

# THE INITIATIVE

## Prologue

1

Wars were the inevitable result of the destabilization of the Middle East. They were small wars as wars go; bloody, destructive, battles waged between ethnic groups in the wake of the American invasion of Iraq and its subsequent defeat at the hands of the insurgents. Even with the emergence of dictators, who kept their mutual hatreds and suspicions in check for a time, the differences between ethnic groups and religious factions could not be held in check forever. Now those differences emerged with new vigor.

The wars that were the creation of religious leaders hoping for bigger power bases, focused the people's attention on the grievances of their divisive past at the expense of any hope for a prosperous future. Brushfire after brushfire flared up throughout even relatively stable Middle Eastern nations. Before long, they had traveled up into the Muslim areas of the former Soviet Union. They spread in all directions, until they came at last to the sixteenth century Tartar strongholds in the ancient war zone that surrounded the historic city of Astrakhan.

The members of the European Economic Community and NATO, threatened by their own Muslim communities, were determined to avoid involvement at all cost. Burned by the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and wary of their own huge Islamic populations, they steadfastly refused to be dragged into the swirling vortex of ethnic dissention playing out in ever widening circles on their eastern flank. They chose instead to let the various factions settle their differences among themselves. The predictable result was genocide.

Then, ten years after the turn of the 21st Century, the bloody skirmishes took on a whole new significance. The Nation of Islam united and began to ascend outside the Middle East. When it became obvious that the bottom third of the former Soviet Union was falling under the influence of the Iranian mullahs, Europe became restless. As the Jihad nibbled at the corners of the western world once again, Europe went on the defensive.

The United States became involved in what became known as the Astrakhan War, by increments. It had all looked good on paper; a UN Peacekeeping profile, with the support of NATO, doing the right thing to prevent world war. Americans joined their allies in an all out effort to contain the threat to the European way of life. There was worldwide agreement that something had to be done and, if done in concert, would naturally be victorious. Once again,

American mothers sent their children to fight on the side of right. Once again, the leaders of the free world were dead wrong.

The concept of peace through war only works when the countries seeking to interfere in the affairs of another country are, and continue to be, committed to the fight. In a religious war, people who lack fanaticism are at a decided disadvantage. As the Astrakhan Intervention dragged on, the American population was once again faced with a test of its resolve. 9/11 was a distant memory, and without a similar catalyst, Americans could not see the point of protecting the citizens of a country thousands of miles from home. What had started as a firm desire to do the right thing became a grinding intervention in the kind of civil unrest that would not go away. Taxes were raised, the balancing of the budget was put on hold, body bags began to flood into hometowns and the people took to the streets.

It was now six years after America had stepped into the Astrakhan Intervention and tear gas flooded American streets with increasing regularity. President Charles Boynton Anderson's election four years earlier had been the war's repudiation. Anderson had campaigned to end the bloodshed and bring the troops home. Americans had flocked to the polls and, despite the fact that polls showed that 63% of the electorate didn't trust his ethics; they had elected Anderson by a landslide. The American voter had spoken.

But ending a war without victory is a daunting task for a politician. Three years after his election, Anderson found himself bogged down in a bloody, costly conflict that would not end.

In January, Anderson had begun to face concerns for his own reelection. As early primary results came in, the President was made painfully aware that the American public, urged on by a stable of hungry candidates, was holding him responsible for the nation's continued involvement in Astrakhan. It didn't take rocket science to figure out that if he did not take some drastic measure, he would be without a job in November. He needed a final solution to the Astrakhan War, and he needed it badly.

The group of five met with the President in one of the smaller conference rooms on the second floor of the White House in late January, three months into the official campaign for reelection. The group consisted of Secretary of Defense Wellington Duke, Secretary of State Harry Eklesburg, Vice President Wynne Jackson, Chief of Staff Donald Finnegan and Special Counsel Roger Farley. The five sat in comfortable chairs around a long, mahogany conference

table. The subject of their meeting was to find a way to end the Astrakhan engagement.

The President spent much of the afternoon staring at the demonstrators beyond the fence that marked the demarcation line between himself and the protestors that dogged him wherever he went. He hated the demonstrators, he hated the press, and he hated the war in Astrakhan. He wanted a second term so that he could pursue a domestic agenda he felt more suited to lead. He was painfully aware that if he didn't find a way out of the Astrakhan debacle, he would become a second Lyndon Johnson, with everything he believed he had accomplished diminished by Astrakhan.

"You'd think I started this damn war," he muttered, as he turned from the window and returned to the group.

There was a murmur of denial in the room. It came from good manners rather than conviction – they all knew the country held the administration responsible for the continuation of Astrakhan.

"Fill them in, Don. Tell them what my polls are saying today," Charles Anderson growled, returning to his chair, a picture of frustration.

Donald Finnegan, a muscle-bound man with a military bearing, looked at each of the people the room individually before he spoke. He had mastered the fine art of leading from the position of second-in-command during his service in the Special Forces, and he was good at his job. Nothing stood in the way of his perceived responsibilities. He was ruthless, running the White House like a military unit. He was generally recognized as one of the most effective Chiefs of Staff in a long line of effective men who had held that position.

Finnegan referred to a sheaf of papers that carried comparison polls for the last four presidencies. The hands that held the papers were strong, thick and blunt. On the third finger of his left hand, Finnegan wore a distinctive ring embedded with a dark, blue stone carved with an ancient crest in its center – the crest of the ancient house of Medici. The ring looked out of place on his massive paw, but it was his treasure, and he wore it with pride.

