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The Writing on the Wall

A NOVEL



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Washington, November 11, 2011

Their grimmest nightmares were exceeded; their worst-case scenarios appeared sanguine in hindsight. The ten men and two women in the wood-paneled room sat in absolute silence. Not one of them could clear his throat, let alone speak. Their hands were clenched into fists, plugging their mouths or kneading their lips. All were sweating, some profusely.

Frozen, paralyzed to the point of motionlessness, they stared in one direction, their eyes displaying shock, disbelief and confusion. They silently begged for answers, for advice, for leadership. However, the man at the head of the table was unable to provide them with any. In this moment of tragedy he could no longer pretend to be stronger, more resilient, or more determined than anyone else. He had worn that mask for most of the past three years, but an hour ago he had been forced to discard it. He could no longer maintain appearances. He was one among equals in his fear.

Yet he could not allow himself to just sit in this stunned state. Almost fussily, his hand reached for the small water glass on the table. The shaking of his arm could not betray him. He raised the glass to his lips, satisfied with his control over his muscles. The mouthful of water cleared his mind and refreshed his burning throat. Without it,

he could not have uttered a syllable. He turned his head to his right and with an obvious crack in his voice addressed a middle-aged, U.S. Air Force Lieutenant General. “How long, David?”

David McAllister, Director of the Missile Defense Agency at the Pentagon, gulped, his Adam’s apple bobbing like a yo-yo. “Five minutes at the max, Mr. President. I’m afraid our boys won’t have any more time to prepare.”

“So, in five minutes we’ll learn if THAAD keeps its promises,” President Jim Whitman sighed.

THAAD, *Terminal High Altitude Area Defense*, was a non-stationary, antiballistic missile defense system. Unlike the outdated and unreliable Patriot system, second generation THAAD was capable of more accurately targeting IRBMs, Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles; at least in theory. McAllister prayed the gap between hypothesis and reality would not prove disastrous.

“I’d like to add that we’ve barely had sufficient time to allocate, calibrate and prepare them. Under these conditions it’s almost impossible to guarantee satisfactory accuracy ...” remarked a Humpty Dumpty look-alike with XXL horn-rims that even Austin Powers would no longer consider ‘shagadelic’, but a gross fashion faux pas.

The President’s question had torn them from their lethargy.

“And may I observe that we can’t afford less, Hector,” the President’s voice was sharp. “We all knew bloody well that THAAD would be our last resort when all the chips were down. Its failure would be a helluva disaster.”

A man in uniform rose from the table and pointed to one of the plasma screens on the wall. “Mr. President, sir, may I ask you to authorize NMCC to eliminate the remaining launch sites and their arsenals? Now that aggression’s so obvious, we shouldn’t have any qualms about this.” General John Zieliski, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was referring to the National Military Command Center at the Pentagon, from which the ultimate order for the strategic use of nuclear weapons would be given.

Four days ago, President Whitman had authorized *Operation*

Resolute Preemption in this same venue, the White House's Situation Room, with these same men and women, his National Security Council, advising him. It had been a desperate and impossible mission from the beginning.

On November 4, a Stinger missile had shot down the Gulfstream jet of General Ashgar Sadaat, the military ruler of Pakistan, on approach to Karachi airport, killing all on board. An unwholesome, inconvenient, yet almost habitual mode of resignation for Pakistani heads of state, often eagerly anticipated by the populace.

But there was more to it this time.

It was the sign for which they had been waiting: religious zealots in their *madrasas*, the lower ranks of the Pakistani Army and parts of ISI, Pakistani intelligence, together with former Taliban and Kashmiri guerillas, united under the insurgent Islamist umbrella organization *Lashkar e Markaz e Yaqin*, LMY. They had been planning for this day for more than a decade. Now the wicked would face perdition while a righteous theocracy rose on the banks of the Indus. The millions willing to sacrifice themselves for the divine cause were provided a first-class ticket for their ascendancy to *Jannah*, paradise. Within two days the country raged, with loyalist forces entrenching themselves around Lahore and Karachi as last bulwarks of defense.

