

What I Saw at the Coup

This is the first time in many years that I have put pen to paper for a lengthy letter, so please forgive my misspellings, poor handwriting or any other errors. I will probably do this in one go and be finished with it. I won't need much of this new notebook. It's a nice room, desk and chair, but really, no computer? I just wish they would stop the hammering outside. I need to focus in order to write well.

No one person could possibly expect to know the full truth about such a complex history, so near to its time. But I know what I know, saw what I saw, and heard what I heard. And now it's time to set the record straight, at least about what transpired between some of the key players in the lead up to the recent events.

What I have heard called "the plan" began as idle office chat, nothing more. (Of course, not much chat is ever truly idle at the very highest levels of power, between senior presidential advisors.) The first time I heard it mentioned was over lunch with Dennis in the White House Mess, down in the basement next to the situation room. We were at a quiet corner table of the wood-paneled dining room, tossing ideas for the next talking points back and forth. Routine.

One of right-wing hate radio's loudest and most poisonous voices was conducting an embarrassing public feud with our press secretary. The President had trapped himself in a seeming contradiction. The viral videos were both damning, and, one must admit, very funny—if one's goal was to make the President look and sound like a liar and a fool. The YouTube videos were getting millions of hits; the TV comics were not letting it go. We had been knocked completely off message, the optics were horrible, and our favorability ratings were collapsing at a crucial moment. (It seems like an ice age ago when such trivialities actually mattered to me.)

I said something offhandedly to Dennis. "I just wish we could get rid of those bastards, once

and for all.”

He stared at me for a long time, chewing on his second BLT sandwich until the Navy steward retreated from range, and then he said, “Actually, Jacinda, there is sort of a plan for that.”

“What do you mean, ‘a plan for that’?”

He explained that it was nothing formal, and there was nothing in writing. Nor would there ever be. It was just a concept he had come up with, along with a few other trusted colleagues and advisors. An idea. They had gamed out various scenarios. We could solve our problems with molding public opinion if we removed just a few dozen key right-wing opinion makers. That was the exact word he used, “removed.” That was last spring, and I put it off as a harmless thought experiment. I didn’t hear anything more about it for several months.

Then one day after another media-talking-points session in the White House Mess, Dennis said, “Remember the plan we were talking about? You know, we really could do it.”

“Are you serious?”

“The timing would have to be just right. Mainly, it would depend on external events.”

Remembering the numbers from our earlier conversation, I told him that removing a few dozen of the worst reactionaries wouldn’t change anything. Other fast-talking right wingers would just take their places. Except they would be angrier than ever.

“Not dozens.” He paused. “Around two thousand, actually.”

The new number shocked me. “That’s not possible.”

“No, it’s very possible. We’ve studied it from every angle.”

Clearly, he knew more about a plan than he was letting on. Nobody was closer to the President than the two of us and his wife, and I had heard nothing from the boss, not even a hint. "You're making this up. You're not serious. Is it a joke, or a test? I wasn't born yesterday." I had to be careful. This was dangerous territory, when any spoken word could be recorded almost anywhere. Trust in a man like Dennis was a very slender reed upon which to cling.

"No, I'm very serious," he said. "Here's how we came up with two thousand. I was given a copy of a new law enforcement software program, one that Justice had for testing and evaluation. A refinement of the social networking analysis stuff. Data-mining, all of that. We put it on a clean computer, adjusted it for our own parameters, and made the list. We tried it at different levels from ten up to ten thousand. The optimal number for the greatest effect with the least initial disruption came in at about two thousand."

I shook my head and said, "Dennis, Dennis...it's crazy to even talk about it."

He continued with what, I saw later, was a canned pitch. "Do you want everything we've worked for to be lost? What if it came to striking boldly, or losing all of the progress we've made over the last fifty or a hundred years?"

I sidestepped. "You know as well as I do that boldness isn't the President's forte."

"Well, you could help stiffen his backbone."

"We could both be facing prison time just for talking like this."

