



Rodney Page

1

Winners and Doubters

Marriott Hotel, DuPont Circle, Washington, DC

It was election night, and elation filled the hotel suite. Ben Thorpe basked in the glow of victory. He was surrounded by his boisterous campaign staff and his wife, Betty. The outcome of the election had not been in doubt for months. For Thorpe, watching his opponent's concession speech had only confirmed the obvious. His entourage when listening to it hooted with joy and took a few last disrespectful shots at Clint Garman, the defeated Republican.

The Thorpe campaign had been superbly managed and well financed. Its success had been aided immensely by the nation's deteriorating economy. Thorpe was young, bright, and articulate, and he intensely believed he was destined for this place and time.

The crowd in the suite began to gather themselves together to head downstairs for Thorpe's victory speech. They had worked hard for this night, which had once looked like an impossible task. After all, Thorpe had been a virtual unknown. He seemed to have come out of nowhere to be elected to the most powerful and influential position in the world. His major opponent in the Democratic primaries had been a popular senator from New York, Hope Carson. Conventional wisdom had anointed her as the inevitable nominee, but she had been overwhelmed by the glib and attractive Thorpe. Thorpe had successfully maneuvered the voters' perception of Carson until she was viewed as a vestige of the past, part of an old establishment incapable of generating the energy and new ideas needed to create

change. Thorpe had promised to turn the country around and to move the nation forward.

Few voters really understood what “turning the country around” meant or where Thorpe would “move” them to. But Thorpe had been carried aloft by a groundswell of young voters; union members; other traditional, liberal special-interest groups; and millions of dissatisfied and frightened voters of all parties. Exit polls had indicated that most of Thorpe’s voters couldn’t articulate any specific reason for voting for him. Nor could they identify any certain policies of his they felt would help the country. Mere change had provided them with enough incentive and motivation to vote for Thorpe.

For four years, the Democrats and the media had relentlessly pounded Paul Withers, the outgoing Republican president, and his party. The impact of this hammering had combined perfectly with the financial crisis in the months preceding the election. Garman had finally been buried by dire forecasts of impending economic doom. The citizenry had voted for change, and it was change they would get. It was time for Thorpe, the instrument of change, to present himself downstairs for his victory speech.

Posed in front of a mirror, Thorpe checked the knot in his tie and how his coat fell across his shoulders. He wore his tailored suit well. He was tall and athletic, a former basketball player at the University of Louisville. Thorpe was handsome and looked more youthful than his forty-seven years.

He was also a man who understood and valued his public image. He had very successfully leveraged his youthful appearance during the campaign without having to utter a word about his opponent’s age, perceived frailty, or “old” ideas. The contrast between Thorpe and Garman was obvious to all.

Thorpe was vain. His impeccable personal appearance had paid off politically, and it also satisfied his expanding ego. His attitude was rapidly evolving from mere ego into the kind of arrogance that accompanies a belief in one’s superiority. He admired himself in the mirror. He wanted to look the part of a youthful, vigorous, and in-charge president-elect when he delivered his victory speech downstairs. His self-admiration was cut short by an interruption from his closest advisor, Victor Sherman, Thorpe’s soon to be chief of staff.

"Ben . . . Mr. President-Elect . . . There's a congratulatory phone call for you," said Sherman.

No one other than Sherman would have dared to bother Thorpe at just this moment. But Sherman was a perfect and necessary complement to Thorpe. A former congressman from Kentucky, Sherman had skills Thorpe neither possessed nor desired to possess. Sherman thrived on confrontation and intimidation. He was profane, blunt, and struggled to be otherwise—even when it was necessary. Thorpe was the velvet glove; Sherman was the iron fist.

Sherman was very important to Thorpe.

"Victor, no offense, but can't it wait? We'll have plenty of opportunity to take congratulatory calls later," said Thorpe. But he knew Sherman seldom misjudged anything.

"No offense taken, Ben, but I think you'll want to take this call," said Sherman, not the least bit intimidated by needing to pressure a president-elect. "It's Isadore."

Thorpe immediately turned on his heel and headed back to the suite's master bedroom and the telephone.

