

Prologue

Mission Aborted

“EAGLE DEPARTING, SOUTH LAWN,” crackled the radio in my van. The motorcade wound its way out the White House South Gate, into the streets of Washington, D.C., and onto the George Washington Parkway. This was the scaled-down procession normally used for “unofficial” events. It included a lead police car, the presidential limousine, the Counter Assault Team truck, the Control Vehicle, which I normally occupied, and the black communications van. The obligatory press corps van, or the “Death Watch,” was bringing up the rear.

On this rainy Friday afternoon we were on our way to watch the Presidents Cup golf tournament in Lake Manassas, Virginia. It was September 13, 1996. I had been working for President Clinton for three months, but I was already well aware of his passion for golf. Having just returned from three days of campaigning on the West Coast and an early-morning cross-country flight on Air Force One, he was up and at it again. This was the Presidents Cup, the team from the United States versus the world’s, and President Clinton wasn’t going to miss it.

Shortly before three in the afternoon, we arrived at the course. Clinton, wearing his normal golf attire of a sport shirt and khaki slacks, was escorted by PGA commissioner Tim Finchem to a VIP tent area just behind the clubhouse. On the way, he stopped to shake a few hands and wave to the crowd. The VIP tent was just outside the clubhouse back door, on a deck overlooking the eighteenth green. The president was seated under a protective tarpaulin with other distinguished guests and surrounded by food and drink.

The rains returned, hard enough to prompt a pause in the action. The president busied himself with an interview with an ESPN reporter and then returned to the VIP area to be with his good friend and golfing buddy Vernon Jordan. The conversation was golf, and the men seemed to be having a great time.

During events like these, I kept close enough to the president to be always within sight and on call, but far enough away to be unobtrusive. If this had been an official event, I would have been in full uniform, Air Force blue, with the traditional silver aiguillette hanging from my right shoulder, signifying the military aide to the president. Today, I was much less obvious, wearing a sport shirt with my White House ID hanging around my neck and a Secret Service pin on my lapel. The obligatory large black satchel, the nuclear “football,” was always at my side.

Though I was called upon to do many things for the president, the “football” was my primary responsibility. Not very imposing, the football is a hard-cased container, approximately two feet high by three feet wide, concealed in a leather outer case. It weighs about forty-five pounds and the military aide has the option of coupling the satchel to his or her wrist with a sort of handcuff or a secure loop for security purposes. The football is the proverbial nuclear button with nuclear launch plans, options, and codes. A military aide with the football is on duty twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, within feet of the president.

As the rains relented, play resumed, and the president again took his position under the tent. I was summoned to Roadrunner, the black communications van manned by members of the White House Communications Agency. On the phone was Sandy Berger, the acting White House national security advisor. Berger wanted me to contact the president. He needed a decision quickly.

“Major, we’re poised to launch air strikes on Iraq and I need the president’s nod.”

I approached President Clinton, trying to attract his eye as respectfully as I could without unduly interfering in his conversation with Vernon Jordan. He looked at me with a perturbed sigh and frowning eyebrows. Nonetheless, he asked, “What do you need, Buzz?”

“Sir, Mr. Berger is on the line and needs a decision about the proposed attack on Iraq.”

“Tell him I’ll get back with him later.”

I returned to the communications van and the waiting phone. “Mr. Berger, the president said he’d get back to you later.” Berger groused and hung up.

These were busy days on the domestic and national security fronts. Just two weeks earlier, on August 31, Saddam Hussein had sent three tank divisions, composed of between thirty and forty thousand of the elite Republican Guard, to capture the northern Kurdish city of Irbil, forcing the mass exodus of from fifty thousand to three hundred thousand refugees, depending on differing United Nations reports.

In the days preceding this invasion, American intelligence officials had highlighted growing tensions between the two main Kurdish groups—the Kurdish Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. Saddam Hussein’s attack on the destabilized Kurds was Iraq’s first major military operation since the peace agreement in 1991—and a clear act of defiance against the United States, since we had become the Kurds’ protector. Wary of potential political repercussions at home, the administration was loath to respond to the warnings. Clinton had other things on his mind—namely, his reelection train trip to Chicago, the 21st Century Express, the Democratic National Convention, and the emerging sex scandal of his key political advisor, Dick Morris. Initially, the administration attempted to buy some time with “diplomatic warnings.” On two occasions, August 28 and August 31, Clinton fired off “don’t do it” notes to Iraq.¹ Saddam marched anyway.

Clinton then authorized a two-day strike at military targets in southern Iraq. On September 3 and 4, U.S. Navy ships positioned in the Persian Gulf and B-52 bombers launched all the way from Louisiana fired forty-four cruise missiles at Iraqi antiaircraft batteries and radar installations located in southern Iraq. As an added measure, the administration extended the southern no-fly zone north to the outskirts of Baghdad.