"Not as long as we're in power. You know how I know? It was Operation Fast and Furious. At least four hundred dead and there was no blow-back that we couldn't handle. Our media stuck right with us all the way through. For me, that was the final test. We can do almost anything, if we get the timing right, and most of the media stays with us."

I replied, “But those were Mexicans. And not two thousand.”

“It doesn’t matter. I have the majority leader on a leash. I could drag him around the White House on all-fours if I wanted to. We have nothing to fear coming out of the House. Without the majority leader, Congress can’t do anything but hold hearings that the media won’t cover.”

“But he hammers us every day in the press...”

“Of course he does, he has to maintain credibility with his base. But it’s pure bluster. Trust me—I own him when it counts.”

In the right company (particularly mine, since we go back so far), Dennis liked to brag about the political enemies he held under the control of blackmail. It was a measure of his power, and whom else could he tell? You could count the people he trusted on one hand, perhaps two. One way or the other, all the dirtiest secrets wound up in his hands. Some said it was a mafia thing. Or the unions. Or the red net that had helped us at critical junctures most of our lives. There were advantages to growing up in the second or third generation of the movement. Certain doors opened before us at critical junctures.

Dennis’s knack for finding the hidden scandals almost seemed occult-like. After the big national health care decision, he showed me compromising “men’s health club” photos of the younger chief justice and his pals. Dennis just couldn’t resist the irony and had to share it with me, but that was a rare case of candor about his methods.

So I wondered what he had on the majority leader, that holier-than-thou redneck prick. Was he kinky, greedy, or both? Had Dennis’s minions discovered ancient history long buried, or had they lured him into some new honey trap? It didn’t matter, and I didn’t really care. But it did explain why the Congress could never seem to move past first base on Fast and Furious, even with so many dead.

But I still wasn't ready to believe he was serious. I said, "Four hundred dead Mexicans are not the same as two thousand dead Americans."

"It depends on what's going on at the time. We would need a thick smokescreen, that's for sure. Lots of background noise. The right emergency." He lowered his voice and said, "And anyway, they wouldn't necessarily be 'dead.' They'd just be 'missing'."

We held long eye contact across the table. He needed to clean his eyeglasses, but didn't seem to mind the smudges. I said, "The Iran thing could blow sky-high any day. And Egypt, and Syria..."

"Exactly. And that kind of an emergency might lead to all sorts of opportunities." He smiled, and gazed at me.

After another long silence I asked, "Does this plan have a name?"

"There's no name."

I asked him, "How many people know about this ... idea?"

"Just a few, but that doesn't matter. It's all designed to be self-reinforcing, once it gets kicked off. A positive feedback loop. Completely unstoppable."

"The President?"

The smile again. A cocked eyebrow. Dennis was as slippery as an eel. A charming eel, when he wanted to be. "He knows that bold action might be called for. We've spoken about it for years, in a hypothetical sense, using historical precedents. But I know from those discussions that he'll back the plan, once the parts fall into place."

I said, "The military wouldn't stand for it, not two thousand."

"The military won't be in the loop—this will all be handled at the federal agency level. The AG is fully aboard, and so are his directors. They're facing federal prison time if the majority leader is replaced. Once he's gone, we'll be totally exposed on that end. So it'll happen soon, or never. Let's just say that forces are in motion and leave it at that."

"So ... what do you want from me?"

"I just want you to influence the President and his wife favorably when the time comes. You know what to say to them. 'Sometimes in the life of a revolution, hard decisions must be taken. We must cross the Rubicon and cement the gains of history, or get washed out to sea and be forgotten.' You know what to tell them. But what about you? Jacinda, when the time comes, can we count on you?"

My mind was in turmoil. I was being asked to engage in a conspiracy. Perhaps this was a setup, and my answers were being recorded for another piece of Dennis's trademark blackmail. Yet to refuse Dennis could also be dangerous. I decided to sound favorable yet remain noncommittal. "I understand history as well as you do. Sometimes dreadful actions are called for during a revolution, I know that. But I won't support a fool's crusade that goes off half-cocked and damns us all as traitors."