Despite the imperfect triumph of the radicals, they controlled most of Pakistan's stationary and mobile missile launch sites, ballistic missiles, and most importantly, two thirds of its nuclear arsenal. Though a fundamentalist coup in Pakistan had always been a question of when and not if, the November crisis had caught the United States off guard – as inconvenient a habit as Pakistan's substitute for orderly change of office.

“I've never had qualms about the nature or scope of the LMY's aggression, or the atrocities they're capable of, General, but I ... I keep asserting that we can't unilaterally nuke a country when we've been attacked conventionally,” President Whitman responded to General Zieliski's suggestion.

Clifford Rougon, Secretary of Homeland Security, shook his

head in disbelief. “For Christ’s sake, they fired five IRBMs on India just minutes ago. And if our THAAD system doesn’t destroy them, millions will die. That’s not a conventional attack; it’s fucking nuclear war ... I don’t believe this!”

“Cliff, the President’s right. We can’t know without a doubt that these missiles carry nuclear warheads,” Vince Lane, the President’s National Security Advisor, objected.

“But we know the missiles have been fired from mobile launchers near Sargodha and Multan. We also know from the most recent KH-14 images and our boys on the ground that these bastards have transported warheads to these launchers from the arsenals where they store their nuclear devices.” Hector Akinitos, Secretary of Defense, hammered his fist on one of the reconnaissance satellite photos spread all over the table. “What more do you need?”

“Goddamn right! I wonder what the fuck we’re waiting for.” John Zieliski brushed his hand through his hair to disguise his cumulative agitation and growing impatience. A proud bearer of the Distinguished Service Cross, he knew when to drop the gloves and pull out the howitzer.

“An atomic explosion,” the President whispered almost inaudibly. Jim Whitman, one of the nation’s most decorated Vietnam War Veterans, was no sissy either.

“That can’t be true,” Doris Mauran, the President’s Press Secretary and one of Whitman’s most valued advisors, groaned. She stared at the four men and her President in utter disbelief. “For Heaven’s sake ... we can’t sit here and wait till millions die without doing anything to stop it!”

“We’ve already done everything we can, Doro. And we’ve paid an inconceivably heavy price for it,” the President responded shaking his head, stunned by shock and grief.

A fundamentalist coup in Pakistan had always been a nightmare scenario for American strategic planners, and though General Sadaat’s assassination had disreputably come as a bombshell at Langley, the Department of Defense’s response had been no less determined.

Within hours, USSOCOM had dispatched Special Forces to airbases in Bagram, Afghanistan, and Kerman, Iran. The *USS Carl Vinson* carrier group had been transferred from the Gulf to rendezvous with the *USS Ronald Reagan* carrier group and India's naval forces off Karachi. In a quid pro quo move, the United States had relocated six THAAD units from Israel and Qatar to India to protect the country's mega-cities and military facilities from potential missile attacks.

Forty-eight hours after President Whitman had authorized *Operation Resolute Preemption*, three thousand Marines landed in Karachi as a vanguard to support the city's defenses. The U.S. Air Force began their bombardment of LMY controlled units advancing on Karachi and Lahore, as Delta Force and Navy Seal units, who had infiltrated the country two days earlier, simultaneously secured the country's major nuclear facilities and stockpiles. This last component of *Operation Resolute Preemption* was given top priority. Fundamentalist control of Pakistan's nuclear material, enabling them to disperse the devices among their affiliates in the Middle East and Asia, was a horror scenario beyond imagination for the Pentagon that had to be stopped by any means.

President Whitman had labeled this operation the boldest and most hazardous in which the U.S. military had ever engaged, despite the abundance of similar operations in the previous two years. Yet never in the country's long tradition of overseas engagements had so few risked so much for the sake of so many – a desperate gamble from the start, a precarious struggle against time. American and Indian intelligence agreed that Pakistan's nuclear arsenal consisted of at least seventy-five serviceable warheads; not one could be permitted to remain in the hands of the LMY. An impossible task.

