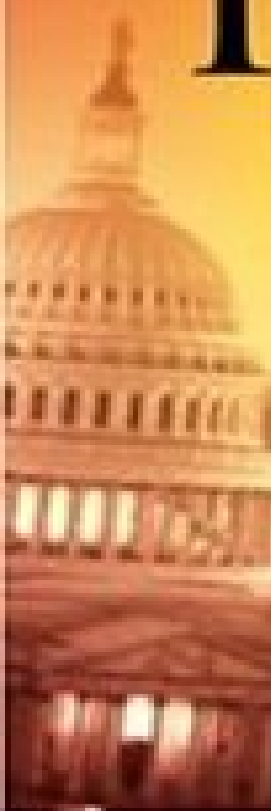


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TERM LIMITS



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. . . Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed, that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government . . . it is their Right, it is their Duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future Security.

—THOMAS JEFFERSON,
The Declaration of Independence

THE OLD WOOD CABIN SAT ALONE, SURROUNDED by trees and darkness. The shades were drawn, and a dog lay motionless on the front porch. A thin stream of smoke flowed out of the chimney and headed west, across the rural Maryland countryside toward Washington, D.C. Inside, a man sat silently in front of the fireplace, shoving stacks of paper into the hot flames.

The papers were the product of months of tedious and meticulous work. Each sheet represented hour upon hour of surveillance notes, in-depth subject profiles, and maps of neighborhoods throughout the D.C. metropolitan area. He knew when the police patrolled, when the newspapers were delivered, who jogged and at what time, and most importantly, where his targets slept and what time they awoke.

He and his men had stalked them for months, watching and waiting, patiently discerning which part of their daily routine could be exploited—and when they would be most vulnerable. His strong hands reached for the fire and stopped short. Letting them hang near the flames, he flexed them straight, then pulled them into tight fists. The men he had been stalking had sent him to some of the most obscure places on the face of the planet to kill people who were deemed a threat to the national security of the United States of America.

He had lost track of the number of people he had killed in the service of his country. He had not intentionally blocked the tally from his mind, it was just something he had never bothered to calculate. Whatever the number was, he held no regrets for the men he had killed. They were honorless, evil psychopaths—killers of innocent civilians.

The solitary figure sitting in front of the fire was an assassin of assassins, an exporter of death, trained and funded by the United States government. His short blond hair glowed as he stared deeper and deeper into the flames, the crisp fire eventually turning into a hypnotic blur. Tomorrow he would kill for the first time on American soil. The times, places, and targets had all been chosen. In less than twenty-four hours the course of American politics would be changed forever.

The sun rose over Washington, D.C., marking the start of what would be a long and busy day. With the president's annual budget twenty-four hours away from a full House vote, the town was in a frenzy. Congressmen, senators, bureaucrats, and lobbyists were making a last-minute push to amend or strike certain elements of the budget. The count was too close to call, and the leaders of both parties were exerting great pressure on their members to vote along partisan lines.

No one was exerting more pressure than Stu Garret, the president's chief of staff. It was nearing 9 A.M., and Garret was ready to explode. He was standing in the Blue Room of the White House watching the president read "Humpty-Dumpty" to a group of kindergartners, and his anger was increasing by the second. Garret had told the president that the photo op with the kids was out of the question, but the White House press secretary, Ann Moncur, had convinced the president otherwise. It was rare for Garret to lose to anyone; even on the smallest point. But Moncur had sold the president on the idea that, in the throes of a cutthroat budget battle, it would be good PR for him to look as if he were above the dirty political horse-trading of Washington.

Garret had been working around the clock for the last month trying to get the votes needed to pass the budget. If the budget was defeated, their chances for reelection would be severely hampered. The count would be close, but there was a plan to make a last-minute charge. The only problem was that Garret needed the president back in his office making phone calls, not sitting in the Blue Room reading nursery rhymes.

As was typical of everything at the White House, the event had started late and was now running over its original half-hour slot. Garret looked down at his watch for the tenth time in the last five minutes and decided enough was enough. Looking to his left, he glared at Ann Moncur, who was standing several feet away. Garret slid between the wall and several other White House staffers and worked his way toward Moncur. When he reached her, he pulled her back and cupped his hand over her ear. "This is the dumbest stunt you've ever pulled. If the budget gets torpedoed tomorrow, you're history. This circus has gone fifteen minutes over schedule. I'm going to the Oval Office, and if he isn't there in five minutes, I'm going to come back in here and personally throw your ass out on the street."