He nodded, and smiled again. "That's good enough."

The war broke out a few weeks later.

I am referring to the cruel and insane but necessary war with Iran.

As necessary for them, as for us. The Iranian missile strikes were followed by the Israeli bombing raids. Or perhaps it was the other way around, the timeline depending on which

news network you believe. When is a preemptive strike self defense, and when is it aggression? I will leave it for future historians. The simple fact is that within a few days cities were burning from Cairo to Islamabad, while at home we were struggling against Iranian terror cells and cyber sabotage, and an anthrax attack that had crippled our mail and package services. The dirty bombs in Houston and Long Beach were overrated initially, but they stopped port operations around the country for weeks. It all added up to a lot of hurt on the home front.

Basic electrical service, phone service, the internet, and our entire digitally managed infrastructure went haywire while the stuxnet-like viruses were continuously fed into our own digital bloodstream. Trains derailed and all of the planes had to be grounded; everybody knows what happened. Many thought the Russians and Chinese were using the opportunity to add to our misery. In any event, Dennis was right: there was plenty of smoke and noise available to conceal the arrests of two thousand reactionary opinion makers. Men, most of them, men who spent nearly every waking moment busily stamping out every little spark of popular democracy, social justice, or true human progress.

The internet was shut down for a week, and was erratic and unreliable after that. Most of the arrests happened during that early period of maximum confusion and fear. Those on the secret arrest list were isolated from communication by the total sabotage of their digital lives. They could not make cell phone calls or send texts, or use the internet in any fashion. They could not find one effective portal to untangle their wrecked virtual lives. Pay phones and land lines were all they had left, when they were working. In the total confusion and disorder of that week, it was understandable that many people might have suffered complete digital blackouts. We were all on uncharted ground, so almost anything was possible. Like the genuine beginning of the Iran war, it could never exactly be sorted out until long after it mattered. Dennis was a genius about that part of the plan.

Down in the secret federal law enforcement fusion centers, our thousands of social network warriors swung into action as the internet was brought back on line—but this time on our own

timing, and on our own terms. Questions about missing right-wingers were deflected by our internet imposters with rumors about embezzled funds, foreign girlfriends, car accidents, distant vacations, nonexistent medical emergencies and other stalling tactics. It would take a long while for a true count of the missing to be made, and by then it wouldn't matter.

Like I said, Dennis was a genius. At first he gave me a daily update, in private. Later, more of us met in the situation room. If Dennis wasn't the leader, I wouldn't know who was. I never met a new member of the circle unless Dennis was there to make the connection. What I mean is that I already knew them; I just didn't know that they were in on the plan, until Dennis brought us together. And I never spoke to any of them about it when Dennis wasn't there with us. Naturally, not a word about the plan was ever written down.

Most of the original two thousand on the arrest list were picked up in the first week. In fact, in their desperation to reconnect, they sent out their precise locations with every attempted cell phone call, text, tweet, email or credit card use, making them easy to find. The FBI and other federal agencies were already on a war-footing tracking down the Iranian and other foreign terror cells, and they didn't question the odd Americans arrested among the rest.

Anyway, ninety-five percent of the people on the list were basically nobodies, and they were rarely missed. It's funny how social network analysis works—it's not the famous people, it's the important people. People behind the famous names. The critical nodes. Bloggers in the basement that nobody had heard of. SNA found them all, and plucked them from obscurity.

Only proven-loyal teams of agents were used to arrest the handful of well-known people on the list. The warrants were prepared by tried-and-true federal attorneys, and signed off by trusted judges. Dennis did not only make a secret list of enemies to arrest—he also prepared a list of key personnel we could depend on to run the dodgy paperwork through the federal law enforcement system with no hassles. In most cases they used "National Security Letters" instead of regular warrants, because then no questions were asked. Dennis and his little circle had mastered the architecture. It was seamless, and for the most part it went like

clockwork, especially at the beginning.