And it did prove impossible. On November 9, the U.S. Air Force destroyed Pakistan's nuclear power plants, and the infamous Khan Research Laboratories at Kahuta, while Special Forces successfully attacked and terminated the Fatehjang National Defense Complex. However, they met severe resistance at the Central Ammunition Depot at Sargodha, Gujranwala, Multan, and Kamra Air Weapons

Complex. Reinforcements were flown in the next morning, but the deadlock held. Worse, satellite images confirmed the LMY had removed six mobile missile launchers from their previous sites, with their current location unknown. As of November 11, the U.S. military had 9,000 soldiers on the ground and over 150 fighters and bombers in the air; yet they were unable to accomplish their mission.

With battles in central Pakistan raging, the next catastrophe hit U.S. forces offshore. Around midnight UTC+5, LMY forces conquered Faisal Air Base, Pakistan's Southern Air Command Headquarters west of Karachi. An hour later, rounds of Babur cruise missiles were fired at the *USS Carl Vinson*, 80 miles offshore. Although their AEGIS defense system destroyed most of the approaching missiles, three got through. In shock, the National Security Council witnessed the slow death of 'America's Favorite Carrier' from cameras installed on a nearby warship. It was the first carrier lost by the U.S. Navy since WW II. Most of the crew was killed in the initial blast, while the suction of the sinking ship, combined with the conflagration on board, made rescue efforts ineffectual. There were few survivors. In a couple of hours, 3,000 deckhands littered the depths of the Indian Ocean.

Almost simultaneous to the attack on the *Carl Vinson*, five Shaheen-III IRBMs were fired from mobile launchers in central Pakistan. The LMY appeared determined to fight to the bitter end and to take as many enemies with them as possible. The flight of these harbingers of death was observed via a KH-14 and transmitted directly to the Situation Room. Calculations of their direction, pitch and speed, indicated their targets to analysts: two were aimed at Delhi, the others at Indian military command centers in Kashmir, where the LMY hoped to thus prepare the ground for the 'Mother of all Battles' – a PR neologism as favored by Muslim leaders as 'War on Something' was by Western politicians.

"Mr. President, sir, I have to report that we got three out of five ... I repeat, three out of five," announced the voice belonging to Air Force Colonel Oliver Heinz, the liaison officer at India's transferred Army Headquarters in Chandigarh.

“Oh my God!” Mauran cried out.

“Which ones did we miss?” President Whitman inquired without hesitation.

“Sir, I can confirm one detonation in Udhampur, another will occur in Delhi within seconds ... according to my information, Udhampur was a nuclear warhead ... I repeat a nuclear ...” suddenly the screen went black. Connection terminated.

The unthinkable had happened.

For over sixty years mankind had lived in awe of the bomb. How today they craved the Cold War’s predictability and rationality. Back then, Kennedy called Khrushchev and they reached a gentlemen’s agreement. In the new millennium, matters were trickier. Osama bin Laden or a Taliban hothead would not answer for fear of the NSA targeting their phone. Besides, chances of dissuading them from a first strike were slim. Their goal was to maximize chaos and destruction, and the United States had nothing to offer that they wanted. Rigorous non-proliferation was the only political and military possibility for all major powers. Yet such an unstable system is inescapably uncontrollable. Today that had become obvious.

“Those gutless bastards; now we’ll nuke their asses,” Clifford Rougon ranted.

General Zieliski was already trying to establish a connection to the ‘molehole’, the underground USSTRATCOM Command Center at Offutt AFB, Nebraska, to confirm Pakistan’s nuclear attack on India.

“Mr. President, Offutt can confirm two nuclear detonations in northern India, both about eighteen kilotons. One in Udhampur, one four miles north of Delhi center.”

Within seconds a million people had perished on the Indian Subcontinent. And even more deaths were to follow.

“I can’t believe they dared to start an atomic war ... this means their destruction ... that’s totally insane,” Secretary of State, Martin Bilderberg murmured.

All of them were shouting, barking orders, trying to make their

voices heard over utter confusion. The Situation Room was in chaos, its inhabitants dazed and unreasoning.

