politics. Like Charlie who is integrated into the White House because he is not politicised as a black, Ainsley and Californian Democrat Joey, both ambitious and attractive, have not let their gender, and in Lucas’s case a disability as well, get in the way of successful careers. The nagging problem for liberals such as Sam and Josh is the lack of evidence affirmative action programs have contributed to either of these political careers. Moreover, both women are accepted in and valuable to the White House precisely because they do not think like women, but like politicians. They make no demands on the part of women. Interestingly, both Sam (with Ainsley) and Josh (with Amy) have problems managing their relationships with powerful, independent women suggesting they may well struggle should their idealised world of gender equality actually take shape.

Amy Gardner does, however, make explicit demands on the part of women:

I spent a year and a half as issues director for NOW, two years as political director for Emily’s List, founder of the Democratic Women’s Forum, AA to Hope Schrader, and director of the Women’s Leadership Coalition…. I beat back five anti-choice judicial nominees, got the Violence Against Women Act re-authorized with a Republican majority and raised $22 million for House candidates.
On the surface, there is no question that Amy is ideologically closer to the Bartlet administration than she could ever be to a Republican government. Nonetheless, she is not in the administration’s pocket, at least not before she is co-opted to serve as the First Lady’s Chief of Staff, and continues to campaign vigorously on issues that she believes that the Bartlet White House neglects. It falls to Josh, who has a long-standing acquaintance with Amy, to attempt to neutralise problems that arise between ‘women’ and the administration. Josh despite his commitments to social justice is profoundly frustrated by what he sees as Amy’s thanklessness and inability to see the broader picture. Moreover, his primary argumentative tactic is to highlight how much worse life for women would be under the Republicans, thus avoiding the merits of Amy’s arguments. Even the romance which threatens to blossom is stymied by the political tensions that exist between them. Like Sam, Josh is unable to confront a powerful and independently minded woman on her own terms and clearly shows the (gendered) limits of his commitments to equality.

Conclusion: The Eternal Hourglass

The United States is supposed to have lost its innocence in the jungles of Vietnam. On this view, the bright shining light on the hill of Kennedy’s Camelot was extinguished by the war and the US turned in upon itself in an agonising appraisal of the violence and corruption it revealed to itself and the rest of the world. Yet, remarkably, the contemporary American self that emerges from The West Wing is no more reflexive, no less naive and self-deluding than the United States supposedly lost in Vietnam. Indeed, perhaps the most vivid symbol of American moral decay, Richard Nixon, wrote of the post-Cold War United States that:

American idealism – sometimes naïve, sometimes misguided, sometimes overzealous – has always been at the center of our foreign policy...This idealism has served as an indispensable foundation to sustain our commitment to the great moral causes of the twentieth century. It has enabled us to lead not on the basis of narrow and selfish interests but through the appeal of high ideals and common values.52

How did the United States regain its innocence?

The answer seems to us to be that the United States repeatedly proves itself capable of remarkable acts of forgetting. Notwithstanding the self-loathing that arose from its exploits in Vietnam, what never happened was the kind of reflexive examination necessary for transformation in the face of an innocence lost. Innocence is lost not with
the realisation that the world is an unpleasant place, but with the acknowledgement that one’s self or nation can contribute significantly to unpleasantness in that world. This is a lesson, at least by the time of *The West Wing*, the United States evidently has not learned, or more accurately has forgotten in the memory-washing Reagan era. While it was forgotten in and through films such as *Rambo*, the United States capacity for forgetting is perhaps best represented by a more recent and considerably lighter film. In *50 First Dates*, Lucy (Drew Barrymore) has been injured in an accident and in a way that means she forgets her day every night. So each morning she awakes, thinking it is her Father’s birthday – the day on which she had her accident. During the film she repeatedly ‘loses innocence’, by being shown the clipping of the accident and having the previous year(s) explained to her, but the next morning she remembers nothing of it.\(^{53}\)

The American capacity for forgetting is seen most clearly through the conscious expression of desire that is *The West Wing*. The vision is of the America that – liberals at least – would like to see: this is not a recognition of the state of the American self, but an expression of frustration that it is not as good as it could, and should be. We need think only of the mawkishly sentimentalised moments of American patriotism: the gang on the Brownstone steps sequentially intoning God Bless America, or in the Oval Office, serving at the pleasure of the President of the United States, or the token Republican proclaiming the naives of *The West Wing* ‘Patriots’. Nietzsche’s hourglass is rendered eternal in the United States through its seemingly endless capacity to forget its lost innocence.