"Please put the call through to me in there. And, Victor, my apologies. Tell them downstairs I'll be there when I get there."

"Will do, Ben," promised Sherman. "I'm sure they won't mind waiting a few more minutes."

The secure phone rang in Thorpe's bedroom. He answered it with apprehension, "Isadore, Ben here. Thanks so much for your call. I hope I didn't inconvenience you by keeping you waiting too long."

"No inconvenience at all, Ben," said Isadore Krakos in his deep baritone voice. He had an accent Thorpe had never been quite able to place. "I know you are quite busy this evening," he intoned, "so I will not take much of your time."

"Isadore, I'm always available for you. And you know I'll be accessible after the inauguration," said Thorpe meekly. He was within weeks of becoming president of the United States of America, but he remained intimidated by Krakos.

"Thank you, Ben. I want to formally congratulate you on running an absolutely masterful campaign. You did your part, I did mine, and our objective was achieved. We both have good reason for satisfaction."

Hearing Krakos claim major credit for the campaign's success did

not surprise Thorpe. Krakos hadn't become one of the world's richest and most powerful men by playing second fiddle to anyone, even the president of the United States.

Wealth and power are formidable tools. Krakos possessed both in abundance and skillfully used them to achieve his goals. But even knowing this, Thorpe had no regrets for hitching his wagon to Krakos's star—especially tonight. Thorpe was quite capable of exhibiting a little humility in return for several hundred million dollars in legitimate and not-so-legitimate campaign contributions.

"Ben, is this phone line secure?" Krakos asked.

"Yes. The Secret Service had plenty of time to secure it, since tonight's results aren't exactly a surprise," joked Thorpe, unsuccessfully trying to relieve his own uneasiness.

But Krakos didn't laugh. He was a humorless man. With a sternness and directness that caused Thorpe to perspire, Krakos delivered his monologue. Thorpe knew to listen and keep his mouth shut.

"Ben, we have been very successful. We are in a position to accomplish many things—things impossible just a few years ago. You are blessed with many talents, and you must use these talents skillfully and with no hesitation. The opportunity provided to you does not present itself often, perhaps only once in a dozen generations."

Thorpe nervously lit a cigarette, something he always seemed to do when talking to Krakos.

Krakos continued: "Our opponents are in disarray. They will be incapable of mounting any meaningful opposition. Any failure will be your responsibility and yours alone, because I have provided all the tools for your success. You were selected to accomplish much," he stressed. "Anything less than complete success is not acceptable. Much has been invested, and many risks have been taken. You have prepared yourself for this and must use all you were taught. And, never forget, you would still be a lowly politician in Kentucky had it not been for me. I say this not to insult you but to remind you to whom you are indebted."

Thorpe stiffened. He hadn't missed Krakos's meaning.

"You must move rapidly to achieve our goals," Krakos lectured. "As is said in your country, the 'window of opportunity' will not remain open forever. Your countrymen are foolish cows who follow

the sound of the bell, but they are prone to erratic and sudden changes of mood. They can be easily led to one cause, but they will quickly switch to another. You will always be supported by certain elements of your electorate, but they are a minority. The American people will not remain forever uninformed. And once they understand our agenda, they will turn on you. Our cause will fail should you not act quickly and decisively. Are my thoughts clear to you?"

"Very clear, Isadore," Thorpe said quietly and obediently.

Krakos's tone lightened slightly. "Ben, enjoy this night of victory. But awaken early tomorrow and implement our plan. Your underlings must be aligned with you, because they will rule your bureaucracy." He paused and then continued. "The Congress is yours. They may balk at times for personal political reasons, but they will support you vigorously for at least two years. Sleep well, my friend. Realize that many busy days lay ahead."

Krakos hung up abruptly, giving Thorpe no chance to respond. The conversation had been unsettling, because this call was the first time Krakos's tone had been so ominous and intimidating. But the partnership between Thorpe and Krakos had been cemented months before. A deal was a deal, and Krakos had, in fact, delivered. Thorpe had been selected, groomed, and put into position. Now it was Thorpe's turn to do his part, and he knew he was up to the job.

He would begin with tonight's victory statement. Thorpe would deliver the speech masterfully, because that's what he did . . . deliver soaring and inspiring oratory.

