

37 Minutes

by Tracy Coyle

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Thursday, June 19th

3:28pm

“Are we ready?”

“Yes Mr. President. One minute.”

He looked again around the room. All the furniture except the Resolute Desk had been removed. No paintings hung on the walls, no statues or busts were displayed. He wondered, again, at his reasoning. Was he trying to hide from the history, the ghosts that clearly occupied this room? Or was he trying to protect them from the future, the soon to be now?

The desk had 3 pieces of paper and his phone. No pens were in view. If someone were allowed to look, they would find the desk was empty. All the drawers had been cleaned out. Despite the complaints of the camera crew, the window coverings were gone also.

“Thirty seconds sir.”

Except for the C-Span producer, the camera crew were all military personnel. Four men specifically chosen for this, event. The producer, William Porter, had decades of experience and was comfortable in the White House and Congress. He had also been cleared by Secret Service down to his first grade teacher.

“Ten seconds. Five, four...” the hand cued him....

“When I last spoke to you three days ago, I said that when I knew more, I would tell you, the American people,

everything I knew, as soon as I knew it. The investigations will continue for months, probably years, but we know more, and I am going to share it with you and then tell you what I am going to do about it.”

No preamble, no ‘good evening’. The disaster, no, the attack was beyond platitudes or niceties. He was not going to start off trying to soften what was about to come. For three days fear and terror had griped the nation and tonight, it was going to erupt into violent hatred and the only one capable of stopping that was him. But to do it, he was going to have to act like everyone wanted to, and he was going to have to shock the American people and the world into ending the violence immediately. Twelve people knew what was coming and in less than 40 minutes, it will either have worked, or started the end.

He reached down and pressed a button on the phone.
“Send in the Secretary.”

The door opened immediately and the Secretary of Defense walked in. William George Franklin had never served in the military but over the last year, he had earned the respect of the Joint Chiefs and the troops in harms way. He was a soldiers’ civilian. Franklin walked to the side of the Desk and turned to face both the President and the camera.

“Please report Mr. Secretary.”

“Yes sir. Estimates of the crowd prior to launch were in the area of 25,000. Photos of similar sized crowds suggest the number in that area. We will never know for sure. Teams have recovered just over 11,000 sets of remains but all of them are from 5 miles or farther away from the Launch Pad. There were just 87 survivors within 10 miles of the Launch Pad, all have since died.”

That was a shock. His briefing an hour ago said 22 were still alive. The Secretary continued.

“There are 19 hundred and forty-seven in burn units around the entire southeast. The report is that 90% of them will probably be dead within the next week. The remainder will need significant rehabilitation. We still don’t have a full count, but right now, 37 thousand, four hundred and sixty three are permanently blind, another 22 thousand are currently blind but may regain some or all of their sight. Anyone that could have seen the actual launch, is permanently blind. The people furthest away that are permanently blind were 27 miles from the Launch Pad, so far.”

“We expect that the 14 thousand survivors from 10 to 15 miles from the Pad will mostly survive but the injuries are all very serious and the doctors are refusing to give us survival estimates. Anyone 20 miles or more away from the Launch Pad will probably survive and anyone 35 miles or more should be relatively safe.”

“We are estimating the dead at 141,250. Seriously injured and not expected to survive at 17,475. Injured but expected to live at 81,900. That is just over 250,000 dead or seriously injured. In terms of property damage, the Cape is a total loss. All facilities not outright destroyed are unusable for tens or even hundreds of years. Interstate 95 and Florida Highway 1 are closed from Sebastian on the south to Oak Hill on the north. Highway 528 is closed east of State Road 520. Titusville, Cocoa and Melbourne are gone as are most of the communities in the closed zone. Department of Homeland Security and FEMA estimate the property loss will approach one trillion dollars, but that is just a guess at this point.”

“Sir that concludes the injury and damage assessment.”

The numbers were staggering but he knew they were still preliminary and whole areas were still being searched. It

was the peak tourist season and no one knows how many were in the area.

“Mr. Secretary, you have informed me of the tactical situation. Please report exactly what you have told me.”

Franklin swallowed hard. He had strongly disagreed, as had most of the Cabinet with releasing the full report. Given the mood of the country and most of the civilized world, this was going to throw gas on and already dangerous situation. But the President would not back down and here he was, giving the ammunition to start the next, and probably last, world war.