Perhaps most poignantly, the continuing self-delusion of American innocence is seen in the special episode that precedes the third season. ‘Isaac and Ishmael’ (first broadcast 3 October 2001) confronts directly the questions asked in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on Washington and New York three weeks earlier. As the title suggests, Aaron Sorkin tells a story of age-old hatreds — Isaac and Ishmael are the mythic originators of the Jews and Muslims respectively. While the episode works hard to distinguish clearly between Muslims and the ‘extremists’ responsible for the terrorist violence, it barely turns its gaze on the contemporary United States’ place in the world. In this, of course, *The West Wing* is not alone, as the response to 9/11 has demonstrated American inability to consider the dark sides of its global practices. Nonetheless, the episode drew a huge viewing audience, some twenty-five million, perhaps indicative of the search for meaning and understanding in the weeks immediately after the attacks on New York and Washington. But if ‘Isaac and Ishmael’ is the high-water mark in terms of viewers, the episode was widely regarded as a critical failure, described, among other things, as pretentious and sermon-like. Arguably therefore, at the very height of its popularity, *The West Wing* contributed an important element to the collective sense of innocence.
wronged and misunderstands the zeitgeist of a post 9/11 America clamouring for vengeance. There seems little doubt that the politics of *The West Wing* are increasingly at odds with the US of the Bush administration.\(^5\)

The America that floats up the Nung River with Martin Sheen as he searches for Kurtz is an ugly, violently masculine self whose primary victims are the poor and/or dark-skinned. It is a self that cannot see the racist, gendered and class logic inherent in its violence: only the colour-blind eyes of Willard, Chef and Lance make it to Kurtz’s own violently racialised dystopia. Reading *The West Wing* in these same terms reveals that the American self of even liberal fantasy at the end of the 20\(^{th}\) Century remains wilfully blind to issues of race, gender and class and manifests itself in the boyishness innocence of Sam and Josh. It revels in the eternal turning of the hourglass, secure in the belief of its innocence and goodness, certain it is still that bright, shining light upon the hill that draws to its shores the poor and huddled masses of the world.

**Notes:**

1. Simon Philpott is Lecturer in International Politics in the School of Geography, Politics and Sociology at the University of Newcastle (UK). David Mutimer is Principal Research Fellow in the Centre of International Cooperation and Security, Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford (UK) and Associate Professor of Political Science, York University (Canada). An earlier version of this paper was presented to the YCISS Afternoon Seminar Series, 13 November 2001. The authors would like to thank the participants for their thoughtful discussion. We would also like to thank the three anonymous reviewers whose insightful remarks and suggestions have helped us clarify our arguments.


4. Ibid.


8. Ibid.


12. Ibid, p.121.


16. See, for example, Susan Jeffords, Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 1994) p.33. See K.J. Campbell, ‘Once burned, twice cautious: explaining the Weinberger-Powell doctrine’, Armed Forces & Society 24/3 (1998) pp. 357-75 for an account of the development of US military doctrine following the Vietnam War. Colin Gray (see C. Gray, ‘The RMA and intervention: A sceptical view’, Contemporary Security Policy 22/3 (2001) pp. 52-65.), for example, disputes the possibilities for the RMA to achieve is zero-casualty objectives, but does not contest the genealogical point. For alternative readings of the so-called revolutions in military affairs, see, inter alia, James Der Derian, Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press 2001) and A. Latham, ‘Warfare Transformed: A Braudelian Perspective on the Revolution in Military Affairs’, European Journal of International Relations 8/2 (2002) pp. 231-66. Interestingly, Marlon Brando’s Col. Walter Kurtz in ANR also recognises the limits of technology in attaining military superiority. In Kurtz’s dossier, Sheen reads: ‘Commitment and Counter-Insurgency, by Col. Walter E. Kurtz. As long as our officers and troops (sic) perform tours of duty limited to one year, they will remain dilettantes in war and tourists in Vietnam. As long as cold beer, hot food, rock and roll and all the other amenities remain the expected norm, our conduct of the war will gain only impotence. (In the document, but not read aloud - The wholesale and indiscriminate use of firepower will only increase the effectiveness of the enemy and strengthen their resolve to prove the superiority of an agrarian culture against the world’s greatest technocracy...The central tragedy of our effort in this conflict has been the confusion of a sophisticated technology with human commitment. Our bombs may in time destroy the geography, but they will never win the war...We need fewer men, and better; if they were committed, this war could be won with a fourth of our present force...’ (see www.filmsite.org/apoc3.htm).