Once each of the arrested was “tagged and bagged,” the normal federal prison bureaucracy handled them like so many UPS or Fed-Ex packages. After the domestic terrorism label was slapped onto their files, special prisoner handling rules applied, mandating their seclusion. Gagged and hooded, if need be. Unlawful enemy combatants, foreign or domestic, could be held incommunicado. It was already in the law. The legal machinery existed; it just needed to be switched on. I must give Dennis all the credit for grasping the enormous potential.

In the confusion during the Middle East war and the domestic terror attacks, including the cyber attacks, it took several weeks for reports about the missing Americans to grow into rumors of a possible purge of political enemies. Our own thousands of internet cyber warriors tamped down the rumors with continuing obfuscations. Many of these keyboard commandos had been burrowing into the virtual world for years under multiple false screen names, building trust and credibility to expend during just such an emergency.

The most effective of the right-wing muckrakers chatting about purges and political arrests were digitally sabotaged and lined up for the next wave of arrests. Once they were isolated they could get in a car and drive, but only as far as the cash in their wallets would carry them. None of their credit cards, phones or other wireless devices worked. This kept them close to home, and made them easy to arrest.

For the first few weeks, the internal war conducted by our security services was going as well for us as the external war was going badly for our armed forces. The President had to struggle to keep his facial expressions under control in his rare on-camera appearances: I knew that secretly, he was as pleased as any of us that so many American warships, fighter planes and bombers would no longer be available to menace the globe. So in truth, at about one month into it, we were actually winning on both fronts, from our own special point of view.

For the most part, our friendly media outlets continued to use our talking points, staying on board with all aspects of the gloriously jingoistic war effort—including the war against all forms of domestic terrorism. Even the right-wing talk radio hosts were cautious about making wild accusations against the government while our heroic armed forces were busy being decimated thousands of miles away.

Crazy black-helicopter talk about a secret political purge was kept beyond the acceptable fringe of polite news network mention during the first month of patriotic fervor that surrounded the war. Our army of social network warriors did a masterful job of remessaging any mention of a “purge” as delusional. No respectable news network or reputable website would touch such rumors. (Some of the most rabid of the purportedly right-wing bloggers promoting the purge rumors were, in fact, our own cyber warriors, working to discredit truthful reports through their bizarre and outrageous exaggerations.)

After a month, though, the missiles and planes had seemingly run out on all sides, and a new stalemate was reached across the Middle East. The fog of war began to lift, and a new, clearer picture began to emerge that we could no longer keep completely hidden from sight. It was not plausible that so many right-wing opinion makers were suddenly unavailable for comment. They could not have all had heart attacks, or fled to Panama, or gone on vacation in New Zealand, or into hiding.

Some of the hate radio hosts began to fan the flames with crazy rumors that really weren't so crazy, not to us. When they were taken off the air through a variety of means (but mainly for violating the “fomenting domestic terrorism” laws), the right wing nut jobs went absolutely mad with fury. The accusations about a secret purge continued. The plan was being laid out for all to see, even while it was being officially denied at every level, and was never reported on at all by our cooperating media networks and other friendly outlets.

And then the shooting started.

At a month and a half or so, it sometimes seemed that the plan was in danger of falling apart. I asked Dennis about it in private, but he appeared unworried. "It's all part of the action-reaction calculus. It was all taken into account. We needed them to react. We're in the second phase. We smoked them out into the open with phase one, and now we can go get them. Why do you think we bought billions of bullets for the DHS? Why do you think we paid for SWAT teams and armored cars in every Podunk town in America? We've been getting ready for this moment for years."

"You knew that this would happen? A civil war?"

He said, "It's not a civil war—it's just a police action against criminals and domestic terrorists. But don't worry: we're ready. Now that they're shooting at us, we can take the gloves off. The first two thousand arrests were just priming the pump. This phase will let us finish the job once and for all. Think about it: even now, nobody knows what happened to the first two thousand, or even that there were two thousand. In a month, nobody will remember if they were arrested before the shooting started, or after."

"So, what did happen to the first two thousand? Can you at least tell me that?"