“Sir.” He paused and swallowed again. During the first part of the briefing, he kept looking at the President, never glancing once at the camera that was capturing everything for more than a billion people waiting for, desperate for information.

“Analysis of the debris has found two different materials. There may have been some attempt to mix materials in an attempt to hide the sources, but it is clear that the material had two separate and distinct origins. We have shared the data with three other nations and they confirm our analysis. The device was a small rocket similar to those used in the Middle East for short range targets, 30 to 45 miles. We believe it was launched from a tanker truck that had been fitted with a launch cradle and driven to a point on or near the Turtle Creek Golf Club south of Rockledge. Travel time was less than 60 seconds from launch to detonation, which occurred approximately 300 feet above and 1000 feet from the Launch Pad. The estimated yield was 37 kilotons.”

“The source of the material Mr. Secretary,” the President interrupted.

“Iran and North Korea, sir.”

“That sounds convenient Mr. Secretary.”

“Yes sir. However, the UN confirmed the signatures on the Iranian material and the North Korean material was a match for the Syrian material found by Israel in 07 and a ship detained two months ago coming out of North Korea.”

“And how did that material and the rocket get into the United States?”

The sharp tone was much less forceful than the same question the President ask three hours ago. He should have an answer, but even Homeland Security was scrambling. “We don’t know. Sir.”

The President nodded but his clenched jaw, prominent as it was, was clear to everyone in the room and watching around the planet.

He reached for the phone again and stabbed the button hard enough to make the phone jump on the desk. “Send them in.”

The door opened and the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Harold Holebrook led in three others. Michael Penn, National Security Advisor, William Prindle, Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Karen Demitrov, Director of FEMA.

They stopped in front of the desk and faced the President.

“I have only one question for the CIA and the FBI, can you confirm the findings of the Defense Department?”

Holebrook led off. “Sir, the CIA can confirm the source materials. We are still trying to determine the method of getting the materials and equipment into the United States.” He looked over at Prindle.

“Sir, we are working on locating the people and methods used to get the weapon into place.”

“That was not my question. Can you confirm the Department of Defense findings?”

“No sir. But we concur in their assessment.” It was just beyond the ability of the FBI to analyze nuclear material but the President was not interested in the FBI’s limitations today.

“Thank you. Please stand over there,” the President nodded towards the Secretary of Defense and the two men moved to stand behind him.

“Director Demitrov. Do you need anything you are not getting?”

A professional, never bothered by the ‘men’s club’, she was terrified for the first time in her life. She knew the others were also. The President had raged for two days and no one was spared niceties. She had given the President two private briefings and after both, she had been flooded with manpower and materials, first for the casualties, second to handle the flow of materials and equipment from the first flood.

“No sir. We have eighty crews per shift, working twenty four seven looking for survivors. Seventeen field hospitals are up and running and we have 41 morgues trying to establish identities. Hurricane season has been relatively quiet and I have been told it will continue to be so for the next 10 days or so.”

“Good.” He stared at her for a second and then nodded to his right. She stepped over to the side and suppressed a sigh.

3:34pm

“Mr. Penn.”

“Sir.”

“Are they here?”

“Yes sir.”

“Bring them in.”

Penn turned and walked back to the door and opened it.

“Bring them in.”

A Marine in combat gear walked in followed by two men that looked miniature in comparison. Three more equally dressed Marines followed them. All four Marines carried sidearms and automatic rifles. Secret Service just about had a cow when informed of the plans and spent two days vetting the Marines but they still protested the weapons in the Oval Office. Especially when no Secret Service agent would be present.

He overruled his detail and the Director. He turned again to the camera.

“The men that have been escorted in are Ambassador to the United Nations for North Korea, Kim Yung and the Ambassador to the United Nations for Iran, Alhemed Fara-Said.” The President nodded to the detail and Yung was taken by the arm and led to the front of the desk.

“I must pro...”

“SHUT UP! I don’t give a damn.” He reached down and picked up the first of the three pieces of paper. “This document voids your diplomatic credentials.”

“You can’t do...”

