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Reflections of a Leader

Asa Baber

I simply cannot afford to have only one set of advisers.

Yesterday, while holding the bedpan for the Attorney General, my palms tingling as his tinkle warmed the metal, I examined him on his foreign policy. "Schlepp," I asked him, "why should Israel invade China? Don't you think they're outnumbered?"

"What?" asked Schlepp. (He was wishing about then that man had been created prostateless.) "Don't you think one Kike can out-talk ten Slopeheads?"

"Yes," I screamed, "but that won't save them from ambushes."

Astrov came in. Schlepp shook his dong at him and yelled, "This country is being run by grandmothers and eggsuckers!"

Astrov smiled and gave us our injections. I was reminded of my first fix at the country club. Such a rush!

This morning my Chief of Intelligence flew me across country and I was awed. The cities! The plains! The gently rolling hills and softly verdant sea!

He flew the jet upside down for a time. I got dust in my nose. "All this is yours," he said, "and one day it will be mine."

I sneezed. "Only if you're nice to me."

He landed on an aircraft carrier and we were transferred by helicopter and seal boat to a submarine, which had a rendezvous with counterinsurgency canoes. I was awed, and so was my bag man.

I held a Press Luncheon off the record, off the tip of my tongue, off the top of my head, off the cuff. A Staff Reporter asked me how I stood the pressure. "I think of the children," I said. "After all, somebody has to do it. If you can't stand the heat, you melt."

My Ecology Assistant was asked about pollution: "When are you going to get the lead out of your ass?"

He handled his answer very well. "When you get the smog out of your imagination."

Word was received from the Secret Service that the shrimp was poisoned. They gave me Alaskan Crab instead. It was yummy for my tummy.

One can do no more than one's best. When the rest of the world is mad, you have only your wits left to you.

Having come this far and borne this weight and shifted this load, my feet hurt.

Take today's Briefing. It did not go well. I wanted to put four Divisions on the border. Maxie opted for nuclear capability and diplomacy in Geneva. Someone, I think it was The Weasel, tacked up an overlay of Napoleon's last campaign and argued that, given tanks and APC's, there would have been no Waterloo.

I wanted to break for a second lunch but was not sure how to go about it without alienating the very people on whom I depend. Astrov solved that for me by coming in and asking us if we were hungry. Schlepp yelled at him: "This country is being run by computers and seducers!"

Astrov smiled. "I happen to like living in a place where you can get away with saying things like that and where criticism is tolerated."

Schlepp looked very ashamed.

"After all," Astrov continued, even though he was busy taking Minox photos of our graphs and charts, "it's a free country."

Schlepp was truly ashamed. "I am sorry now that I said that."

Astrov smiled. "That's all right."

Schlepp got out of bed and put on his slippers. "Could I have the key?" he asked, "I have to go make do-do."

Astrov handed the key over grandly and we were all impressed.

Usually, when asked about the State of the Nation, I am prone to think fiscal. As the currency goes, so goes my health and equilibrium. At tea, Astrov asked me where I thought we would be two hundred years from now. "Right here," I said. "We do not progress, neither do we stumble. All of History is no more than a dot from God's pencil. We are His paper, His graphite, and He has been grinding away like an angry child at one spot for ten thousands of years."

"Wouldn't you like Him to let up a little?" asked Astrov.

"Only when He's satisfied," I answered, baring my arm, clenching my fist, watching the vein. "If He got frustrated, it might be all He wrote." I laughed hard at my own corn-pone and waited for the jab.

My Chief of Naval Operations drove me out to the desert to watch a new missile being tested. It was kept under electric blankets. I cut a ribbon and made a speech and the children in the shopping center cheered because they knew I was for them, and would go to war if necessary to save them. When the missile was fired, the children were very childish about it and went oooo and ahhh. The missile flew downrange like a burning pencil. It exploded at the base of a mountain, and when the fire and dust cleared and we could look through the blockhouse windows again, the mountain had disappeared.

"You certainly changed that skyline," I said. I was awed.

"Thank you," said my Chief of Naval Operations, "but don't forget that skylines are very individualistic things, and depend on where you are standing."

"Well," I said, "maybe not for the mapmaker."

"Two hundred years from now, when that gully we've made today has cooled down, we are going to build a thousand swimming pools," said my Chief of Naval Operations. The children cheered.

We left by monorail and caboose, transferred to pneumatic capsules and were sucked back through the vacuum to Headquarters. My bag man got tubesick.

I wanted to give Veronica a medal at dinner but there seemed to be some rule against it. As a person in power, I have to be understanding about such things. Rules apply to all of us, weak or strong. Since my election, I take an almost perverse pleasure in finding that there are limits. Thank God for them.

Night comes on like a blanket of tree bark. Our own weight and fatigue pulls us down, sags our cheeks and buttocks. I have more speeches to make, reports to read. I kiss my Staff goodnight and eventually fall to my slumbers, such as they are.

I do not permit myself to dream. The world waits for the sun to come round by me again, and that is heavy knowledge. The phone light glows red in the pitch. I have practiced reaching for it as a cowboy for his gun. I sleep on my heart side. During Inspections, Schlepp stays awake all night and tries to catch me doggo and loggy. He has a stopwatch and clipboard, and he times me from the first prod to that moment when the phone is against my ear and I am upright and coherent.

I can do it in milliseconds.

Buffalo Bill has nothing on me.