"The polls have been lower for other Presidents at this stage of the campaign, Mr. President," he reported in his stiff, military way.

"Presidents who were reelected?" Charles Anderson asked, knowing the answer.

"No. But anything can happen." They'd had this conversation before. "If you brought the bastards to the table you'd be a shoo in."

"So Harry, what's happening with the negotiations?" The president fixed his Secretary of

State with an accusatory glare. Harry Eklesburg had a pretty good idea whose head would roll if the president didn't start to do better in the polls.

"They won't agree to the shape of the table," Eklesburg replied defensively. It was a gratuitous statement. Everyone knew that the insurgents wouldn't agree to the shape of the table. Round, oval, square, rectangle, there weren't that many shapes to choose from, and the insurgents had rejected them all.

"Damn it! How can a bunch of third world camel fuckers be so God damn stubborn?" the president demanded, pounding the table with frustration.

"Maybe they're reading our press," Eklesburg replied, "and those war protestors out there aren't exactly helping matters." He wanted everyone in the room to know that the failure of the peace talks wasn't his fault; not that it would matter.

The president rose and went to the window again. "Just like Vietnam and Iraq," he muttered, before rounding on the members of his unfortunate inner circle. "Well, I'm not going to become a Lyndon Johnson or a George Bush. I want a way out of this with some kind of a victory, gentlemen."

"There is a way...." Wellington Duke ventured, his voice hesitant, uncertain.

"What way?" The president asked, without turning away from the window.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," Vice President Jackson drawled, his discomfort obvious to everyone at the table. If Wellington Duke was uncomfortable about a suggestion, Wynne Jackson didn't want to hear about it. "I have a press conference in ten minutes with the 4-H Clubs of Iowa. I don't think we can afford to have me stand them up in an election year."

"Yes of course, Wynne," the president's disdain-laden words filling the room as he glared at the man he'd been forced to choose as a running mate. "You'd be much better off with the 4-H Clubs than deciding national policy."

The vice president ignored the cutting words, gathered his papers, and made ready to leave. "Mr. President. Gentlemen," he said, his strong southern accent filling the room. No one said another word until the door had closed behind him.

"Putz," the president muttered at the closed door. "Too bad we can't replace him before the election."

"He's got better polls in the south and west than you have," Finnegan reminded him.

"I know. I know. Don't think I haven't thought of that a hundred times. I didn't say I would replace him, I said I wanted to." Charles Anderson let an uncomfortable silence build in

the room before returning to the subject that had driven his Vice President to the eager faces of Iowa's 4-H'ers. "Now, where were we?"

"The initiative is called Tranquillity..." Duke wasn't certain of himself. He wasn't sure he liked what he was about to propose. He could never quite remember how this idea had come about in the first place. Someone had mentioned it in a high-level discussion and it had seemed like an interesting concept when he'd first heard it, but now he wasn't so certain.

"Nice name, Tranquillity," the President spat, venting his displeasure with the vice president at the nearest available target.

"It's a synonym for peace," Duke said. Then he paused to let the president chew on the concept for a minute. "It can't be done without your authorization, of course..." He was skating around the issue, spewing half sentences, trying to avoid telling the president exactly what he would be agreeing to, while at the same time, appearing to brief him. Sometimes the president didn't really want to know everything about the proposals his advisors brought him, and Duke thought this might be one of those times.

"Is it legal?" the president joked.

Duke knew it wasn't legal at all. "Well..."

The president caught on quickly. He waived his hand to indicate that he was much too busy to listen to a lengthy briefing. "Spare me the details. What do I have to do?"

"You have to..." Duke hesitated again. The idea seemed less and less viable the closer he got to actually putting it into words.

"Duke brought over a disk with a draft Finding on it," Finnegan cut in, sparing the Secretary of Defense the agony of explaining to the president that he was proposing a gross violation of International Law. "I'll have Mrs. Stevens bring it up on her computer and make copies for your review. If you like it, we can finalize it and you can sign it this afternoon."

"A Finding?" the president asked. He could never get used to the jargon that they spouted around the White House. Although a Finding sounded like permission to conduct an investigation, and may indeed have started out that way, it actually covered a great deal more ground than that and gave authorization to carry out whatever the president instructed.

"Authorization only. You don't need all the details," Finnegan hastened to reassure him.

"You're sure it's legal?" the president asked again, voicing the question that everyone wanted left unspoken.

"It'll save thousands of lives..." Finnegan's calming voice drew the president's attention

back to the justification to which they would ultimately resort.

The president didn't have a very long attention span. While he was a natural-born political animal, he wasn't a smart man, and lengthy discussions bored him. His greatest skill had been appointing smart men to support him, although that had been very much the doing of the people who backed him. He was run by shadows, but he didn't know it. Good luck had kept him out of any real trouble so far. That was about to change.

"Well then, let's get on with it," Charles Anderson said, looking at his watch. They were hosting a dinner for the French Ambassador in an hour, and he still had to get dressed.

3

Donald Finnegan let himself into his private inner sanctum and went straight to the phone. The late afternoon sun that streamed through the window glinted off his distinctive ring, casting golden circles on the walls.

In another office, a different hand wearing a matching ring pushed the talk button. That hand had been scarred by shrapnel years before in another war. The metal splinter had entered the palm and blown out its center; a crucifixion wound, the doctors had joked as they struggled to bring the mangled bones into a semblance of working order.

"Yes?" the soft voice on the other end of the phone drawled.

"He signed the Finding," Finnegan reported.

"Good," the voice replied. "Follow through on this as soon as you can, Colonel."

"Yes Sir," Finnegan replied.