

The United States of America

We live in an uncertain world. The period following September 11th saw the United States and its allies waging a persistent and fearless war on terrorism. The cost in terms of lives, emotion and dollars was staggering. Military, diplomatic and covert operations along with self-protection initiatives drained the treasuries of the allied countries. The people of the world were tired, resources strained, stock markets anemic and still the terror continued, though dramatically slowed. No country was immune, no religion, no race. It was simply madmen run amuck, inflicting pain on an injured planet. Former President George W. Bush had declared the war was just and, “the only way to guarantee safety and freedom for our grandchildren.” The world was not so sure anymore.

Economic strengths shifted, power bases were altered, the world order left in chaos. Unlike most wars, the enemy was not always obvious. Lesser evils like the virulent Islamic extremists from Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines rode the coattails of the stronger, more organized aggressors inflicted their own brand of skewed justice in small, painful doses. An old military adage declared that if the head of the snake were severed the body would die. But, this enemy was not a snake. It was a worm. Every time the head was incised, the body would slither beneath the earth, where a new head would grow. The revitalized vermin would then crawl up from the sewers to scavenge and spread their pestilence on the unsuspecting. As the global military machines chipped, chopped and hacked away at the cells of terror across the globe, the maggots rose from the ashes to fuel the fire of the jihad. Capturing world enemy number one, Osama bin Laden had been a surprisingly simple task. Actually, it was just dumb luck, a Delta Force team in the right place at the right time. Crushing the vast al Qaeda network had proven more difficult. With their leader imprisoned, the autonomous hoard of ugliness had been kept alive with a seemingly endless supply of funds from Iraq, Iran, North Korea and other similar thinking counties. Also included were wealthy individuals disgusted by the concept of freedom and hateful of any positive human condition.

The most troubling aspect, and the most frustrating, was the sheer quantity of funds being channeled into these dark conspiracies. Billions of dollars had readily flowed into the coffers of the terrorist organizations, feeding the worms. Behind closed doors, world leaders knew the source. Smaller countries like Iraq did not have the wherewithal to provide the level of sophisticated support the terrorists were receiving. It was all too obvious who the true enemy was, but world leaders were unable to prove or halt the flow of cash. Only one country could afford such a hefty tab. The one country that had benefited the most from the madness was China. Diplomatic efforts endeavored to dam the headwaters, yet the money continued flowing. Their methods of distribution were just too many and too sophisticated.

President David Totten, a man of great resolve, campaigned on the earlier vision of President Bush to cleanse the planet of evil. The years, lives and billions of dollars spent were finally paying off. Intelligence told him they were finally turning the corner, starting to win. An end was indeed in sight. He felt they were at last over the hump. The people of countries most injured by the war, like Afghanistan, had turned their sympathies to freedom and peace because of the benevolence shown them. Northern Ireland was finally at peace. Israel and Palestine had settled their differences and were coexisting in peaceful accord. Islam, a religion of peace, fully embraced tolerance and respect for non-Islamic faiths and all people living together in harmony.

Finishing the war was going to be a direct result of what the United States does best, creating and utilizing technology. Technology and liberal surveillance laws allowed authorities to eavesdrop at will on the communications of those out to commit harm. Electronic mail intercepts were the greatest intelligence-gathering breakthrough since the Allies deciphered the German's secret code during World War II. Sophisticated tracking systems followed and diverted the flow of large sums of money in and out of sheltered accounts.

Somberly, President Totten stood behind his desk looking out the window of the Oval Office having concluded the daily meeting with his national security team. It was time to write the final chapter to this segment of history, close the book and turn out the lights. It was time to put this all to bed. America would indeed stand tall once again.

His planned trip to China would be the first non-war related major Presidential event in a very long time, but Totten viewed the visit with trepidation.

Beijing, China

The dank vault buried three stories under the Ministry of Commerce in the heart of Beijing had not been entered in years. Three men stood at the entrance, in front of a massive steel door supported on hinges the size of a man's leg. One man carried a metal box, military green and worn from years of use. The enormous steel door groaned, and the rusted hinges creaked, as it swung open. A switch on an aging cobweb-covered electrical panel was thrown, creating a loud metallic clack. High intensity lamps flooded the area with brilliant white light. The green metal box was lifted and dropped onto the bamboo tabletop. Billowing clouds of dust rose into the air and spread through the small enclosure. The larger, and older of the three, dressed in a full-length robe of red silk trimmed with spun gold piping and polished gold buttons, watched intently. With a snap of his wrist, the newly installed Premier of China motioned the order for his aide to open the container. His large hand returned to its resting place atop his oversized belly.

