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Unity in Polarity: Various Aspects of Bartlet's Persona in The West Wing

The West Wing portrays a vivid picture of the routine life of an American President through fictional characters and settings. "On the Day Before" (10/31/01) offers a variety of situations that depict the complexity, polarity and vitality of the president's role and responsibility. The Presidency, though, is a gigantic task involving a situation where the President has to oscillate among a number of diverse roles, yet it is not something outside the compass of human potential. The roles like chief executive, commander-in-chief, chief of state, chief of party, and chief legislator have to be played by a single individual. Each role puts the President into a different atmosphere and a different set of references. Each role demands a different personal façade to handle the specific situations related to that role. The President, however, assumes a different personality in a chameleonic manner in order to fulfill the different set of requirements needed for a specific role; his senior staff members too have to do the same.

Corwin (1957), while discussing various roles played by the President, asserts that the roles of chief executive, chief legislator, command-in-chief, and chief diplomat are expected from the President under the constitution. President Bartlet, together with his senior staff members Toby, Sam, Leo, and CJ, faces varied and complex situations in the episode "On the Day Before." (10/31/01). The issues like vetoing of the "death tax" bill and the suicide bombing in Israel, require different types of reaction. The issue concerning the elimination of the estate tax requires the President to assume the role of Chief Executive and Chief Legislator. In this role Bartlet goes through a set process which involves:

1. Gathering primary information

2. Taking detailed advice from the senior staffers

3. Making the final (executive) decision.

Josh, Toby and members of the campaign team advise Bartlet that he should veto the bill. Bartlet, after combining his thoughts with that of his advisors, concludes that vetoing is the only option. Bartlet shows his resolve by signing the veto despite the threat that House of Representatives may override it. Josh warns the President: “ Sir, if the House successfully overrides the veto, we’re going to look weak.” Bartlet’s reply was realistic and honest: “ If the House successfully overrides the veto, we are weak.” (twiztv. com).

The President faces another tough situation in the episode when he comes to know that two American students have been killed in a suicide bombing in Israel. This situation requires the President to assume the role of Commander-in-Chief and Chief Diplomat. This type of situation require immediate reaction and quick decision-making ability. Bartolt, therefore, goes for a shorter and quicker route of decision making. He immediately calls a meeting in the situation room. Military advisors of Army, Navy and Air Force together with Nancy, the top military advisor, attend the meeting. Bartolt gathers the primary information and without taking any detailed advice, simply reaches to the final decision. His decision to call the Palestinian leader in order to ask him to handover the responsible people seems apt and in time.

His role as a chief of state or head of the people, however, is highlighted when, in the end of the episode, he discusses the issue concerning condolences to the parents of the two boys who were killed in the suicide attack with Toby, CJ, and Josh. The human and spiritual side of his character

is also revealed in that discussion when he says, “ On Yom Kippur, you ask forgiveness for sins against God. But on the day before, you ask forgiveness for sins against people.” (twiztv. com).

To conclude, I would say that the institution of Presidency is quite challenging since it requires the President to play a variety of roles and in each of these roles the President has to assume a different persona.

However, in “ On the Day Before”, President Bartlot and his senior staff members seem to have the right potential of fulfilling the requirements of their multiple roles. The polarity of the nature of their job is overcome by their and mental and professional unity which ultimately makes the Presidency an efficient institution.

#### References

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