

The *West Wing*'s "Isaac and Ishmael" as a Captivity Narrative and American Jeremiad:

A Call for Acknowledgement of America's Historically Rooted Ideology

Thomas J. Gillan

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Kathleen Hohenleitner

Following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Aaron Sorkin and NBC responded with a stand-alone episode of *The West Wing* entitled "Isaac and Ishmael." The episode centers on a group of high-school students from Presidential Classroom and, separately, an Arab-American man, Raqim Ali (Ajay Naidu), who works at the White House, being interrogated for having been suspected of plotting a terrorist attack. Meanwhile, the White House goes on crash, which, as Josh Lyman (Bradley Whitford), the president's deputy chief of staff, explains "means there's been some kind of security breach and no one's allowed in or out of the building" ("Isaac"). During this crash the students congregate in the White House mess room where members of the staff come by to talk to them. By the end of the episode, the Secret Service finds Ali innocent.

This essay argues that "Isaac and Ishmael" constitutes a contemporary example of both the American jeremiad and the American captivity genre with captivity operating on several levels, all of which reinforce the myths, ideals, and ideology of American dominant culture during a time of crisis: in this instance, the period immediately following the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent "War on Terrorism." The qualities present in "Isaac and Ishmael" that are characteristic of captivity narratives and jeremiads are physical and

psychological captivity, the need to establish the author's credibility, prescribed and sometimes transgressed gender roles that promote heterosexuality and a stable family as "normal," a sense of declension or crisis and the need to return to normalcy, and a black-and-white mentality. All of these are present in *The West Wing*'s "Isaac and Ishmael," and all can be found in standard pieces of the captivity genre.

American ideology is present throughout many captivity narratives written in colonial America and the Early Republic. Standard captivity narratives include those of Mary Rowlandson and Mary Jemison. Generally following a plot that begins with violence often between two different cultures, the narrative then moves to removal from one's usual surroundings to those of the other culture. From there, the captive usually experiences some type of acculturation. By the end of the narrative, the other culture either adopts the captive, as was the case for Mary Jemison, or the captive is redeemed and returned to her own culture through negotiations, as was the case for Mary Rowlandson. In all of the narratives, the captives symbolize representatives of their culture in distress. This distress or anxiety lies at the heart of the American jeremiad.

Some argue that the captivity narrative is unique to American literature. The jeremiad, while not unique to

America, took on particularly unique forms in the New World. Typically confined to a type of sermon, the jeremiad includes, according to Perry Miller, “fast-day and election sermons” with one standard theme: that “New England is steadily declining from the high purity of the founders” (23). Sacvan Bercovitch elucidates Miller’s definition more fully in his *American Jeremiad*, writing, “The American jeremiad was a ritual designed to join social criticism to spiritual renewal, public to private identity, the shifting ‘signs of the times’ to certain traditional metaphors, themes, and symbols” (xi). Bercovitch hints at the relationship between captivity narratives and the jeremiad, saying, “captivity narratives . . . transform what elsewhere would be considered evidence of private regeneration into a testimonial for the colonial cause” as evidenced in Mary Rowlandson’s captivity narrative (Puritan 117). Increase Mather’s preface to Rowlandson’s narrative sets out with the clear purpose of establishing Rowlandson as a type to which the community should aspire (Rowlandson 63-68).

Toward the beginning of the show the students are ushered into the White House mess. While this “brightly lit . . . classroom, a racially and gender-plural space” imposes a controlled, sterile, and hospital-like environment, it also, as we will see later, invokes “the home and the family” (Spigel 134). In this controlled environment surrounded by experts, a female student asks a question characteristic of the infantile citizen, “So, why is everybody trying to kill us?” Josh responds, “It’s not everybody.” She retorts, “It seems like everybody.” A different student chimes in, “It’s just the Arabs,” while another student tries to correct this comment saying, “The Arabs is too general.” Josh attempts to help the students better understand and qualify their remarks by giving them a question: “Islamic extremist is to Islamic as blank is to Christianity.” There is a pause as Josh writes the answer on a dry-erase board and tells the students, “It’s the Klan gone medieval and global. It couldn’t have less to do with Islamic men and women of faith of whom there are millions upon millions. Muslims defend this country in the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, National Guard, police, and fire departments” (“Isaac”). This suggests that there are “proper” places from which Muslim Americans can lay claim to American identity, express their patriotism, and be co-opted or assimilated into American culture. It also seems to be an attempt to put to rest any anxiety or suspicions of Muslim Americans on the part of the American viewer.

