

THE SHELL GAME

PROLOGUE

Washington, DC

14 June 2009

The hotel suite is richly decorated in cream-colored fabrics and matching carpet. The turquoise drapes are drawn, blocking out the view of downtown Washington and any “prying eyes.” A series of aluminum steam table pans situated on warming trays cover a small side table, the aroma of scrambled eggs, bacon, and hash browns filling the room.

Ignoring the hunger pangs growling in his stomach, Colonel Graeme “the Bull” Turnbull, U.S. Army, directs his harsh blue-eyed gaze at the two civilians seated directly across the conference table. Ryan Gessaman, a rugged man in his forties, wearing a dark suit and matching bow tie, had been a senior assistant to Richard Perle, former chairman of the Defense Policy Board. Perle, known around Washington power circles as the “Prince of Darkness,” is himself a close friend and adviser to former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and a major investor in a number of defense companies. Perle is also co-founder of the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), a neoconservative political think tank established in 1997 that promotes American dominance in world affairs.

Turnbull does not recognize Gessaman’s companion, an as-yet unidentified woman with thick, shoulder-length blonde curly hair and penetrating hazel eyes, her navy business suit partially concealing an athletic physique.

“Colonel, are you sure we can’t interest you in some breakfast?”

“No, thank you, sir.”

“Well, if you change your mind. . .” Gessaman opens a sealed file. “I understand you’re currently stationed at Camp Anaconda. How long have you been in Iraq?”

“Since the beginning. I started in Afghanistan with the 187th Airborne Regimental Combat Team, the ‘Rakkasans.’ We were the first boots on the ground. Same for Iraq. *Ne Desit Virtus--*”

“–let valor not fail.” The woman translates. “When did Military Intelligence recruit you?”

“The day Psy Ops found out I spoke fluent Arabic.”

“So you were with M.I. two years, then Counterintelligence. Looks like you were quite busy. . . over one hundred interrogations.” The woman’s eyes narrow. “Tell me, Colonel, what’s the most interesting thing you ever learned from these ‘sessions.’?”

Turnbull frowns. “You don’t want to know.”

“Try me.”

“Back in 2005, I reported that Bin Laden had escaped to the Hadhramaut of Yemen, that he was being protected by Sayyid tribesmen. The info went up the food chain, but nothing ever happened. Seems the Sayyids of the Hadhramaut are allied with members of the Saudi Royal Family. . .to go after him would have insulted our Saudi friends. Better to just pretend the number one bad guy’s hiding in a cave in Afghanistan than confront the real enemy, huh?”

The woman nods. “I share your frustration, Colonel. Off the record, CIA ran

an assessment of the blowback of a Bin Laden capture. Sometimes bad guys are better left alive than dead.”

“Is that why we’re funding Sunni insurgents with ties to al Qaeda?” Turnbull watches their expressions drop. “Yeah, I know about that, most of the other grunts in M.I. do too. You don’t have to be a brain surgeon to figure out where these guys are getting their money and weapons.”

“It’s a complicated situation, Colonel,” Ryan Gessaman replies.

“Not when you’re getting shot at.”

“Shiite radicals must be contained.”

“Look, friend, let’s get something straight: I ain’t in politics and the old ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend’ policy doesn’t fly with me, unless your definition of history is any period of time less than five years old. We supported Bin Laden to keep the Soviets in check, we support Saddam to keep the Iranians in check. . . now we’re supporting al Qaeda to keep Iraq from turning into a Shiite nation? Ever wonder why we’re not exactly being embraced these days?”

The woman stares straight ahead, saying nothing, her silence saying everything.

“Let’s refocus on Iraq,” Gessaman says. “The President has decided to go with a troop surge in Afghanistan. Your thoughts?”

An icy glare crosses Turnbull’s eyes. “You don’t want to know my thoughts.”

“Off the record.”

“Off the record. . .” Turnbull smirks. “The last commander-in-chief started a forest fire, the new one seems a lot smarter about tossing matches. Still, the problems remain the same. Where’s the President getting these additional troops from? The Boy

Scouts? I'm working with soldiers that have been recycled so many times their starting to demand air miles. My enlisted men are so fried that a third of them no longer have any business carrying a weapon, let alone participating in combat operations where their presence jeopardizes the welfare of an entire platoon. And the Reserves and National Guardsmen? Nice surprise, not telling them deployment doesn't officially begin until their boots hit sand, meaning the six months their unit spent at the MOB stations didn't count."