In obedience, the second man cut through the padlock and lifted the hasp, but a disapproving grunt from the Premier stopped him from lifting the lid. With a toss of the head, the Premier instructed him to wait outside. The third of the group stepped forward, a small nervous English gentleman sporting a graying mustache, thick round glasses and wearing a dark pinstripe suit. He reached over and lifted the lid. The hinges groaned and the room exploded in a kaleidoscope of colors. As if shot

from a thousand laser beams, painted light radiated out in all directions. An audible gasp sounded from the Englishman, and he took a cautious step backward. The Premier's posture straightened. He stiffened at the wonder he saw inside the box, but allowed himself a tight smile. His head then nodded approval. Recovering, the diminutive character approached the bamboo table to have a better look inside. His gaze fell upon virgin white silk and the incredible object nestled in the center of it. Not a word was spoken for several moments. The man looked up at His Eminence.

"Sir," he said, "Only the Buddha could have created something as wonderful as this. It is astounding. But I must hold it in order to conduct my examination."

Premier Lolo squinted. With reluctance, he gave a slight nod for the man to proceed. Although the man's trembling hand was of average size, it could not fully encircle the colossal deep blue diamond as he lifted the stone and drew it toward his face. The diamond absorbed the white light from the overhead lamps and instantly reflected it back in rays of red, blue, green and yellow. From his jacket pocket he took out a loop. Setting his glasses on the table, he placed the loop over his right eye and studied the precious stone for several minutes. He set the diamond back inside the case. He removed the loop, replaced his glasses then removed them to wipe the lens. From his brow he dabbed away beads of sweat before turning to face the Premier.

"This is incredible! Astonishing! The stone is flawless! Perfect, it is perfect! And yet it is so very large." The Premier smiled again. This time it was a broad, relaxed, toothy grin spreading from ear to ear. "The clarity the stone possesses is unlike any diamond I have ever examined. And yet, and I repeat myself, it is so large! In all my years, I have never heard of a diamond of this size existing anywhere in the world. Can you tell me from where it came?"

The Premier sidestepped the question. "When I was but a small child the Buddha came to me in my sleep. Over the course of many nights he gave me instructions. With this stone and the others like it..."

"Others!?!?" exclaimed the man.

"In just a few years time China will be a very different country, and the world will be very different as well. Thanks to our friends, the change is already well underway. As America fights the terrorists, a war, which will take many years, we shall plan for the future. This is the dawn of great happenings for our people and our culture. The diamonds will make the Buddha's wishes possible. No longer will the capitalistic ways of the West dictate to our people and the people of the world."

Premier Lolo reached over and closed the lid. The thousand tiny rainbows disappeared as quickly as they had formed.

An Unexpected Find

American Airlines Flight TW1 was two hours away from completing its daily non-stop flight from St. Louis to Honolulu. Occupying a third row seat in first class was Trevor Brice, a St. Louis businessman. Brice stared out the window studying

the cloud formations hovering above the Pacific Ocean. The plane was passing over several clusters that looked as if they were islands floating in the blue waters. Clouds, like most things in nature were a favorite form of inspiration to him. What wondrous natural effects God has provided for us, he was thinking while studying the different shapes, patterns and contrasts of clouds with the sea. A talent for design was his most prominent trait. Everything from buildings to consumer products carried the hallmark of his work. The 15-person design firm he ran enjoyed a worldwide reputation and was the hallmark for design excellence. His life as a businessman was one of international acclaim and provided an excellent façade for a man who had a need to freely roam the globe without suspicion.

The soft vibration from the alarm in his wristwatch brought his mind and eyes back into the cabin. After a thoughtful moment to clear his head, he bent over and lifted the black leather briefcase from under the seat in front of him. As he placed it on his lap, he glanced at the passenger in the seat to his right. She was fast asleep. They had chatted during the first hour of the trip. She had introduced herself as Martha Gielow, a Yahoo marketing executive. She was on the second leg of a journey that started a day earlier in Milan, Italy. St. Louis had been a stopover in route to the Hawaiian Island of Kauai for a long overdue vacation.

Brice flipped the briefcase onto its top and popped open the compartment hidden on the bottom. Martha Gielow shifted in her seat. He gave her another look. When satisfied, he lifted the lid of the compartment.

From inside he removed the familiar blue folder with its red security ribbon and the words “Your Eyes Only” in block letters fanned across the top. The seal of the President of the United States was embossed in the center. Again, Brice checked on Gielow and then up the aisle for a roaming stewardess or other passenger. Satisfied he could view the documents free of wandering eyes, Brice reached into his pocket and retrieved his Swiss Army knife. With the small blade, he cut through the red security ribbon.

Inside he found a single sheet of the President’s letterhead and underneath it, a photograph. His instructions were written in the President’s own hand.

*From the Desk of David S. Totten
President of the United States of America*

Mr. Brice:

Thirteen months ago, the Kilauea Volcano experienced a major eruption that blew the top off of the Pu’u ’O’o vent. The eruption uncovered a second large opening right next to the active lava tube. Experts thought it was only a dormant lava conduit probably formed centuries ago. The vigorous volcanic activity around the vent has limited their observations to aerial surveillance. Last week a team of vulcanologists finally got a look at the site firsthand. The lead member of the team, a Dr. Samantha Allison from the Hawaiian Volcano Observatory, supervised the lowering of an electronics and camera package into the old conduit. Prior to this

effort the old conduit had been considered a bottomless pit. Scientifically, what Dr. Allison discovered was an ancient lava tube or conduit as it is called. The shaft was measured to a depth of about 4,000 feet, or down to sea level. At the bottom she also discovered a very large cavern, with an equally large pool of water inside it. The interesting part is, her camera snapped the attached photograph. As you can see, it is self-explanatory.

