



AWAKENINGS

A Novel About
America's Shattered Psyche

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The White House

Tuesday, January 22, 2013

0524 hours

The door to the president's bedroom opened, and lights from two side lamps came on as two men entered. One headed for the bed where the nation's newly elected chief executive slept; the other remained at the door.

"Mr. President," the man called out above a conversational level. "Sir?"

A slight groan came from the sleeping figure, his back to the visitor.

"Sir, I'm Agent Moore."

The groggy president rolled onto his back and rubbed his eyes, squinting, as he waited for his eyes to adjust to the lights. "Good morning," the reclining figure groggily uttered. "My alarm not go off?"

"No sir. We have a serious emergency."

"What? Oh, is this a drill for the new guy?" he asked, propping up on his elbows.

"I wish it were, sir. There's been a nuclear explosion."



Michael Paul Macdonald had barely been president of the United States for seventeen and a half hours and was less than four hours from climbing into bed after a night of delirious celebrations.

“When?” he asked, pulling on his sweatpants, laid out for his morning workout.

“At 0522:21, which was two minutes ago, sir.”

Macdonald pulled on his sweat shirt. “Where?” he asked, beginning to tie a shoe lace.

“Detroit, sir,”

He lurched up. “In our country? I thought . . . where are we going?” he asked bending to tie the other shoe.

“Situation Room first, sir.”

“One bomb?”

“So far,” Moore said, as he and the president rushed to the private elevator that would take them to the basement.

“Good God,” Macdonald exclaimed. “Who’s been—?”

“Everybody, sir.” The elevator doors opened, and they jogged, with Moore leading, through halls Macdonald had not yet seen, under the White House and the West Wing, and into the Situation Room. Army NCOs were busily hooking into NORAD’s Distant Early Warning system control center in Colorado.

The system was designed and built during the Cold War as the primary air defense warning line in case of an over-the-pole invasion of North America. It covered the tundra of northern Greenland, Canada, and Alaska. There had been no reports of an intrusion into NORAD’s umbrella surveillance, yet a nuclear explosion had flattened an American city.

An Army major appeared, handing the president a sheet of paper containing

the latest report. “We’re ready for you in the Com room sir. You’ll record your message there.”

The written information was skimpy, but enough. The major escorted him to a chair and small table, upon which sat a microphone. Macdonald studied the brief message prepared by his military aide, and then said, “I’m ready.”

On cue, he ad-libbed a less-than-one-minute announcement about the attack, concluding with his assurance that he would be back to them shortly with more detailed information.

It was not the message he’d envisioned he would make to the American people on his first day in office. When finished, he announced, “I want to go to the Oval Office.”

Agent Moore was at his shoulder. “This way, sir.”

The new employees arriving at the White House had received mixed messages on their smartphones about “explosions in Detroit.” Once in the White House, they quickly learned exactly what had happened, and that the nation’s defense system had gone to DEFCON 1 and orders were automatically issued for all military personnel to report to their bases and prepare to defend the United States against attack. All commercial and private aircraft were being ordered out of the air, and all pending commercial flights were grounded.

Hundreds of new White House and Executive Office employees, most recovering from the exciting events of the night before, continued to straggle in. They had been celebrating the inauguration of the first-ever Centrist party president and vice president. All were suffering from some gradation of sleep deprivation.

Instead of searching for their assigned offices, they were, by position or rank, ushered to the Oval Office, Situation Room, Cabinet Room, Roosevelt Room, or some other hastily arranged space. Secret Service agents ordered all electronic communication devices be turned off or confiscated. Security wanted no calls in or out.

Questions flew through the air: “Where is President Macdonald? Who did it? What’s happened? Are we being invaded?”

These rookies had believed their first day on the job would consist of finding their desks, the restrooms, and the coffee machine—not facing a national emergency.

The presence of generals and military aides entering the West Wing added

to the ominous desperation pervading throughout. Unassigned people milled around, waiting. Conversations were questions that received no answers.

The Situation Room, with its wall-embedded television monitors, was beginning to fill rapidly as cabinet designees, senior White House staffers, generals, and admirals came in from a meeting with the president in the Oval Office. The low murmurs were interrupted by a uniformed guard.

“The President.”

President Mike Macdonald then strode in, looking like he had just come from the gym. Six foot five, solidly built, and grim-faced, the newly elected president entered the tension-filled room.

“Good morning,” said Darlene Sweetwater, the president’s Chief of Staff. “This is not how we hoped to start our first day in office. All cabinet designees and senior staff please sit along this side of the table.”

Once the civilian leadership was in place, President Macdonald sat so that others would follow. The few empty seats at the table’s ends were quickly filled. Others stood or sat in folding chairs along the wall.