Gessaman interrupts, "Morale aside, Colonel, we're asking for your assessment of--"

"Morale aside? Disillusion and morale don't mix real well on the battlefield. Our guys want to complete the mission, they're no longer sure what the mission is. Last month my soldiers killed a guy setting a roadside bomb. Turns out he was a sergeant in the Iraqi Army, the guys we're supposed to be training as our replacements! Who the hell are we fighting for? In the last ninety days, three of my Pfc's committed suicide. These were brave, outstanding soldiers. . . when they arrived three tours of duty ago. Two were on antidepressants, the third had already attempted suicide ten weeks earlier. His mental health officer and I had personally signed a recommendation that the soldier not be returned to active duty. My CO's response was that we had troop shortages, request denied."

"Duly noted, Colonel," said the blonde. "We appreciate the severity of the situation, which is why you are here. Now, if you could refocus your comments on the activities of the enemy."

“I’m sorry, ma’am, I didn’t get your name.”

“No, you didn’t. The insurgents, Colonel.”

“Insurgents are a small piece of a larger puzzle. Two years ago we were in the middle of a Sunni - Shi’ite civil war, now we’re seeing growing signs of a Shi’ite movement designed to unleash a nationwide blood bath aimed at American troops. The militias’ objective is to lure us out of the green zone, then pin us down in hostile neighborhoods using Iranian-made rocket-propelled grenade launchers. As a result, we’ve now ceased all military sweeps. Meanwhile, the local Sunni population is slowly being killed off or sent packing. By invading Iraq, we essentially radicalized the entire Muslim community and turned a secular society into a Shiite nation.”

“In your estimation, Colonel, what group is doing most of the damage?”

Turnbull looks hard at Gessaman. *They’re playing head games, leading me somewhere...* “Which group is the worst? The Shi’ite Death Squads. . . the Mahdi Army. . . the Badr Organization...take your pick. Essentially the groups trained by the Iranians. They come and go as they please, controlling neighborhoods, sometimes entire cities, and the Iraqi militia and police give them free reign. The civilians are too scared to venture out of their homes, and areas that used to be mixed have now segregated into either Sunni or Shi’ite simply out of necessity. Add to that the perpetual shortages of water and electricity, plus an exodus of ten thousand Iraqis a day and you’ve got an almost intolerable situation. But you already know that, don’t you Mr. Gessaman.”

Gessaman says nothing.

“Let’s talk about you, Colonel.” The blonde leafs through her own folder. “Both parents trace their roots to the Scottish Highlands, your family came to America just after

World War II. Grandfather was a war hero--”

“Yes, ma’am. He fought Rommel in North Africa.”

“According to your bio, you come from a long line of fighting men.”

“The Turnbull clan has fought in every war since Longshanks invaded Scotland.”

The Colonel smiles. “We were a wild sort, the only bunch of rowdies ever to have a bounty placed on the entire clan’s head.”

“Tell me about John Turnbull.” The blonde flashes an encouraging smile.

“John Turnbull. . . now there was a crazy muther. According to Scot lore, John was reputed to have killed more English during William Wallace’s raids than any other kinsman who wore the kilt. Used to bring a two-hundred pound Mastiff into battle. One time, John beheaded four English Knights while his dog chewed on their arms. True story. Some time after that this little English dweeb by the name of Kerr beheaded the dog and John simply lost it. Forgot all his training and got his arm chopped off, then he lost his head. Literally. War is hell, huh?”

The blonde again makes it a point to reference her notes. “According to Scot history, for the next two hundred years the Turnbolls waged war on the Kerr’s land.”

“That we did. See, us Highlanders. . . we never forget a debt.”

“Killed a lot of people in the process, I imagine.”

“Nothing I’m proud of, mind you. But you do what you have to.”

“Women and children too?”