“Well, from their point of view, I guess they had nothing to lose,” Richard Abel, Deputy National Security Advisor, offered his views to Bilderberg. “We’re engaged in four simultaneous wars from the banks of the Jordan River to the Indus. They must perceive this as the start of a global Islamic endgame, in which all debts are cleared. Apparently, they intend to ...”

“I don’t give a fuck about their motivations. They’ve committed the worst war crime in the history of mankind, for which they will pay dearly,” President Whitman announced, the authority in his voice overlaying the babble.

“Is there any chance ... I mean, can’t we call Prime Minister Gandhi, ask him to ... uh, desist from retaliatory strikes?” Bilderberg inquired.

“That’d be a futile attempt,” the President declared. “Do you really think the American people would listen to pleas for appeasement from any nation after the nuclear destruction of their capital? Surely not. Retaliation’s now India’s business, ours is to prevent the LMY from using any more nuclear devices. We’ll proceed as agreed.”

In the case of an LMY nuclear attack on either India or U.S. forces in the region, the Security Council had already arranged for the deployment of low yield, nuclear missiles against all remaining Pakistani nuclear facilities and stockpiles.

“General Zieliski,” everyone fell frighteningly silent when the President addressed the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff with a firm voice. “In respect to the powers the American people have entrusted me with and for the peace, benefit and freedom of the entire world, I authorize you to execute Phase Four of *Operation Resolute Preemption*. According to the National Command Authority, I ask the Secretary of Defense to corroborate this order. May God bless America.”

General Zieliski turned to Hector Akinitos and listened to his confirmation. Then he saluted both men and replied, “Mr. President, Mr. Secretary, I acknowledge your authorization of Phase Four. We

will proceed as ordered.”

The President responded to the CJCS’ salute, turned around, and headed for the door. Doris Mauran tried to approach him, but William Davenport, the President’s Chief of Staff and most trusted friend, blocked the way. “Ladies and Gentleman, please, allow the President some minutes of privacy for reflection.”

The first American President since Harry Truman to authorize the use of nuclear weapons against another country walked out of the room.

Almost at once, the United States and India gave orders to launch their nuclear missiles. While American Tomahawks, with low yield, three-kiloton warheads, were aimed at the remaining Pakistani launch sites, India’s Agni-IV missiles annihilated the cities of Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Peshawar, Multan and Quetta. Another two million people met their end this fateful night and Pakistan became a nuclear wasteland.

The magnitude of disaster was inconceivable. Over the previous two years, mankind had already been forced to helplessly witness the social, political and economic breakdown of everything they had built since WW II. But the events of 11/11/11 were the culmination of all their fears. In India, hundreds of thousands perished within seconds, their lives terminated in the middle of the night while they slept peacefully, unaware of the ultimate destruction approaching them. No last words or prayers granted.

It was even worse in Pakistan. As a result of Indian and American reactions, a territory the size of California was contaminated for generations to come, adding millions of casualties from starvation, exposure and disease. The survivors would be disfigured, stigmatized for the remainder of their miserable lives. Sterile, they would slowly decay from various types of cancer. The climatic and biological effects for the entire subcontinent were impossible to anticipate. Doomsday had eventuated; the onset of worldwide tribulation.

President Whitman went to his bedroom to fight the accumulating nausea overwhelming him and to rest briefly while Doris Mauran and her staff worked on the tone of his address to the American public, revealing the condemnable LMY attack on India and the necessary response by the United States. How to explain the unspeakable? No expression existed in any language to describe what had happened, the scale of tragedy was beyond comprehension. Yet, he had to find words to calm the fears, to propitiate the American people in these hours of horror. He needed, once again, to pretend confidence and leadership, trust in mankind's abilities to master even this unprecedented disaster. A great lie that had to be delivered convincingly, nonetheless.

His presidency had not lacked opportunities to address the American public in difficult times, both dramatic and historic. Over the past two years he had explained an unparalleled chain of mayhem and disasters to his shocked, frightened and fatalistic countrymen. Two years in which one catastrophe after the other had befallen this country, its people, and their President. Two years that had altered the American psyche forever.