He shook his head, slowly. "Jacinda, you don't need to know. But they won't be coming back. They won't be seen again. At least that much, I know for sure."

So they were dead. That didn't upset me. Hundreds of thousands had died since the missiles had flown, most of them in the Middle East. For some reason I was thinking of the Polish officers in the Katyn Forest. Twenty-thousand military officers and many other members of the Polish intelligentsia had been killed in 1940 after the Red Army invaded Eastern Poland. The Soviets had blamed the mass-killings on the Nazis for decades, until the fall of the USSR in 1990 when the truth was finally admitted. So, naturally, I had a question. "Will they ever be found?"

“No, this time it’s sealed airtight. They’ll never be found.”

I heard later, from Larry, that the first two thousand were taken in unmarked vans to a brand-new “bureau of prisons transfer site” in Kansas or Oklahoma, or somewhere else out in flyover country. The site consisted of some fenced-in buildings near an old airstrip. Vans and small airplanes arrived one at a time. As each van or plane arrived, the prisoners were signed over by the US Marshals or other federal agents to a small waiting detachment that, on paper, was from the TSA.

It was an ad hoc special unit made up of men preselected for their violent proclivities. One of the benefits of SNA is that it permits you to find and bring together any personality types that you need for special missions—even unquestioning executioners. According to Larry it was staffed entirely by criminal street gang members with a promise of parole, pardons, and citizenship—but he has been known to embellish a story with his own lurid details.

After the U.S. Marshals departed, instead of being transferred elsewhere, the manacled arrestees were marched around a corner, stood against a wall, and shot. Their bodies were then burned in an on-site incinerator. According to Larry, one van load at a time is how you get rid of two thousand diehard reactionaries. The “transfer facility” was then bulldozed, and each person with knowledge of the site was himself transferred to distant and remote federal installations, where their single voices in the wilderness would never be heard, or believed. Then a rapid process of attrition would begin, with the individuals comprising the former group of executioners suffering a statistically improbable number of heart attacks, fast-acting cancer, accidents and other plausible reasons for their rapid demise.

I have heard other rumors about the final disposition of the two thousand, and I’m not sure which one is true, but that was the version told to me by Larry. I was never really a part of his circle with Dennis. I only sat in on a few meetings. If there is any truth to his story, it will probably come out eventually. But if I know Dennis, unlike the Katyn Forest, not even the bones of the missing two thousand will ever be found.

Toward the end of the second month, against all odds, it seemed like his plan was working. Our federal agents were making record numbers of arrests for new acts of bona-fide domestic terrorism, and of course, for “fomenting domestic terrorism” in the media and on the internet. We still had most of the friendly media on our side lamenting the outbreak of right-wing terror against the government. As long as most of the media continued reporting our version of reality, we could keep pushing the right-wing extremists to exhaustion and eventual submission.

Ah, silence. The hammering and sawing outside has stopped. I flex and shake my hands, limbering up my sore wrist and fingers. Flipping back through this spiral notebook, I count a dozen freshly-filled pages. I have not done so much handwriting in one go since taking blue-book exams at the university, and that was decades ago.

Back to my story. The first real jolt indicating a serious problem with the plan came when television reporter Cathy Carlsen was killed in Norfolk, shot dead while covering the commissioning of the Harvey Milk, the Navy’s newest destroyer. That she was killed was bad enough. That it happened on a “secure” naval base—a federal installation—made it much worse. Her blood splattered across the white uniforms of the gathered admirals made quite a picture.

We were two women born in the same year, with similar academic backgrounds. We had known each other for decades, and her untimely death hit me hard. Cathy Carlsen had been a reliable voice on the progressive side of a supposedly impartial television news network. That a respected member of the media would be assassinated was big surprise, at least to me. Up to that point, only a few federal officials and high-ranking agents had been targeted.

Then a new photo was released on the internet. I had always thought the NSA could trace those things back to their origins, but evidently not. The photo was taken through the Norfolk sniper’s rifle scope just a few moments before the murder. It showed thin black crosshairs and other reference marks across Cathy’s smiling face. And it showed some text added just

above her head:

If the media lies, the media dies.