The Colonel’s guard goes up. *She’s a spook. CIA most likely. Careful, Bull, this one’s a wolf in sheep’s clothing. . .*

Ryan Gessaman jumps in before he can reply. “Colonel, you’re right about

Iraq, it's become a real quagmire. Was it a mistake to go in? We'll let history decide. But the problem that refuses to allow democracy to take root in Iraq is the same one that threatens America – Islamic radicals. And everything's coming from Iran.”

“Ever hear the term, “Islamic Waqf,” asks the blonde. “It refers to an old Islamic precept that states Muslims have the right to claim any territory their people conquered by force. Any conquest, including the ones that date back over a thousand years.”

“That's a radical interpretation,” the Colonel counters. “Waqf is the act of giving an estate to the leaders of Islam to manage to help the poor.”

“Radicals are who we're dealing with, Colonel. America stumbled in Iraq, and radical Islam used the momentum to spread its tentacles throughout the Muslim world. Sure, Obama's presence may have affected Lebanon's election results, but Ahmadinejad is alive and kicking in Iran, fanning the flames of a dangerous ideology that thinks nothing of slaughtering Muslim and non-Muslim civilians alike to achieve their objectives. These radicals have infiltrated at least fifty-five different countries, and they won't be satisfied until they've retaken or recaptured every speck of land, from Madrid to the Middle East and then some. Their influence is spreading quickly throughout the Arab world, the more radical the violence, the more power they wield.”

Gessaman nods. “This is Nazi Germany all over again, only they're killing for Allah, which is a far more powerful cause than the Fuhrer. Radical Islam is winning the war of minds through an extensive propaganda program. Children are in Palestine, Jordan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia are being taught at an early age to despise the West. Text books and music videos depict Jews and Christians as blood-sucking animals, the West as

Satan worshipers. We have video-taped footage of first graders chanting for Jihad and the opportunity to blow themselves up in Allah's name. And as bad as things may seem now, it's going to get a whole-lot worse. Within the next three years we could be looking at Armageddon-like attacks that could lead to the end of open societies as we know it."

"Three years, Colonel," the blonde repeats. "Within three years Iran will be producing enriched uranium. Think about how a nuclear Iran would change the Middle East. The Saudis would demand nukes, then Egypt, Jordan, Syria. . . nuclear detente. But that's not even the worst of it. How do we stop Iran from supplying nuclear weapons to terrorist groups? Is there any doubt these Islamic radicals would use them? Remember how helpless you felt on September eleventh? Imagine waking up one day and learning a suitcase nuke just wiped out Manhattan, or Chicago, or Philadelphia, or Miami--"

"--or all of them at once!" Gessaman says. "Hijacking planes and flying them into skyscrapers requires long-range planning and specific talents, and we still failed to stop it from happening. Smuggling in a dozen 15-kiloton suitcase nukes would be a cakewalk. A dozen Hiroshimas, Colonel. Think Homeland Security could stop it? What about immigration? Christ, we can't keep a thousand Mexicans a day from sneaking over the border, and eight years after 9/11 our ports still remain virtually unprotected. And you know how Washington is, when it comes to terrorist threats, the politicians always wait until something bad happens before they react. You think the Dems are going to keep us safe?"

Turnbull closes his eyes, trying to imagine smoldering American cities, tens of millions vaporized, millions more dead and dying, the economy destroyed, panic in the streets.

“It’s an absolute nightmare,” the woman says, “and Iran is the linchpin. Rumsfeld screwed up Iraq, no argument, but the neo-cons were right about one thing: Threats must be addressed before they arrive, sponsors of terror held accountable. We simply cannot afford to allow the nuclear genie out of the bottle in the Persian Gulf.”

Colonel Turnbull’s heart races. “Why am I here?”

“You’re here because you know the enemy, because you’ve seen what they can do. You’re here because you have access to resources we may need.” Ryan Gessaman closes his folder. “For a moment, Colonel, I want you to imagine you’re the Secretary of Defense. Better yet, President Obama. Your top advisors have just told you in no uncertain terms that, within the next five years, Iran will have enriched uranium to build and supply nuclear suitcase bombs to radical extremists. How do you prevent the terrorists from using those weapons to decimate our nation and Western Society?”

“A preemptive invasion, I suppose.”