Moncur strained to smile and look relaxed. She glanced around the room and noticed that some of the other staffers and several members of the press were watching. She nodded her head several times and was relieved when Garret stepped away and headed for the door. For obvious reasons, Moncur didn't care for the older, crass chief of staff. Simply put, he was a pain in the ass to work for.

Michael O'Rourke walked purposefully down the hallway of the Cannon House Office Building. It was just after 9 A.M., and the building was crowded with people. O'Rourke avoided making eye contact with anyone for fear of being stopped. He was not in a good mood. O'Rourke didn't like Washington; in fact, it was safe to say he hated Washington. Midway down the hall, he turned into an office and closed the door behind him.

Inside were five men wearing dark suits and drinking coffee. O'Rourke shot his secretary a quick glance, but before she could respond, all five men closed in on him.

"Congressman O'Rourke, could I please have a moment of your time? I just need five minutes," pleaded the man closest to the door.

A short, pudgy man pushed his way to the front. "Congressman, I would like to speak to you about how the farmers in your district will be affected if you don't vote for the president's budget."

The thirty-two-year-old freshman congressman held up his hands. "Gentlemen, you're wasting your time. I've already made up my mind, and I will not be voting for the president's budget. Now if you will kindly vacate my office, I have work to do." The group started to protest, but O'Rourke opened the door and waved them into the hallway. All five men stumbled to grab their briefcases and then headed off dejectedly, in search of another congressman to cajole.

The portly lobbyist hung back and tried to give it another shot. "Congressman, I've talked to my people in your district, and they've told me you have a lot of farmers waiting for the crop-failure money the president has in his budget." The lobbyist waited for a reaction from O'Rourke but got none. "If this budget doesn't pass, I wouldn't want to be in your shoes come next election."

O'Rourke looked at the man and pointed toward the door with his thumb. "I have work to do."

With the vote so close the lobbyist was not willing to give up easily. "Mr. O'Rourke, if you vote no on the president's budget, the American Farmers Association will be left with no other choice than to support your opponent next year."

O'Rourke shook his head and said, "Nice try, but I'm not running for a second term." Waving goodbye, the young congressman grabbed the door and closed it in the lobbyist's face. O'Rourke turned to face his secretary, Susan Chambers.

Susan smiled and said, "I'm sorry, Michael. I told them you had a full calendar, but they insisted on waiting around to see if you would fit them in."

"No apologies needed, Susan." Michael left the main reception area and walked into his office. He set his briefcase on the chair beside his desk and picked up a stack of pink messages. Yelling toward the door, he asked, "Has Tim come in yet?"

"No."

"Has he called?"

"Yes. He said that since there isn't a snowball's chance in hell of the president taking the funding for the Rural Electrification Administration out of the budget, he's going to get some errands done and be in around one." Tim O'Rourke was Michael's younger brother by two years and his chief of staff.

"I'm glad everyone is so positive around here."

Susan stood up from behind her desk and walked to the doorway of O'Rourke's office. "Michael, we're only being realists. I admire that you're trying to do what's right, but the problem is, guys like you don't win in Washington."

"Well, thank you for your vote of confidence, Susan."

Susan looked up into O'Rourke's bloodshot eyes. "Michael, were you out again last night?" O'Rourke nodded his head yes. "This bachelor life is going to kill you. Why don't you make an honest woman out of that adorable girlfriend of yours?"

O'Rourke had been hearing it from everyone lately, but he was in no position to get married. Maybe in another year . . . after he got out of Washington. He looked down and sighed, "Susan, I'm Irish, we tend to get married late in life. Besides, I'm not so sure she'll have me."

"That's a lie and you know it. She adores you. Take it from a woman: I've seen the way she looks at you with those big brown eyes. You're the one, so don't screw it up. There aren't too many like her out there." Chambers slapped him in the stomach. "I hope being crowned the most eligible bachelor in Washington hasn't gone to your head!"