Josh calls on the students to rephrase the question. One girl responds, “Why are Islamic extremists trying to kill us?” After declaring that as a more reasonable question, Josh asks, “Why are we targets of war?” The students give responses such as “because we’re Americans,” “our freedom,” and “freedom and democracy” (“Isaac”). Josh, disappointed in their responses, suggests that “it’s probably a good idea to acknowledge that they do have specific complaints.” This is, of course, after he says, “I think they’re wrong.” He goes on to list some of those complaints. Josh’s assistant, Donna Moss (Janel Maloney), might be categorized with these students as a “docile patriot” or an “infantile citizen” when she suggests that there is no rationalizing a person strapping a bomb to his/her chest (Puar 130, Spigel 245). As Lynn Spigel has written:

[Josh] says all of this at such rapid-fire speed that there is no in-depth consideration of the issues. Instead, the scene derails itself from its “teaching” mission by resorting to the colonialist rhetoric of “curiosities.” The scene ends with Josh telling the students of his outrage at the cultural customs of Islamic fundamentalists. The familiar list of horrors—from the fact that women are made to wear a veil to the fact that men can’t cheer freely at soccer games—redirects the episode away from ethics toward an ethnocentric celebration of American cultural superiority. (Spigel 243)

He also suggests that Middle Eastern Muslims are bothered by the United States’ free and open newspapers, churches next to synagogues next to mosques, women able to become and do anything they want, and all people being able to cheer whatever they want at sporting events (“Isaac”). This, indeed, contrasts adherents to the “American Way” with those defined as being outside the acceptable community.

Josh creates a dichotomy for viewers: the good American Way and its customs against the evil ways of religious fanaticism, the potential of an America with a redemptive view of history, always leading toward progress, against the backwardness of barbarism. The next scene, in a “dimly lit room, an enclosed, monitored space” where Secret Service agents are interrogating Raqim Ali because of his alleged link to terrorists, strengthens the dichotomy (Puar 134). In their article, “Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots,” Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai argue that the demands for “normalization” following September 11, “invit[ed]

an aggressive heterosexual patriotism that we can see . . . in dominant media representations (for example, *The West Wing*)” (Puar 117). Puar and Rai consider “the show’s double frame itself as a kind of technology that is supposed to manage dissent, a technology that demands allegiance even as it produces pluralism” (Puar 134). Sacvan Bercovitch writes that representative selfhood and the jeremiad were “intended as a strategy of control. It was designed to keep self-assertion within cultural bounds” (*Rites* 36). Like the “endless, self-enclosed dualisms” that allowed the jeremiad to succeed “as a ritual of socialization,” the bifurcations and the double frame of “Isaac and Ismael” stage “two forms of power . . . to quarantine and to discipline” (*American* 194, Puar 135). Writing about many nations’ grievances against the United States, Professor Stanley Hoffman warns, “We should not meet the Manichaeism of our foes with a Manichaeism of self-righteousness” (Hoffman). Indeed, bifurcations, national self-righteousness, and innocence are recurrent themes in “Isaac and Ishmael.”

When the show returns to the mess hall, Toby Ziegler (Richard Schiff), the White House communications director, joins the conversation. He enters into historical pedagogy that builds upon the dichotomy already constructed for viewers. Additionally, Toby reminds the students that “The Taliban isn’t the recognized government of Afghanistan. The Taliban took over the recognized government of Afghanistan” (“Isaac”). He goes on, making an historical comparison: “When you think of Afghanistan, think of Poland. When you think of the Taliban, think of the Nazis. When you think of the people of Afghanistan, think of the Jews in concentration camps.” The comparison, overstretched and dramatic, serves a purpose. Americans’ collective recollection of World War II often evokes false images of America as the world’s savior. Perhaps these comments served to rectify any qualms in American minds over the United States’ Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan.

The best example of the episode’s and America’s self-righteousness occurs when Toby builds on the American myth of innocence by relating a story he had heard from a Jewish friend of his father who had been prisoner in a concentration camp: “He said he once saw a guy at the camp kneeling and praying. He said, ‘What are you doing?’ The guy said he was thanking God. ‘What could you possibly be thanking God for?’ ‘I’m thanking God for not making me like [Nazis]’” (“Isaac”). During the

Cold War, Christian theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in his *The Irony of American History* reminded Americans of the Biblical story of the Pharisee who “is condemned and the publican preferred because the former ‘thanks God’ that he is ‘not like other men’” (160). Humility is often one of the Christian virtues lacking in America, and without an “other” against whom a people can be defined, no self-righteousness can exist. The Cold War having ended a decade prior to 2001, Americans were forced to find a new “other,” the terrorist espousing Islamic fundamentalist extremism, onto whom they could project their fears.