“Obama would never go for it,” Gessaman replies, “and it still wouldn’t work, at least not with conventional forces. You said it yourself, Iraq’s a disaster, our troops are burned out, the military is dangerously short on manpower, and the American people want out of the Persian Gulf. Even if you went ahead, you’d need upwards of half a million troops to invade Iran, maybe more to maintain control, which none of us truly believe can happen. Where do you get the troops?”

“You could institute a draft,” the blonde suggests, playing devil’s advocate.

Gessaman shakes his head. “The American public would never go for it.”

“Okay,” the Colonel says, “so we don’t invade, we simply take out their nuclear facilities, just like the Israelis did with that Iraqi reactor back in ‘81.”

“A good suggestion,” Gessaman states, “only there’s potentially dozens of facilities, most of them unknown, many underground, plus there’s the terrorist training camps, the military bases. . .no, if we do this it’s got to be all or nothing. And remember what you said earlier, by invading Iraq we essentially radicalized the entire Muslim community. The days of preemptively attacking another country are over. . .unless there’s just cause.”

“You mean if they hit us first?”

“Exactly.” The blonde’s eyes bear down on Turnbull. “The world had no problem with us invading Afghanistan after 9/11. Two years ago, I sat in a top-secret meeting between President Bush and his most-senior national security advisors about rewriting the rules of the Cold War. The old rules of deterrence don’t apply when it comes to suitcase nukes. Before his presidency ended, Bush announced that, should a nuclear suitcase bomb ever be detonated on American or Allied soil, the United States would hold the country who supplied the material ‘fully responsible’ for the aftermath. I think Obama would adhere to that.”

Colonel Turnbull wipes a bead of sweat from his brow. “What does ‘fully responsible’ mean exactly?”

“The term was purposely left vague, allowing for a nuclear. . . or other type of retaliatory attack. Should such an attack be directly linked to the Iranians through nuclear forensics, the outcome would change the geopolitical landscape forever.”

“You sound like Cheney. . .like you want them to hit us.”

Gessaman attempts to dismiss the charge with a smile. “The former VP is simply concerned about showing our enemies any chinks in the armor. Let’s not forget, it

was the Bush Administration's preemptive doctrine that kept this nation safe. Not a single attack on their watch."

"Wasn't 9/11 on their watch?"

The blonde loses her patience. "Iran's a very real nuclear threat, Colonel. You think Obama's 'citizen of the world' speeches are going to alter the aim of radical Islam?"

A rush of anxiety causes the Colonel to flush. "Who are you people?"

The blonde leans forward, lowering her voice. "We're like you, Colonel, loyal Americans who love this country too much to see it turned into a socialist nation. . .or a parking lot. Look at the EU, they know the importance of strength. Their last elections returned hardliners to power. Spain, Bulgaria, Hungary, Latvia, Greece, Ireland—"

"Just get to the point."

"Iran's about to become a nuclear threat. The only way we stop them is to control the variables. In doing so, we can cripple radical Islam once and for all."

"How?"

"By minimizing the damage. By allowing one targeted city to be nuked."

Colonel Turnbull sits back in his chair, suddenly feeling queasy. "You're insane."

"Twenty bombs or one bomb, Colonel, pick your poison. The difference between letting it happen and making it happen could be 50 million dead Americans and permanent martial law. Yes, a nuclear attack on an American city is a horrific price to pay, but it would limit the damage and turn the tables on our enemies, giving us the

excuse to eradicate the radical element of Islam once and for all. It would change the world.”

“Let me get this straight, you want to allow an entire American city to be nuked in order to turn Iran into a parking lot?”

“No, absolutely not. We hit only the desired Iranian targets. Nuclear facilities, military bases, terrorist training sites. A preemptive strike to prevent a dozen nuclear attacks on American cities.”

“But to wipe out a million Americans?” The Colonel mops sweat from his brow.

“Your grandfather fought in World War II,” the blonde reminds him. “Imagine what would have happened if Roosevelt had waited another six months before entering the war. All of Britain would have been lost, the Manhattan Project would have been delayed. Hitler’s heavy water experiments were nearly complete. Germany would have won the war.”

“But allowing a nuclear attack. . . on American soil?”