O'Rourke frowned and shook his head. "Very funny, Susan."

Chambers turned and walked away, laughing.

"I'm glad you're getting such a kick out of this, Susan. Hold all of my calls. I have an appointment at noon, and until then I don't want to be disturbed."

"What if your grandfather or Liz calls?"

"No one, I don't want to be disturbed." O'Rourke shut the door and sat down behind his desk.

WHEN THE PRESIDENT ENTERED HIS OFFICE, he found Garret and his budget director, Mark Dickson, sitting on a couch by the fireplace, poring over the prospective vote count, trying to figure out whom they could sway to their side. Stevens knew his chief of staff was in a bad mood, and he did not have the energy for an argument. So he decided to defuse the situation and take orders. As he walked over to them, he took off his jacket, threw it on the other couch, and clapped his hands together. "All right, Stu, I'm all yours for the rest of the day. Just tell me what you want me to do."

Garret looked up and motioned for his boss to take a seat. Garret and Dickson had been in the office since 6 A.M., putting together a final list of possible holdouts. With one day to go, they had secured 209 votes. The opposition had 216 votes, and ten congressmen were still undecided. Garret had a piece of paper in front of him with two headings: UNDECIDED and POSSIBLE DEFECTORS. Ten names were under the undecided heading, and six under the possible-defectors heading. Both columns had shrunk considerably in the past week as the vote approached.

"All right, here's the current situation, Jim." No one but Stu Garret ever called the president by his first name. "We need to put this thing to bed today. Basset and Koslowski are up on the Hill playing good cop—bad cop with the fence-sitters. We're going to try and start a stampede by noon." Tom Basset was the Speaker of the House, and Jack Koslowski was the chairman of the House Appropriations Committee.

"Are we in a position to do that?" the president asked.

Garret leaned back in his chair, placed his hands behind his neck, and smiled. "Tom Basset has a meeting with Congressman Moore at eleven, and when that meeting is over, Frank Moore is going to make an announcement that he's backing the budget."

"How much is it going to cost us?" asked Dickson.

"Only about ten million."

"You guys are going to bag Frank Moore for ten million? That's nothing more than pocket change to Frank." The president shook his head. "How are you going to get him to settle for so little?"

Garret's smile emanated confidence. "We recruited some outside help to get him to see things our way."

"What kind of help?"

Garret paused for a long moment and replied flatly, "Arthur Higgins arranged to have some photos taken of the congressman and a certain young woman."

Arthur Higgins. There was no more mysterious name in all of Washington. Stevens seriously wondered whether it was in his best interest to know any details. Arthur Higgins was an ominous and legendary figure in the power circles of Washington and many of the world's other capitals. For forty years Higgins had run the most secretive branch of the CIA. Officially he never existed nor did his department. Higgins had been the author and controller of the Agency's most delicate and dangerous covert operations since the height of the cold war. Several years earlier he had been forced out of the CIA in a heated power struggle. What he had been doing with his time and talents since was something that was whispered about behind closed doors.

Stevens looked up from the paper and said, "You're going to blackmail Frank Moore?"

Garret smiled and said, "Essentially."

"I don't want to know the details, do I?"

"No." Garret shook his head. "Just trust me when I say Moore will see no other choice than to vote our way."

Stevens nodded solemnly and replied, "Next time, I would prefer it if you would let me know about these things before they're set in motion."

"Understood." After a brief silence Garret turned their attention back to the task at hand. "Jim, I need to get you working on a couple of these possible defectors. Our staffers have been feeling these guys out, and I think that two of the six will give us their vote if you promise not to back their opponent in the next election. Out of the ten undecideds and the six possible defectors, we're going to have to get at least nine or the budget is dead, and if that happens, we may as well kiss next year's election good-bye."

"What about any possible defections from our side?" the president asked.

Garret leaned forward. "Don't worry about that. If one of those little pricks steps out of line, Koslowski will cut every penny of federal money from their district. We're not going to have any traitors." Besides being chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, Jack Koslowski was the party's chief neck-breaker on the Hill. He was known and feared by all as one of the roughest players in D.C. "What I need from you this morning are some real nice down-home phone calls to a couple of these rookie congressmen, telling them how much their vote would mean to you and the country. Maybe even invite them over here for lunch."