“SHUT UP! Marine, if he opens his mouth again, shoot him.” The Marine escort took his sidearm, released the safety and put the gun to the Ambassador’s head. The terror was clear in his eyes and the Ambassador from Iran stirred and was quickly ‘steadied’ by two of the Marines.

“When you leave this room, you will be taken to a detention facility where you will be held indefinitely pending negotiations for your release. Step back.”

The Marine guided the man back into the middle of the detail. A nod from the President and the two Marines holding the Iranian moved him forward. When they were standing in front of the desk, the President lifted an eyebrow in question. The Iranian made no comment but continued to stare back.

“Very well.” Picking up the second piece of paper, he continued. “This document voids your diplomatic credentials and is an order for your arrest to stand charges in a military court. I have sufficient evidence to implicate you directly and I intend for everyone to see it.” If he expected a response, it was not happening. He nodded to the detail and they returned to their positions near the door with both former Ambassadors firmly in hand.

3:39pm

He turned to the camera.

“Over the last two days, sufficient evidence has been presented to implicate the governments of Iran and North Korea, as well as several other organizations in a plan to detonate a nuclear device on American soil so as to cause significant damage and casualties. That information is being provided to the UN Security Council and our Allies right now. Mr. Penn.”

“Sir.”

“Execute scimitar.”

“Yes sir. If I may?”

The President turned the phone to the man and he pressed a button. “Execute scimitar on Presidential Orders.”

“No wait, you can’t...” came a strangled cry from the back of the room. The Iranian was looking at the North Korean with fear and, sympathy? He turned back to the President and saw the stare. “NO.”

“Captain?”

The Iranian was grabbed by both arms and stood against the wall. The Captain, took out his sidearm and placed the barrel on the Iranian’s forehead. The North Korean didn’t understand, he kept looking at the Iranian and back to the President.

“Four minutes Mr. President.”

“Very good.” The President faced the camera. “We wait for four minutes before proceeding.”

A noise came from the back of the room and the strong smell of urine filled the room. The Iranian had pissed himself. Whether it was his knowledge of Scimitar or his expectation that something similar was about to befall his country, the President didn't care. He actually smiled.

“Every action has a consequence Mr, Ambassador.”

Minutes passed.

The phone chimed once and the President nodded. Penn picked up the phone and after 10 seconds put it back down without saying anything.

“Thirty three minutes sir.”

“Very good.” The President looked at the North Korean who was still obviously confused but the Iranian was staring straight ahead. “Execute Pesh-kabz.”

The Iranian's eyes went wide and as his mouth formed the scream, the Marines' gun discharged. Only the Marines and the President stayed standing. The camera jerked and everyone turned first to the Iranian who was slumping to the floor and then back to the President.

“Mr. Penn?”

“Yes, sir, sorry sir.” Penn stood up straight and reached for the phone. Depressing the button as if it were a trigger he did not want to touch, he spoke towards the phone.

“Execute pesh-kabz, on Presidential orders.” He pressed the button again and turned to look at the Marines. The Captain had reholstered his sidearm and was standing in front of the North Korean.

“It will take about three minutes sir.”

Less than a minute later, the phone chimed and Penn picked up the handset. A single nod and he returned the handset. “Scimitar one has detonated sir. Pesh-kabz has crossed the border.”

3:48pm

The President nodded and turned to the camera.

“When I spoke to you two days ago, I promised swift retaliation against those responsible. A few minutes ago, 63 cruise missiles from ships in the Pacific launched. Each missile carries two tactical nuclear warheads and they are striking North Korean military targets all along the DMZ. Over the next 31 minutes, three cities in North Korea will also be attacked. Sunch'on, Kanggye and Namp.”

This time the North Korean's eyes went wide and he collapsed in a heap. The President stared at him for a few seconds then nodded to the Marines. They carefully lifted the unconscious man and left the room with him, leaving the body of the Iranian against the wall.

“The towns I mentioned are locations for Presidential Palaces, but maybe the North Koreans didn't think we knew about them. The North Koreans apparently believed that their ability to launch against the South Koreans would stay our hand indefinitely. That, or the prospect of war with China. Those threats are soon to be rendered, meaningless.”

Penn looked at his watch and nodded to the President.

“At the same time, the Iranians have spent the last several years feeling threatened, and threatening. That ends tonight also. Seventeen American bombers are over Iran, I am sure, based on expected responses, that the Iranians have begun to lock down their nuclear facilities. We will see soon if they were very good or not. In any case, Tehran and Qom will shortly cease to exist.”