Trevor flipped up the page and there, to his amazement, on crisp four by six-inch Kodak paper was the conning tower of a submarine. The insignia appeared to be Chinese. After a moment's contemplation, he went back to reading the note.

Fortunately, Dr. Allison had the good sense to hide this finding from her other colleagues. Using local connections, she got the photo to Rear Admiral Hanover at Pearl Harbor, who forwarded it to me. Our intelligence has confirmed this is in fact the conning tower of a Chinese, Han class, nuclear attack submarine.

Trevor, I want you to confirm that there is in fact a submarine hiding in a cavern beneath the United States and, if so, answer the obvious question. What the hell is it doing there?!?

You can find Dr. Allison at the Hawaiian Volcano Observatory. I prefer not to have anyone else, except for the two of you, know anything about this, but do what you have to do. As you know I will be traveling to Beijing in only a few days. Our relationship with China is already strained and this does not help. Speed is essential. I need to know about the sub.

Exercise extreme care!

Good luck, Trevor, & God Speed,

David

Trevor slowly closed the cover of the binder and stared straight ahead at the back of the seat in front of him. His mind became an instant blur of runaway thoughts. Mindlessly, habitually, he reopened the folder, quickly folded the letter and dipped it into his water glass. The special notepaper dissolved in an instant. The photo, he slipped it into his breast pocket. He again glanced over to the adjacent seat. Martha was still asleep. Good! He returned the folder to the secret compartment and closed the lid. He then sat back and shut his eyes. His fingers drummed lightly against the top of the leather case.

He tried to imagine an underground cavern with a submarine inside. The ability to envision a cavern was easy as picturing a submarine, but melding the two images together just wasn't working.

"How does a nuclear submarine, a Chinese nuclear submarine, find its way into an underground cavern 4,000 feet below and a good five miles inland of the Big Island of Hawaii?" he thought.

That was a huge question. An even bigger question was, what was it doing there? His mind was firing like spark plugs in a Porsche. He could almost feel the electrical impulses flash through his brain. He noticed his head becoming warm and his heart started to race. After a deep breath and long sigh, he turned to look out the window once again.

America had not forgotten the lessons that the Japanese taught her in World War II. Our Navy knew every square inch of the islands from Hawaii to Midway and the ocean floor below for 100 miles in all directions. But they did not seem to know about this cavern. If they did, the entrance would have certainly been mined. Ok, so our Navy doesn't know about the cavern. How the hell did an enemy attack sub get past the constant patrols and find the damn thing? In some ways the Hawaiian Islands were better protected than the mainland. Where was the entrance to this place? Was the sub now trapped, or could it still come and go? And was it still coming and going at will!?! A billion-dollar submarine? Sitting under the world's most active volcano? Why? What else could possibly be down there? Is the attraction something that they found or are they building something there? Nothing made any sense.

Half an hour passed and resolving this issue mentally was never going to happen. He finally decided to put it aside until he made contact with Dr. Allison. He turned the briefcase over and pushed it back under the seat. Again, he stared out of the window.

Seven hours earlier, he had kissed his wife and two daughters good-bye when they dropped him at the front entrance of St. Louis – Lambert International Airport. His final destination on this day was Hilo on the windward side of the Big Island of Hawaii. As far as anyone in his office knew, the five-day trip was intended to provide him an uninterrupted opportunity to study the active lava flows of the Kilauea Volcano. This was not his first trip to the Big Island. He and his wife had traveled here on their tenth wedding anniversary. He had maintained a good mental recollection of the volcano and its surroundings, but needed to refresh his memory and study the details.

The Blue Hawaiian Hotel & Casino was in the very early stages of design. Las Vegas had already brought New York, Venice and Paris to its famous strip. The beaches, fishes, rainbows and sunsets of Hawaii would arrive within three years. The main entrance was slated to wind through a massive man-made lava field with hot bubbling ooze, radiating heat, steam vents and sulfur cones. Brice's firm had won the contract to design what was promised to be the most ambitious hotel project in the world. Awards and letters of praise covered the walls of his office, but this project was going to top them all.

The unexpected jolt of the landing gear touching down on the runway in Honolulu caused him to jump. He took a long, deep breath and composed himself. A quick search of his briefcase located his itinerary; Aloha Airlines flight 48 to Hilo, departing 6:45 pm, Hertz rental car, convertible, of course, and a suite at the Hilo Hotel. He looked at his watch. He had a little over an hour until his connecting flight. Great! It would be nice to stand up and stretch a bit.