The request was met with a grimace by the president, but Garret continued, "Jim, I know you don't like mixing with the common folk, but if you don't get a couple of these boys to switch over to our side, you're going to have to do an awful lot of ass-kissing come election time." Garret paused, giving the president time to reflect on unpleasant memories of the campaign trail. "If everything goes well with Moore, which I'm sure it will, I want to schedule a press conference at noon to try and spook the rest of these guys into settling. At the press conference I want you to stand up and complain about congressional gridlock. Tell them that you can't start fixing this nation if they don't pass your budget. You know the routine. I wrote a speech for you last night, and when we're done with the phone calls, I want to run through it with you." Garret hadn't actually written the speech. One of his staffers had, but Garret was not one to give credit to others.

"How do you want him to respond if they start asking about us buying votes?" asked Dickson.

"Flat out deny it. Tell them that there are several congressmen who feel very strongly about getting certain kinds of economic relief to their districts, which are in dire need of help. Deny it, deny it, deny it! This thing will all be over in a couple of days, and then the press will move on to something else. If they start to lay into you about any frivolous parts of the bill, just squirm your way out of it, and then look at your watch and end the press conference. Tell them you have to meet some diplomats from one of the former Soviet republics." Garret quickly jotted down a note to himself. "By the time you go on, I'll have an excuse ready."

The president nodded his head in a positive manner. He was a professional politician, and Garret was one of the best handlers in the business. He trusted Garret completely when it came to manipulating public opinion.

Garret stabbed his index finger at the list of congressmen. "All right, let's stay focused on the game. I don't give a shit what the press thinks, just so long as we get this budget passed." Garret picked up a pen and circled three names under the possible-defectors heading. "Now, Jim, these three boys are as big hicks as they come. They're a couple of Mr. Smith Goes to Washington types. Just like Jimmy Stewart in the movie. All three are freshmen and are full of ideals. If you call them up and beat the commander-in-chief drum, I think we can get them to jump sides. Give them the old 'Rome wasn't built in a day, we can't save the nation overnight' speech." The president nodded his head, signaling a full understanding of the performance needed. "These next two guys are the ones I was telling you about. If we promise not to back their opponents in the next election, they'll give us their votes. All they want is a personal guarantee from you . . . they said they don't trust my word." Garret let out a loud laugh. "Can you imagine that?"

The president and Dickson joined in with smiles and a couple of chuckles. Garret pressed on. "Now this last rep is a real nut-bag, and I'm not so sure she'll play ball. Koslowski wanted her name on the list. She's from one of his neighboring districts in Chicago. She's a black freshman and she scares the shit out of me. She's a bona fide race-baiter. She'll call anyone a racist, and I mean anyone. She'd call the pope a racist if she had the chance. I think in exchange for her vote she's going to want to be invited to several high-profile events and be put on some of the more powerful committees. At which point she will stand up and call our biggest financial backers racists and embarrass the shit out of them. I would prefer to avoid having to deal with her if at all possible."

The president massaged his fingers. "Why is she on the list?"

"I told you, Jack put her on there just in case we need a vote at the last minute. We're not going to deal with her unless we absolutely have to. Now let's get started with the three rookies."

The first name at the top of the list was Michael O'Rourke. The president picked up his pen and stabbed the tip at O'Rourke's name. "Michael O'Rourke—where have I heard that name before?"

Garret looked over at his boss and shook his head. "I have no idea. He's a freshman independent from Minnesota." Garret glanced down at his notes. "He was on Senator Olson's staff before he was elected. He graduated from the University of Minnesota where he played hockey. After college he went into the Marine Corps and fought in the Gulf War. It says here he was leading a squad of Recon Marines behind enemy lines during the air war conducting target assessment when they saw a coalition pilot shot down. He and his men rushed to the pilot's aid and held off an entire company of Iraqi soldiers until the cavalry showed up. He was awarded the Silver Star."

The president continued to stare at the name and mumbled to himself, "I know I've heard that name before."

Mark Dickson interjected, "Sir, you may have read about him in the papers. He's recently been crowned the most eligible bachelor in Washington by the social columnists."