“The governments of Russia and China have been politely warned to stand down from any response. If all goes as planned, this will be over in 37 minutes, or about 28 minutes from now. After which all of our forces will stand down and withdraw.”

“Over the next several days, reports will come in concerning the damage and death tolls from my orders. They will be at least a magnitude greater than we have suffered. Many innocent civilians will die, are dying. I do not ask for forgiveness nor offer an apology. For too many years we have tried to be polite neighbors to countries that consider that politeness a weakness. The attack of June 22nd will not go unanswered, nor un-avenged. We lost thousands of people but I can't help but think of those 8 astronauts on that Launch Pad and what they represented to the world. They were the target. The hope they represented was the target.”

The door to the Oval Office opened and the Vice President stepped in. The Marines also returned and three went over and picked up the body and removed it. The Captain escorted them to the door and closed it, remaining in the room.

“Madam Vice President?”

“Sir, the Russians and Chinese have agreed and the Chief Justice is ready.”

The phone chimed and with a look, Penn picked up the handset. He nodded several times and then, “Keep us informed” he hung up the handset.

“Sir. The Norks...sorry, the North Koreans got off two missiles but both failed to detonate on impact. The South Korean military is dealing with them. All other scimitar operations are proceeding as expected. The Iranians got off three missiles, we intercepted one, the Israelis' got the

other two. All three were destroyed without detonations. Pesh-kabz one, three, four and five have already completed, two and....”

The phone chimed and Penn picked it up immediately and then realizing what he had done, looked at the President. “Ok.”

Penn hung up the phone and continued. “Two, six, seven and eight have all executed as planned.”

He made no mention of the remaining two squads and the President decided to leave the issue open for the moment. He turned to the camera.

4:01pm

“My first responsibility is to the protection of the people of the United States. We failed.....I failed and we have suffered for it. I take responsibility because I was one of those that thought we were stronger for working with all countries, the good and the bad, the friends and those that we wanted as friends.“

He turned to the Vice President and nodded. She turned, and nodded to the Marine Captain who opened the door and admitted the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. They both approached the desk. The President reached down and picked up the third piece of paper.

“Chief Justice Roberts, this is my resignation.” He handed the page to the Justice who read the short paragraphs. He turned to the Vice President. “Madam Vice President, do you concur with the President?”

“I do not. I think we need him now more than ever. But I understand why and I accept that.”

“Very well,” said Roberts who turned and nodded to the President. The President came out from behind the desk and headed for the door. The Captain turned and opened the door preceding the President through but just as he got to the door, his sidearm was pulled from the holster from behind, he turned quickly but the President had planned this and practiced it for hours, the gun went off with the Captain’s hand still reaching. The President fell backwards and the gun fell from his hands.

The room was silent. No one moved. The Captain finally bend down over the President and knew before trying that it was useless, the pool of blood forming behind the

President's head was enormous. But he checked and found no pulse.

Thirty seven minutes after the camera went on, it went dark.

Wednesday, September 17th

“Madam President.”

“Ambassador, how good of you to come.”

“Thank you for taking the time to see me.”

“So, tell me. How did it go?”

“Better than we expected. Turn out was high and Ayadi was clearly the winner. There will be no run-offs and he wants me to tell you that he is ready to work with the United States.”

“That’s great. And reconstruction?”

“It too is happening better than expected. There is a sense of ...hope for the future.”

“Good, good.”

“Tell me Madam President, will you ever use the Office?”

“Nope. Haven’t been in there since the last night. Not planning on going in there. Everyone that goes in there says the President is still there. The Haunted Office is the unofficial name. The Roosevelt Room will do for me. Who knows what the next President will do.”

“So, you are not running again?”

“Everyone wants to know” she smiled. “We’ll see how things progress. We have a long way to go and I have a promise to keep. Thank you for coming by and telling me

in person. Tell your President that I look forward to meeting him in person!”

“Thank you Madam President. I will tell him. Good day.”

She walked him to the door and then closed the door. She took out the piece of paper. Seven words in a barely readable scrawl “Promise to stay vigilant, keep us safe.”

Always. Rest my friend.