The president-elect straightened his tie and headed downstairs.

Saint Simons Island, Georgia

Congressman Tyler Armistead and his wife, Ashley, were enjoying a late dinner at their refuge, Saint Simons, a barrier island off the coast of Georgia. They had a house on East Beach, and tonight they were dining on the patio of a restaurant in The Village—the small, intimate business district on the island. The evening was unseasonably warm, and the couple had the patio almost to themselves, which suited Armistead just fine.

It had been a long day, and the Armisteads enjoyed the quiet meal. After they finished it, they began the short drive home. The island had retained its slow, casual, residential ambiance, except for its landmark hotel, the King and Prince Hotel. They passed the lighthouse, and the venerable King and Prince Hotel loomed ahead. Once a small, iconic place built in the forties, it now was a rambling complex with multi-storied additions built in the last twenty years. Armistead lamented the changes to the place since his high school days when he worked there as a lifeguard. His reminiscences reflected his introspective mood this evening.

The Armistead house was in an area developed in the fifties and sixties, but some homes there were over seventy years old. Massive erosion and buildup had changed the seashore dramatically over the years; some homes once yards from high tide were now a quarter of a mile from the ocean. Other homes faced almost certain destruction with the next hurricane, despite the best efforts of the Corps of Engineers to hold the sea back through dredging and placement of tons of huge granite boulders. The island's old-timers laughed at the Corps's folly.

Luckily, Saint Simons and the other Georgia barrier islands, from Cumberland in the south to Tybee near Savannah, benefited from a geographical quirk. The coast was indented, scooping westward in a semicircle from Jacksonville, Florida, to Charleston, South Carolina. This anomaly of nature guided most hurricanes farther out to sea, mostly sparing Saint Simons over the years.

With the exception of a few recently built mansions, East Beach was comprised of one-story, ranch-style homes with porches and sun decks to take advantage of Saint Simons's mild climate. The lack of hotels and condos there isolated the area from tourist traffic. Few Pennsylvania and New York license plates were spotted on East Beach, much to the relief and pleasure of its residents.

Armistead had been born and raised on Saint Simons, and he and Ashley loved the peace and solitude of the island, particularly compared to the madness of their other haunt, Washington, DC. The two spots may as well have been on different planets. Both he and his wife felt that without the restful time spent at East Beach, they couldn't have borne the artificial and surreal world inside the Beltway.

With Tyler Jr. and his sister Debi back at the University of Georgia (UGA), the island and house were blissfully quiet after the weekend's Georgia-Florida game festivities. The game was played in Jacksonville, an annual event since 1933. Saint Simons was the unofficial headquarters for UGA fans, and thousands poured in around November 1 every year.

Armistead's seat in the House was secure, and his reelection had not been seriously challenged, so the victory celebration across the causeway in Brunswick had been short and sweet. Armistead was one of those remarkable human beings almost everyone instinctively likes—not a bad trait for a politician.

After his surprising victory in 1994 at the age of thirty-three, Armistead's forthrightness and likeability had propelled him to relatively easy reelection victories. He had significant accomplishments on various House committees on defense and intelligence. As much as Armistead hated to admit it, he was a politician. He liked to think not; but as a Republican member of Congress, no amount of rationalization would disguise the fact.

The presidential election results had been anticlimactic. The election would be over officially before the Armisteads got home, and all the pundits would be doing what pundits do. However, Armistead still felt compelled to watch the coverage on TV.

The truth be known, he would have much rather curled up with Ashley on the couch and watched an old movie, one of those classics where the good guys and bad guys are clearly defined and the good guys prevail in the end. He quietly wondered to himself why, on the way home from dinner, he had thought about his days as a teenage lifeguard at the formerly quaint King and Prince Hotel. Now here he was, yearning for old cowboy movies. He concluded that the good old days had been really just that: days when things had seemed simpler, more honest, and more straightforward. He wished that Washington could work that way. Armistead turned on the TV and passively watched the never-ending commentary, much of it concerning the future implications of the election.

They're already speculating about the next two elections, he thought. Certainly someone will make some meaningful comments about the very real threats the country is facing . . . or more likely they won't, he concluded.