“New flash, Colonel: Roosevelt *knew* the Japanese were readying an attack on Pearl Harbor, and guess what – he allowed it to happen!”

“I heard that, I just never wanted to believe it.”

“Believe it,” Gessaman states. “U.S. intelligence had broken the enemy’s codes months earlier, we’d been monitoring their communications long before December 7, 1941. World War I was Roosevelt’s Iraq, he knew Congress and the American people would never agree to engage in another battle in Europe, not unless something drastic were to happen... an event so terrible, so heinous that it would incite an emotional public

response and elicit a massive call to arms. When he learned the Japanese were coming, FDR ordered the carriers out to sea and allowed the devastation in Pearl Harbor to take place. The President sacrificed thousands of innocent American men and women so that our country would be forced to go to war, a war the White House secretly provoked in order to give us a fighting chance to defeat an evil that was threatening the entire world.”

The Colonel’s eyes grow harsh. “And Bush? Did he allow the events of 9/11 to happen in the same way?”

Ryan Gessaman smirks. “Honestly, Colonel, I didn’t think someone of your stature would be a conspiracy theorist.”

The blonde leans forward, the conversation so overwhelming that even the taut breasts beneath the woman’s white blouse cannot divert Turnbull’s attention. “Colonel, this is merely think-tank conversation, the Pentagon engages in this kind of rhetoric eight days a week. But let’s face facts: Islamic radicals want to get their hands on a nuke, and with Iran entering the game, the odds are suddenly even that the threat is very real. I think you’d agree we’ve been relatively lucky since 9/11, but our ports remain unprotected, our border patrols fail almost every test we throw at them. Sure, we could sit back and pray our intelligence network will stop the next wave of attacks, only it doesn’t take a team of terrorists to blow up a city, it only takes one suicide bomber with one atomic suitcase bomb. But if we control the variables, we can destroy the threat.”

“What variables do you control?” Turnbull asks. “The Republicans lost the Presidency and both Houses. Obamam can do no wrong, the GOP is perceived as the party of ‘no,’ and neo-cons like Cheney and Rumsfeld will be lucky just to stay out of jail.”

Gessaman smiles. “You’re misreading the landscape, Colonel. We’re dealing with some major players—”

“Enough.” The blonde waves the conversation off. “Anyway, this is just talk. Before any action can even be considered there must be a plan, and no one knows this area of the world better than you.”

Colonel Turnbull clears his throat. “Nothing personal, Ma’am, but I have a family that’s barely seen me these past few years. I’ve done my time in hell, so if it’s all the same to you, I think you’d better find another man for the job.”

The blonde sits back, her face turning flush. “You think you’ve been in hell? You have no idea what hell is, Colonel. I have a great uncle who passed away a few years ago. When he was ten the Nazis rounded him up with his parents and sisters, his aunts and uncles and cousins and the rest of the Jews in his village and shoved them into cattle cars. The lucky ones suffocated to death on the ride to Auschwitz. When they arrived at the death camp the women were separated from the men and taken directly to the gas chambers. That was before the Nazis figured out they could run the ovens day and night by using the fat from burning human flesh as a fuel.

“I may seem like a cold-hearted witch to you, Colonel, and maybe I am. But when I go home at night I hug a husband who loves me and kiss two young children whom I adore, and if I have to be a bitch to make sure they don’t get incinerated by some wacko in a turban who’s been brainwashed into believing he’s going to paradise for killing infidels. . . then so be it.”

She pauses, looking out the window at downtown Washington. “Last week I was watching CNN. . . Glenn Beck was interviewing Benjamin Netanyahu. The Israeli

Prime Minister was asked what the Jews learned from the Holocaust. You know what he said? He said, ‘when someone tells you they intend to annihilate you, you should believe them.’”

She forces a smile, regaining her composure. “I know you’re a family man, Colonel, that’s why you’re here. For a moment I want you to imagine you and your family living in the Highlands centuries ago, at a time when Longshanks was readying his invasion of Scotland. If you knew you could save your country and countrymen by sacrificing a few clans while forever removing the English threat, would you have done it?”

Colonel Turnbull grinds his teeth, the damaged nerves in his right quadriceps causing the leg to shake. “Okay, lady, you’ve got your man.”