In the bathroom he splashed a handful of cold water on his face and placed a wet towel on his neck. Instead of helping, the maddening swaying intensified by the minute. Should he ring up the White House Medical Unit? No, he could not afford any sign of weakness in these critical hours. Like a millstone, all the hopes and fears of his cabinet, the country, perhaps the whole world, rested on his broad shoulders and his experience. He felt like a shrugged Atlas, no longer able to hold up the world. It was a burden too heavy for one man.

When sworn in almost three years before, Whitman had been convinced he was more skilled and better prepared for the burden of this office than most of his predecessors. An expert on international relations, staunch hawk and unfailing reformer, he dreamed of putting his stamp on the nation by cementing its supremacy in an increasingly hostile international environment; forcing an easing of the country's most apparent social ills through a new square deal, while soldiering on to fight corruption, cronyism and patronage

wherever they threatened to taint the system. Yet fate had denied him the opportunity to accomplish any of these lofty goals. On the contrary, Jim Whitman would go down in American history as the President whose tenure realized the worst, sustained decline in American power.

History was often merciless in its cynicism. Few of the tragedies that had befallen America were of his doing. Most were rooted in the decades before, in his predecessors' undertakings and blunders. Yet, Jim Whitman had had to bear the heavy load.

Losing more than 10,000 soldiers in the Middle East over the last two years, with tens of thousands of businesses bankrupt, an unemployment rate of over sixteen percent and the dollar having lost more than sixty percent of its pre-2009 value, the country was financially and politically in a total shambles. The GDP had relapsed to its 2002 value, a decline of ten years, as a result of the worst recession since 1973. Geopolitically, America had once shaped the world; now it was almost incapable of reacting.

Returning to the bedroom, he poured himself a mug of Winter Warlock Oatmeal Stout, a lifelong habit from his upbringing near Colorado Springs, placing it on the windowsill next to his bed. While he loosened the neck of his shirt, his view wandered across the park and the familiar Washington skyline as the sun was setting. So perfectly peaceful, so totally deceiving.

He turned around to face Stan Stokes' commemorative painting, *Mitchell's Air Armada*, depicting a German attack on his paragon's DH-4 bombers, personally chosen by Whitman to decorate his bedroom.

"I've failed you in every aspect," he shook his head in disbelief and gulped some of the stout.

He placed the mug on a small sideboard only to see it toppled when a sudden gust of wind flipped the heavy damask curtains against it. President Whitman, with a reputation for coarseness that capped Nixon's, cursed roughly and knelt down to pick it up. But when he tried to rise, he had to brace his hand against his knee. An unexpected,

malicious wave of pain raced down his spine and his entire left torso. The air was pressed from his lungs; it felt like millions of electrodes were attached to his neural system. He could no longer breathe or contract a single muscle. When he believed the spasm had reached a level impossible for him to endure, it increased twofold.

A shockwave knocked him to the ground, leaving him helplessly crawling on the carpet like a marionette cut from its strings. He tried to struggle, to fight the damnable pain. If he could just get to his feet again, then he would have won. Just get up. His hands clasped the soft edge of the bedside carpet; he attempted to lift himself. Impossible. More effort. Then a new surge brushed across his chest like an electric whip.

“Lafayette!” he called out with the last of his breath.

The next assault on his body catapulted his head backwards in maddening agony. His eyes, almost bulging from their sockets, focused on the brownish liquid of the stout spreading on the carpet, its white foam forming a sea of bubbles.

Ridiculously, the image of himself at the GOP Convention, accepting his party’s nomination came to his mind. Beaming, hands clasped above his head, surrounded by *Zubbles*, colored soap bubbles that had replaced the traditional, but unreliable confetti rain. Millions of tiny tinted balls. Red. White. Blue. Blowing around him.

Then he surrendered. Jim Whitman’s long journey had come to an end. He finally found redemption.

Shortly after, one of his secret service men stumbled over the President in his bedroom. He had succumbed to the burden of responsibility, perfectly reflecting the current status of his country: America, an empire whose apparent decline was inescapable.