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'West Wing' Takes On Tanker-Plane Scandal

Has the scandal about the Boeing Co. tanker-plane deal gone Hollywood?

Last week's episode of "The West Wing," the NBC drama about life in the White House, had a subplot about a defense contractor, Mueller-Wright Aeronautics, trying to sell billions of dollars' worth of helicopters. The similarities to real life, including an irate Arizona senator, generated buzz at defense contractors



BY ALEX WONG—NBC VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS

Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), against the deal in real life.

around the Beltway.

On the show, the helicopter sale is bottled up in the Senate Armed Services Committee by Arizona Sen. Matt Hunt, who wonders whether Mueller-Wright circumvented the rules.

In real life, Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) has been the biggest opponent of the Boeing tanker deal, in which the Air Force was to lease 20 Boeing 767 refueling tankers and buy 80 more.

"There's no better evidence that the Boeing tanker-lease story had legs than watching it on 'West Wing,'" said Danielle Brian, executive director of the Project on Government Oversight, a watchdog group.

The similarities didn't stop there. At one point, the head of Mueller-Wright reveals the company hired a Pentagon procurement official to seemingly help the company get the contract.

The real-life flap over the deal includes Boeing's hiring—and firing—of an executive who helped negotiate the tanker deal before she left the Air Force for Boeing. The deal is now tied up in a Pentagon inspector general's investigation. For real.