You take a side, you're along for the ride.

A traitor in front of a camera is still just a traitor.

This single act of domestic terrorism immediately dampened the enthusiasm of most of our formerly reliable reporters to continue carrying our water. More such photographs of other media figures appeared on the internet with cross-hairs over their faces. Most of the pictures were bogus, just photoshop pranks, but they had a similar effect: our dependably cooperative reporters suddenly lost their nerve. The comments following the photos on the remaining right-wing web forums were perhaps the most frightening aspect. It was obvious that plenty of Americans were willing to voice their support for the assassinations of their political enemies in both the media and the government. It became a game for them to walk right up to the "fomenting domestic terrorism" line with carefully parsed and coded words, and this choked our fusion centers with background noise.

For another week or two it seemed that we were playing catch-up with new bloggers who appeared each morning like overnight mushrooms. In spite of all of the new restrictions and tracking tools, every day anonymously sourced articles concerning the purge were posted on what remained of the internet. It was obvious that some of the stories were coming from federal law enforcement whistle-blowers. Dennis said that if the internet rumor-mongers and the last of the hate radio hosts could be silenced, the plan could still be fought to a win. But the leaks were not plugged. Instead, they worsened.

The final outcome hinged on a simple equation that was based on the availability or nonavailability of enough federal agents to make fresh rounds of arrests each day, crushing domestic terrorists and their internet supporters faster than they could proliferate. New

arrests were being made, but still the assassinations of government officials and media figures continued to escalate. One a day. Five a day. Ten. Twenty. Some officials were killed by their very own bodyguards or aides, who then disappeared. The words “civil war” were being tossed around on both sides.

Even though the total number of murdered government officials was insignificant as a percentage of their total numbers, far too many of them reacted hysterically out of personal fear. Practically the entire Senior Executive Service demanded protection teams of federal agents to bodyguard them twenty-four hours a day. Soon there were no agents available to stamp out the internet insurrection with new arrests, much less somehow interdict a single domestic terrorist on a private sniper mission. Instead, all of the armed federal agents were kept occupied guarding terrified government leaders.

And that was the downfall of the plan: it just plain came down to numbers, manpower, and, perhaps, agent morale. I’ve seen reports that at least a third of our federal agents went on sick leave vacation, after word of the original two thousand political arrests began to spread within their ranks.

The ferocity of the counterattack took us all by surprise.

Even Dennis. His original arrest list, derived from cutting-edge social network analysis, was a great success as far as it went, especially in spurring the rest of his “action-reaction calculations.” It sure provoked a fierce reaction, anyway. But at a level that none of us ever anticipated or even dreamed possible.

Dennis had always assumed that the combined might of our armed federal agents and their SWAT Teams, reinforced with local police and, if necessary, the National Guard or even the Army, could crush any conceivable right-wing reaction to his plan. But social network analysis couldn’t find snipers who were not part of any network. That’s when we began to hear of “The Militia of One.” In the end there were too many rifles, and too many willing shooters. A

number that was constantly heard was twenty million. That was the number of Americans who supposedly went deer hunting every year, against less than 200,000 armed federal agents.

Local police evaporated from the equation once the going got tough. The most common sentiment heard expressed was, "You feds made your bed, so now sleep on it." The National Guard, those units not already deployed overseas, proved hopelessly slow and cumbersome. That is, the few who reported for duty when called up.

While top federal officials hid inside buildings, a new and unanticipated escalation of the sniper war emerged. When no one of high rank was available to shoot, their outermost rings of security were targeted, even down to GS-5s standing perimeter duty. Suddenly, competent and trustworthy guards were very hard to find.

On the remaining internet the threats multiplied as pictures and videos were shared and commented upon by millions. "Remember your oath" was a common theme. That whole tired shtick about "defending the Constitution from all enemies foreign and domestic," with a heavy emphasis on domestic. All of that reactionary claptrap. Who knew that so many of them took that oath so damned seriously? Who knew? Mere words on paper, and yet, so many Americans were willing to kill and to die for them. Who knew?