While everyone was arranging themselves, President Macdonald had a brief, whispered conversation with Darlene. When he turned to the assemblage, he spoke in a calm, firm tone, belying the bitter rage he felt.

“About a half hour ago, I broadcast a short announcement to the American people. I explained what has happened and assured them that their government was fully engaged, responding to this despicable act, which has brought death and devastation to millions in America and Canada.”

That sudden reality brought forth groans.

“The investigation into this attack is already underway. We will find out who did this, and we’re going to find out fast. I have been apprised that the device set off in Detroit was not flown in. NORAD reports no sightings of any unknown or unauthorized planes or missiles. We have no understanding of the type or class of the device.”

He looked across the table. “General Gibbons?”

General Carla Gibbons was the first female chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and she responded in a steady, strong voice, “Thank you, Mr. President. Nuclear bomb experts are being flown as close to Detroit as we can get them. We are viewing hundreds of satellite photos and security surveillance tapes from prior to the blast. Although the bomb took out all local video recordings, some feeds went to sites twenty to fifty miles out from the central city area—a plan developed soon after 9/11.

“Our satellite readings have identified the device as creating roughly a two-mile primary radius with radiation rings reaching four to eight miles out, depending on the terrain. Initial radiation readings are low. There appears to be up to a mile-wide crater formed by the explosion that transcends the Detroit River into Windsor, Canada. The bomb’s position is estimated to have been four to six hundred yards into the city from where the river bank once was.

“Satellite photos do not show a poisonous mushroom cloud. I am confident our senior staff and scientists at the Pentagon will quickly come to a more definitive understanding of the type of ordnance used, especially once our team is able to reach ground zero. It is an hour from daylight there, but satellite readings indicate heavy smoke clouds blanketing a very large area.”

The president suddenly stood, and others began to do the same. He waved everyone back to their seats. “No, please. I feel the need to be on my feet. Thank you, General. We all appreciate your efforts and quick reaction.”

Macdonald stopped behind his SecState designee, Nadine Rankin.

“We new folks are all shell-shocked. The only combat I expected to have this morning was with the US Senate regarding my cabinet designees,” he said offhandedly, lightly patting her on the shoulders. “SecState designee being one of them.”

“I assure you, Mr. President, we are fully engaged and totally focused,” Gibbons said. The other generals sat poised, ready to move on orders from their commander-in-chief.

“I know you are, General.” He swept his long arms out indicating the entire room. “Heck, most of us don’t know each other very well. As for me, I have a wry sense of humor, which gets me into trouble from time to time. It has a mind of its own and pops out at the most inopportune times.” He smiled and continued to circumnavigate the large table, occasionally nodding or whispering hello to those from his campaign.

Macdonald, forty-four, was born October 3, 1968, to Edna and Paul and raised in Ft. Collins, Colorado. Extremely bright, he started kindergarten at four and, after a month in first grade, was skipped up to second grade. He was a rawboned, 170-pound six-footer at the end of his freshman year and played basketball and football.

In June 1985, at sixteen, he graduated number two in his high school class and

enrolled at the University of Colorado on a partial academic scholarship. He grew in size and physical talent and became a starting linebacker his sophomore year. He was touted as a potential All-American.

He never dreamt, in his wildest imagination, that he would enter politics. A former Marine, he became a Rhodes Scholar and later earned a PhD in finance from the Wharton School of Business. He had once shown great potential for pro football. However, he never got that far, breaking his leg in two places near the end of his junior season.

His leg healed well, and he had planned to rejoin the team at spring practice. He was all about football, hoping for that elusive professional career. But fate played a more dramatic and tragic hand: his father was killed in a late-winter car accident. Although his mom taught high school and his dad had provided for them in case of his death, Macdonald felt it might not be adequate enough to see his younger sister and brother through college.

Also, he had no way of knowing how well he would heal. His future wasn't as clear as it had once seemed, even though he was on a full scholarship. His responsibility was to his family, and he needed to lessen the load on his mom. He had always wanted to be a Marine and had considered joining after college, if he didn't earn a pro contract.

He enlisted and went to Parris Island in July 1987. Macdonald was immediately singled out as a leader, both physically and mentally. Following basic, he was chosen for Force Recon training. The Marine leadership saw him as officer material, but he needed to complete his college degree requirements to go to Officer Candidate School.

He was whisked off to Penn State in January 1988 to earn a degree in political science, while also studying military history and global economics. He worked three consecutive semesters, earned over fifty credit hours, and graduated that December. He spent the Christmas holidays with his mother, sister, and brother, and right after New Years, he entered the Officer Candidate School.