Sam Seaborn, the deputy White House communications director and the terrorism expert among the staff, enters the mess after Toby begins responding to a student’s question about history’s first terrorists. The show continues its themes of American innocence and historical pedagogy as the students briefly discuss instances of non-violent protests of Gandhi and the Civil Rights movement. One female student asks, “Weren’t we terrorists at the Boston Tea Party?” (“Isaac”). Sam responds, almost dismissing the question as absurd, “Nobody got hurt at the Boston Tea Party. . . . Never has a war been so courteously declared,” thus complying with the denial of historical reality necessary to claim innocence (“Isaac”).

Sam also says that terrorists always fail and usually “succeed in strengthening whatever it is they’re against,” reassuring the students and viewers of their future victory, if only they can weather the present trials. Indeed, much of the jeremiad’s purpose is preparing its hearers for a time of sacrifice and renewed faith. One student wrestles with the fact that despite their failure rate, terrorists continue to terrorize. Sam agrees. The student asks, “What do you call a society that has to just live every day with the idea that the pizza place you’re eating in can just blow up without any warning?” (“Isaac”). Sam responds, “Israel,” as though preparing Americans for the worst case scenario.

Some characters in “Isaac and Ishmael” conform to prescribed gender roles, and others do not. Like Mary Rowlandson, who eats what she can obtain voraciously, thus defying the image of the stereotypical Puritan goodwife, C.J. Cregg (Allison Janney), the White House press secretary, speaks to the students about increasing funding for spy agencies: “We’re going to have to tap some phones and we’re going to have to partner with some people who are the lesser of evils. . . . Some of these guys we’re going to have to walk up and shoot them”

(Rowlandson 81, "Isaac"). C.J. defies her gender's prescribed roles which are in turn exemplified by the show's first lady, Mrs. Bartlet (Stockard Channing), the pious mother who tells the students a story of two brothers, Isaac and Ishmael (Puar 134). Sorkin's juxtaposition of American innocence with C.J.'s blatant call to violence that implicates America's guilt is quite telling of the American character. Rather than admit that, as Reinhold Niebuhr has written, "power cannot be wielded without guilt," Americans continue to claim innocence even after they commit acts, virtuous and not so virtuous, that incur guilt (37). That such calls to action and potential violence are made by a woman further reflects the ambiguity of gender roles characteristic of the captivity narrative.

By the end of the show, the crash is lifted with Ali found innocent and with "the president as Father enter[ing] and say[ing] that what we need right now are heroes" and the first lady "as Mother" telling the "youngsters a kind of bedtime story" about the brothers Isaac and Ishmael (Puar 134). In the closing scene, Leo McGarry (John Spencer), the president's chief of staff, apologizes to Raqim Ali, saying, "Hey kid, way to be back at your desk" ("Isaac"). This line is directed at the American people, anticipating their response to the show's exhortations. By giving them the vocal reward beforehand, the American people are to feel forced into returning to normalcy. That it is directed at a Middle Eastern-American also suggests that American identity, particularly the diligence and work ethic of the "American," is, at least theoretically, open to people of all backgrounds. It allows for pluralism without the chaos, a "strategy of pluralism everywhere to compartmentalize dissent so as to absorb it . . . into a dominant liberal culture" (Rites 21).

My purpose in this essay has not only been to draw parallels between the captivity narrative, the jeremiad, and this particular episode of *The West Wing* but also to call attention to the myth and ideology of America. Sacvan Bercovitch has asked what would happen if the United States were "recognized for what it was . . . just one more nation in the wilderness of this world? What would happen . . . if 'America' were severed once and for all from the United States?" (Rites 65). Likewise, Reinhold Niebuhr wrote that "our American nation, involved in its vast responsibilities, must slough off many illusions which were derived both from the experiences and the ideologies of its childhood" (42). Niebuhr and Bercovitch are right on most counts, especially when it comes to America's pretensions to innocence. Myth, combined with television as a cultural medium, exacerbates America's

response to terrorism, homogenizing American political culture. Furthermore, "Isaac and Ishmael," like many of the media's attempts at historical pedagogy following 9/11, employs the same tactics that Stanley Hoffman claims terrorists use, namely "simple explanations . . . and a highly selective approach to history" (Hoffman). Myth, however, also serves a vital purpose in all societies, and America's is designed to confront and overcome crises such as the "War on Terrorism." Perhaps Americans can confront the difficult challenge of finding the right balance between reality and myth, liberty and order, consent and control, the necessary questioning of authority and the suppression of dissent, and the challenging of social norms and their maintenance. The American Middle Way may serve us well here.

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