17. It is generally supposed that the Vietnam Syndrome was systematically undermined during the Reagan Administration, and then comprehensively overcome in the 1991 Gulf War. For a contrary argument, which suggests that the Gulf War in fact reinforced the syndrome, see Campbell (note 16).


19. Ibid.


21. The destruction is untold precisely because of the unwillingness of the US to account for that destruction, and in particular to reckon the numbers of Iraqi dead. The independent tracking project, ‘Iraq Body Count’, estimated as of 29 July 2004 that between 13,086 and 15,149 Iraqi civilians have been killed in the war and occupation. (http://www.iraqbodycount.net/ (accessed 7 Oct. 2004).


24. Ibid, pp.31-35.


32. Ibid, p.76.

33. Ibid, p.81


35. Lacy (note 3) p.627.

36. Ibid.

37. There are blacks in senior positions in Bartlet’s White House but none on his immediate staff. Admiral Percy
Fitzwallace (John Amos) of the US Navy appears from time to time to advise Bartlet and is acutely conscious of his achievements as a black man. In one instance he reels of a list of accomplishments (in the context of his ethnicity) and invites those listening to ‘beat that with a stick’. Nancy McNally (Anna Deavere Smith) is National Security Adviser to Bartlet. She is uncompromisingly tough suggesting that an ambitious black woman cannot afford herself the luxury of Sam’s and Josh’s liberal moral angst. Both are listed as secondary characters at http://westwing.bewarne.com/characters/secondary.html


41. According to Washington Trends, the average salary for 2001 was $37864, or about $730 per week. See http://www.ofm.wa.gov/trends/htm/fig102.htm (accessed Aug. 19 2003).


45. Kilday (note 7).


47. Lane (note 43) p.34.

48. These include, the President’s secretary, Mrs. (Delores) Landingham (Kathryn Joosten) (who dies), the vivaciously intelligent young Republican, Ainsley Hayes (Emily Procter), recruited by the administration to give them a head up on the thinking of the opposition (and who is accommodated in a basement office complete with water pipes and distant from the ‘real’ debates upstairs), Donna Moss, whose ‘commonsense’ marks her as a far more useful adviser on political pragmatics than Josh gives her credit, first season political strategist Mandy Hampton (Moira Kelly), whose grating advice and in your face manner alienate the male team, the deaf and politically astute Joey Lucas (Marlee Matlin) who acts as a political strategist and pollster for the Bartlet Democrats, Amy Gardner (Mary-Louise Parker) Director of the Women’s Leadership Coalition and latterly Chief of Staff to the First Lady, and Margaret (NiCole Robinson), the enigmatic secretary to Leo McGarry.


50. In the episode ‘17 People’ Ainsley declares: ‘A new amendment we vote on declaring that I am equal under the law to a man? I’m mortified to discover there's reason to believe I wasn't before. I'm a citizen of this country. I'm not a special subset in need of your protection. I do not have to have my rights handed down to me by a bunch of old white men. The same Article 14 that protects you protects me.’


53. 50 First Dates is a more interesting representation of American forgetting than the rather better, and better known, film Memento. In the latter, Leonard (Guy Pearce) has suffered a similar brain injury to Lucy’s, but the process of forgetting is much faster, and so he can forget everything in the time it takes for another character to leave a room and re-enter. Lucy retains her short term memories for the day, and so can reflect on her past, only to have the reflection wiped away by sleep.

54. See Ezell (note 9) pp.172-173.