The snipers grew ever more brazen and their numbers multiplied daily. They were emboldened by accounts of the murders of federal officials that were splashed across what was left of the internet, no matter how we tried to control and contain it. They posted comments such as, "You can take away our rights, but we still get to vote under Rule 308," (which I have since learned refers to a popular rifle caliber). The shooters understood the critical manpower equation as well as we did. We were outgunned a hundred to one by snipers we could neither see nor find, and they knew it.

Right-wing media dutifully passed along all of the latest terrorist manifestos.

“Anonymous sources within the so-called ‘liberty movement’ are now demanding that highway checkpoints searching for weapons be disbanded immediately. These sources state that any federal agents, military or police stopping vehicles and searching them for firearms will be considered traitors and could be shot.”

Our jaws dropped down in the situation room when we heard that demand relayed on FOX. There was talk in the room of arresting the entire management and all of the remaining on-air personalities and so-called reporters at that rogue news network. Actually, it became a screaming match. The final decision was up to the President. He needed time to think it over, and went upstairs.

Thereafter, FOX led each fresh report with a graphic announcing the discovery of a “Communist putsch against the Constitution.” Oh, how I hate that ugly German word. Not revolution, not even coup d’etat, but putsch! What an unfair description of a sincere attempt to solidify the forward march of history, right in the heart of capitalist imperialism. In time, “the putsch” became the name that stuck to Dennis’s original plan. Even on MSNBC, where they at least called it “the so-called Communist putsch.”

I knew it was finished when I was driving up I-95 from Virginia into the city at dawn. From a long way off I saw two bodies hanging from the overpass. Northbound rush-hour traffic was crawling, so I had a long time to look. I was driving my mother’s Acura, wearing a blond wig and big sunglasses. There was no security in recognizable security anymore. A convoy of black full-size SUVs was liable to become a bullet magnet on any highway around DC. I was safer in the white Acura, but feeling very, very alone.

Their ropes were tied to the guard rail above their heads. They were clothed, thankfully, and hooded. Black military-style fatigue uniforms, and bare feet. Their swollen hands were bound behind their backs. The two bodies were slowly twisting without any visible actions being taken to recover them. This told me the bridge might be under a sniper’s observation, holding the police at bay while keeping the corpses in view of thousands of Washington’s

morning commuters, half of them federal employees. I had a chill feeling, being in range of a right-wing sniper. A white bed sheet hanging between the two bodies was marked with black spray-painted lettering.

Every fed must decide:

Liberty, or Tyranny?

Death to all traitors!

I got off at the Quantico exit, looped back and went home. Never returned to my office in the West Wing, never saw the White House again. I was picked up three weeks later by a team from the FBI, while I was staying at my mother's place outside of Charlottesville. Since then I've been under house arrest, and lately held in a series of rooms and cells. The rules seem to change daily, but at least I have not been physically brutalized. Instead, my guards seem to revel in reactionary notions of chivalry, pointedly calling me "ma'am," and asking about my comfort. Pen and paper and a better pillow they are happy to provide. I hate them all the more for their sexist bourgeois manners.

As would be fully expected following such calamitous events, the political world has turned quite upside-down. When it reconvened in emergency session, Congress was a different animal, and in a mood for bloody revenge. Somehow, the greater war deaths and the deaths from the secret purge and the counter-revolution were blended together, and we were blamed for all of them.

The backlash to our efforts saw many of our progressive friends in the Congress retire immediately, and their replacements, mostly appointed by governors, were uniformly reactionaries. The opposition party majority leader that Dennis had formerly dangled on a string was one of the many who swiftly departed the scene. More than half of the Supreme Court disappeared for reasons of age or health. Two had died suddenly, some said of

“Breitbart’s Syndrome.” Our old protections were swept away.