He laughed to himself, acknowledging that the talking heads on TV weren't members of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence and didn't know what he did. *Thank God for small favors*, he thought. *If they did, we'd all be in deep trouble.*

"Okay, what's on your mind?" Ashley asked him. As his wife of twenty-four years, she missed little when it came to Armistead's emotions. Sensing his contemplative mood this evening had been easy.

"Baby, this election is very troubling to me," he blurted out, primed for the question and with an urgent need to answer it. "We don't know a damn thing about Ben Thorpe. He's such a mystery. We don't know who he really is, what his values are, or what his philosophies are. This country is absolutely clueless about who they just elected. Most of the media abdicated their responsibility. Nobody, Democrat or Republican, turned the rocks over to discover what this guy is all about."

Ashley agreed with her husband but attempted to soothe his concern.

"Tyler, this country has elected some real losers, but the system's always handled it one way or the other. Whatever Thorpe is or isn't, the country can deal with it."

"This could be different, Ashley," he insisted.

She let him continue.

"We have an unknown president. We've no idea how he got to where he is so quickly. One day nobody's ever heard of him; four years later he's running the United States. Okay, so here's what we know, which makes me worry. We know he's associated with people who have no love for this country. We know he'll have complete control of the Congress for at least two years. He's likely to appoint left-of-center judges. We know he had practically limitless financial support during the campaign and don't know where the hell it all came from. He's an extremely gifted speaker with great personal appeal. Ashley, we've elected a well-crafted media image. We didn't elect the man or his policies, because we don't have the vaguest idea who he is or what he stands for."

He suddenly realized he was shouting. "Ashley, I'm sorry. All this seems obvious to me but to few others."

"Maybe it's time for you to get out of politics," she proposed satirically.

He laughed. Ashley always dealt well with his infrequent fits of self-pity.

"Thanks," he chuckled, "I needed that."

"Of course you did. Whining doesn't become you, and it's terribly boring."

"Is that so?"

"You can't imagine."

"May I have five more minutes of whine time?"

"If you must."

He laughed again. "Okay, no more than five minutes, I promise."

"The clock's started," Ashley smiled.

"We Republicans didn't just merely lose an election. Our party doesn't know what it stands for anymore. We don't have an identifiable vision or specific solutions. Senator Garman was all over the board during the campaign, and Thorpe ate him alive. Garman's whole damn campaign was a collection of equivocations, and he refused to take the fight to Thorpe. There were all sorts of warning signals about Thorpe and some of his cronies . . . and some of those cronies aren't very nice people. But Garman didn't push Thorpe," said her husband emphatically.

"But Tyler, it was an uphill battle," his wife interjected. "When the economy went downhill, Garman didn't have a chance."

"I agree. Given the economy, I don't think we would've won anyway. But Garman was off-balance trying to juggle the factions in our party. Thorpe, to his credit, sensed that and exploited it masterfully. Garman was self-destructing, and Thorpe finished him off."

He paused and then continued. "I believe most of the votes for Garman were actually votes against Thorpe. If our base only has a negative incentive to vote, we'll never win another national election. I think the Republicans are about to enter a period of confusion and infighting."

"The usual factions?" Ashley asked.

"Yep, 'moderates' and 'right-wing conservatives,' to use the media's terms. I'd prefer 'centrist' and 'conservative' myself. But

whatever you call them, the philosophical gap is widening, and I believe the centrists will widen it by moving left," he reasoned.

"How's it going to play out, Tyler?" asked Ashley.

"I honestly don't know. If Thorpe governs from the center, as you'd suppose he will, based on his campaign, the status quo will probably grind along. If he moves to the left, I think the political landscape will turn upside down, and something—or somebody—has to ensure our political, moral, and economic principles aren't lost in the confusion. Hell, it seems many folks in this country have forgotten the Constitution anyway."

"Whine time is over," she said. "You can't solve it all tonight."

Her husband agreed. "Okay, maybe we can find an old western on TV."

Ashley smiled devilishly, "I think we ought to be able to come up with something a little more interesting than cowboys and Indians."

"Agreed," he said. "Take me to bed, Mrs. Armistead."