While the administration claimed success, the results were underwhelming, if for no other reason than that the Kurds were in the north, not the south. “Our mission has been achieved,” declared the president in a statement from the White House. “Saddam is strategically worse off and knows there is a price to be paid for stepping over the line.”²

But the real price was paid by those who opposed Saddam. The Republican Guard had executed an estimated one hundred Iraqi dissidents, arrested fifteen hundred more, and generally extinguished whatever opposition Saddam Hussein might have faced from within. Not only did Saddam Hussein claim victory against the United States, but also his antiaircraft batteries fired missiles at U.S. fighters patrolling the no-fly zones, and the Iraqis launched a MiG-25 and a helicopter into the restricted airspace. Saddam Hussein was thumbing his nose at the president. And now, two weeks later, the U.S. was poised to respond again. We dispatched eight F-117 stealth fighter-bombers capable of carrying 2,000-pound bombs into the region and sent B-52s to Diego Garcia, in the Indian Ocean, in preparation for action.

On September 11, two days before the golf outing, President Clinton told a crowd in Sun City, Arizona, that “action is imminent” in Iraq and that “the determination of the United States in dealing with the problem of Iraq should not be underestimated.”³ Pentagon officials claimed an attack was “very likely” and would be “larger and more destructive” than the last set of strikes. Now, on September 13, while the president attended a golf tournament in Manassas—near the site of a heralded Civil War battlefield and the graves of thousands of American citizen-soldiers—National Security Council deputy director Sandy Berger was looking for a decision.

I was called back to the Roadrunner van and took another phone call from Berger. This time he was animated, obviously upset. The attack was to be launched under cover of darkness, and we were wasting valuable time. Pilots were in the cockpits waiting to launch, targets were identified, everything was in place, all he needed was the go-ahead.

These were my peers in those cockpits, fellow Air Force officers and aviators. I could picture them. Mentally and emotionally I could place myself with them. I had been there myself, on the edge of a military operation headed into harm’s way and waiting for the chain of command to kick things off. I promised Berger, “I’ll make every effort to get to President Clinton as quickly as I can and explain the circumstances. I’ll get back to you as soon as possible.”

This time, the president was engaged in conversations with several people and was less approachable. I maneuvered through the crowd and caught his eye. When President Clinton saw me, he seemed disturbed at being interrupted again with something unimportant. He frowned as I neared him. “Mr. President, Mr. Berger has called again and needs a decision soon.” I explained in a low tone, “We have our pilots in cockpits, ready to launch, and we’re running out of the protective cover of nighttime over there.”

Irritated at me and maybe at Berger, he said, “I’ll call Berger when I get the chance.”

Optimistically, I interpreted this to mean soon. Maybe he wanted to find some time, some privacy, I surmised, and would then call Berger. At almost all presidential events, the staff creates what are called “presidential holds,” sequestered rooms where the president can relax and where secure phones for classified conversations are stationed. I assumed that the president would find his way to the hold, located in the clubhouse, and confidentially communicate his decision.

Not fifteen minutes later, Berger called me again. This time he was irate—at me, not the president. “Where is the president? What is he doing? Can I talk to him?”

“Sir, he is watching the golf tournament with several friends. I’ve approached him twice with your request. I’ve communicated your concerns about the window of opportunity and about the pilots being prepared and ready to go. I’m an Air Force pilot myself, sir. I understand the ramifications. I’ll try again.”

As I approached the president for the third time in less than an hour, I thought about the hundreds, if not thousands, of people who must have put considerable time and focused effort into this attack plan and were now hanging on the president’s decision. I didn’t know the details of the operation, but I didn’t have to. I knew that we had our military force primed to strike, potentially taking lives, or having their own lives taken. It all came down to a simple yes or no that was being solicited in the midst of a golf tournament.

I made my way through the crowded VIP tent. The president spotted me, headed me off at the pass, and spoke first. “Tell Berger that I’ll give him a call on my way back to the White House,” he said coolly, indifferently. “That’s all.” And he dismissed me.

All right, I thought. He’d call from his limousine as we motored back to D.C. The limo was equipped, like his hold room, with secure telephones.

I called Mr. Berger and explained that the president would contact him from the limo. Berger sounded defeated and sighed. “Okay,” he said. We both knew what that meant. We’d missed our opportunity.

In the Persian Gulf the sun was coming up. Without word from the president, jet engines would shut down, and pilots would climb out of cockpits and return to their squadrons or beds. Maintenance crew chiefs would put down their headsets and prepare their fighters and bombers for another day. Commanders, war planners, targeting experts, and controllers would push back from their computers, put the phones down, and have a final cup of coffee before heading home.

The president smiled as he signed autographs, shook hands, and waved at the crowd. He climbed into his limo while the staff and Secret Service scrambled into the support vehicles. We made the rainy drive back to the White House.

What haunted me more than anything else was that the president refused to make a decision. Human lives were at stake—the lives of American service members and the lives of our allies who opposed Saddam at our behest and were now under attack. At a time when America's honor and grander principles were being challenged and the world was watching our every move...the president was watching golf.