He graduated in April 1989, with his mother present. Second Lieutenant Macdonald was assigned to Force Recon for command training. Shortly after his team was formed, they went through more intensive training, and late that summer they deployed to the Middle East. Macdonald was second in command.

After Desert Storm, the team's leader was reassigned and First Lieutenant Macdonald was given command. Macdonald was fast-tracked to captain. He had planned to make the Marines his career.

Now, over twenty years later, he still exuded an athletic prowess. Away from

the football playing field, his size was more pronounced. He had a hearty, broad-jawed look, his rugged features appealing. But more importantly, underneath all of that, there was a brilliant and creative mind.

Eighteen hours after he had become president on the promise of fiscal reform, he was now a new president at war, a commander-in-chief facing an invisible foe.

“Mr. President,” said the Secretary of Defense designee, Senator Ogden Garrett, cradling a phone, “National Geospatial satellite photos confirmed NORAD’s report; no unauthorized air traffic was over Detroit or Windsor prior to detonation. Geospatial believes the blast was at ground level.”

Uneasiness flooded the room. Gibbons made a phone call. Rankin said incredulously, “What happened to ground security? How could somebody just drive a bomb—?”

“Right!” President Macdonald interrupted. “That is precisely what we need to find out.” He had now circumnavigated the room and stopped behind his Chief of Staff’s chair. He surveyed the room. He missed not having Gus Vaughn, fellow Marine and his Homeland Security Secretary designee, with him. Vaughn had flown back to Arizona immediately after the inauguration to finish transitioning in the new director of Southwest Border Operations, his old position.

Macdonald whispered to Darlene. “Have someone reach Gus and get him hooked into here.”

“Sir,” Gibbons called out, holding a phone. “General Kirkpatrick reports that Air Force Two is now airborne with the vice president and has cleared Washington air space, accompanied by six fighter-jet escorts. They will take up a high-altitude position over southern Indiana.”

“Thank you, General,” Macdonald said, sitting.

He turned to the woman on his left, Cynthia Bolden, his personal secretary and special assistant. “Cynthia, get me the Michigan governor. General Gibbons, fill up our military bases around Detroit with Military Police and every medical unit you can spare.”

He discussed logistics with Darlene until Cynthia interrupted.

“Mr. President, I have Governor Carlton.”

“Put him on speaker. Governor?”

“Mr. President.”

“Henry, what can you tell us and what do you need?”

“I have a report one of our National Guard planes made from thirty-eight thousand feet. The center city area looks like a scorched parking lot. We helicoptered down from Lansing, but were kept twelve miles out from downtown, even though we were upwind and wearing biohazard suits. There are reports of hundreds of fires dotting the landscape; mounds of debris are now where buildings once stood.”

Macdonald shook his head. “Okay, we’re augmenting your National Guard, mobilizing US troops from New England to Illinois and from Kentucky and the Carolinas north. They’ll be in the air, on trains, trucks, whatever. Vice President Dudley is in the air and on the phone. You know what she can do.”

“We’re grateful, sir,” Carlton replied. “We’re conscripting every closed-in arena, church, school—whatever we can safely use. The governors of Ohio, Indiana, Pennsylvania, and Illinois have called up their Guard units in full civil-defense mode. Windsor, Canada, is reported to be leveled. The first victims coming out of the blast area are all from the outlying Detroit suburbs. The folks downtown never had a chance.”

“We will get you numbers and e-mail addresses to assist you in reaching me. We’ll supply enforcement units as fast as we can. General Gibbons, or her surrogate, will call you. I’m available day or night. Good luck. Our prayers are with you.” The line went dead.

“I have a feeling I’m going to be saying that a lot these coming days,” Macdonald said, looking at the determined faces of his people. “Okay, I’d like all cabinet designees to go to their new offices and get together with senior staff. They’re in a vacuum, waiting for everyone to get situated. Your presence will be reassuring. I may pull you back at a moment’s notice, but get started.

“One thing. Be careful about drawing hasty conclusions based on assumptions. We want to know who did this, but we have to deal with facts before making deductions. We will try our level best to keep you up-to-date.

“Darlene, call the former secretaries of Defense, State, and Homeland and the directors . . . get everyone you can find in here.”

Macdonald’s eyes swept the room. “Don’t get caught up in the enormity of this disaster. There will be plenty of time for that later. We’re all rookies today, but we’ll be hardened veterans by the end of the week.

“A.J.,” he said, addressing his press secretary, A.J. Delarosa. “I’ll meet the press within the hour, but not to take their questions. I want to get our message out, not theirs.”