And now America has slid back into worshipping the dusty old parchment. In their reading of the Holy Constitution, the Senate and Supreme Court made the rules and conducted the trials, and swift trials they were. Guilty of high treason, conspiracy to commit genocide, and a dozen other charges. Guilty on all counts. What else could we expect? We took the bold action, grabbed for the brass ring of history, and we missed it. Where no mercy is given, none should be expected.

I’ve seen Dennis but have not been able to speak to him in private. Once we were left alone in a small conference room, but both of us were convinced the room was bugged and under video observation, so we just talked about the food and our involuntary accommodations and such.

While being escorted in the hallway I have heard Larry talking in his cell to somebody, a priest or a lawyer perhaps. He always seems to speak in a snivel. But he’s not the worst of them. Many of my former colleagues have clearly been eager to spill their pitiful guts and minimize their participation in the plan, hoping that Dennis will take the brunt of the lynch mob’s fury. But I knew that was a foolish hope: there was fury enough for all of us. So I kept my silence, until now, when it can no longer affect my own outcome.

Now I write for posterity alone.

I rise from the table and stretch. To see out through the high window in my room, I must climb up on the desk. If anybody is watching me on hidden cameras, they don’t seem to care that I am sneaking looks out through the narrow window. I am on the second floor of whatever building I am in, so I must look down a bit to get a view of the source of the hammering and sawing in the paved courtyard where they used to take me for exercise.

The gallows structure seems to be complete. There are four square holes under a single

beam. Workers are screwing down some hardware for traps not yet installed. The grim work of execution will be done in two shifts, on consecutive mornings. I shall outlive Dennis by twenty-four hours. At times like this, I almost wish I believed in an afterlife, like those fools deluded by the opiate of religion. The only afterlife I shall achieve is what I am writing on the pages of this spiral notebook, and they will be cold comfort in the ground. To come so far, to get so close, and then to be consigned to oblivion—it just seems so damned unfair after three generations of dedicated struggle.

(To be tried, convicted, hanged and buried as a traitor concerns me not at all, considering the illegitimate, even farcical nature of the kangaroo court that condemned us.)

I was scarcely involved in the plan, and then only passively. I gave no orders; I conducted no illegal arrests or executions. In truth, I did little or nothing to influence the President one way or the other before the fact. But I knew of the plan, and for that, I will be hanged in two days time as one of the secondary conspirators. There will be no clemency coming from the “Acting President,” or the new “Provisional Supreme Court.”

A few days ago Dennis smiled at me when we passed in a corridor in our matching gray jumpsuits. He was wearing leg and waist shackles, in addition to handcuffs like mine. He must have been giving them hell to merit the chains, and I felt a little ashamed of my meekness in captivity. Despite all that has happened, I am proud of him for that smile and his thrown-back shoulders, a warrior for the cause to the very last. He was, in the end, the single man who was bold enough to initiate decisive action. The failure was not his.

No, it was the President, the man in whom we invested our very lives, the ultimate standard-bearer of the global forces of progress; it was he alone who let us down at the crucial moment. He vetoed the last plan to arrest the remaining right-wing media voices and shut down their vile hate networks. He failed us when we needed him the most.

Air Force One landed in South America while I was being arrested. As the world has seen, the

blue and white 747 now sits empty on a tarmac at a remote Argentinean air base near the Andes, disabled and unflyable. The President has gone with the wind, and he is still a relatively young man, nearly a decade younger than me.

I have no doubt that he will eventually turn up somewhere in the developing world, someplace tropical and near the ocean, a land where the call of the muezzin is heard at sunset. A place where he will be admired for striking many hard blows at the Great Satan.

Coming home, the almost-conquering hero, while we face the hangman. It's just so unfair that the fascist reactionaries will inherit America, and undo the work of generations to advance the human condition.

Other than the final outcome, I would not change a single thing that we have done.

Hasta la victoria siempre!

Up the revolution, forever!

Jacinda Hamden

Former Presidential advisor

(Matt Bracken note: I wrote this during a previous administration, but I think it still has some lessons for today and tomorrow. This story and others are included in "The Bracken Collection", essays and short fiction from 2010 to 2019.)

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