

YOU THINK YOU ELECTED YOUR PRESIDENT? THINK AGAIN ...

THE ENLIGHTENED

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PROLOGUE

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“Honestly, it does get to my ego now that everybody call me Madam President”, the newly minted President of the United State, the first ever female president, walked into the oval office with her husband of 26 years.

The good natured husband replied “Michele, don’t forget our rule #4. It would really drive me crazy if I have to solute you every time I see you”.

26 years ago when they got married, both being on the verge of stellar careers, in somewhat nerdy way, they wrote down several rules that will govern their marriage. Rule #4 states, regardless of one’s status and income outside the family, everybody is equal at home and have equal saying on all decisions related to family. This rule was brought up by John who was on the verge of becoming a superstar in physics, hailed as one of the brilliant young minds with the Nobel prize caliber, who being intelligent enough, wanted to set up a rule before his own fame take over his better judgment.

Now looking back, it is funny to see how far they come, and how life is unpredictable. He has played second fiddle to Michele over the last 10 years since she entered United State senate, and now the first female president. He could not be happier.

“Don’t give me ideas, John!” Madam President smiled.

“Did you find it odd that President Cohen is truly pleasant today? I mean, he is a sitting president that lost to a challenger. I don’t think he is simply being polite and gracious”.

The previous President has a somewhat controversial reputation and legacy. A veteran of the Vietnam war and a Medal of Honor recipient. Graduated top from his class from West Point, made a four star general before he was 50. He has an impeccable reputation of being the guardian of the free world, and contrary to the conventional wisdom, he proved himself to be an exceptional diplomat. Despite his military background, he was extremely deft at handling the international relationship without the actual use of bombs and American blood. The so-called Cohen Doctrine in handling international crisis utilizes the strategy of fighting poison with poison. He does not draw a clear line along ideological boundaries, and he has no problem supporting (or at least turn a blind eye to) an government in a volatile region as long as such government pose no threat or has no intention to expand its influence outside its boundaries, and basic human rights are respected inside its boundary.

President Cohen argues a dictatorship has something to lose if they attack the rest of the world, and because of that, it is much easier to contain. The most dangerous enemy is the kind that has nothing to lose.

While he has fair share of critics from all spectra of political and philosophical views, nobody can argue with the results. He was able to pull all American troops out of war zones, while substantially increased the attitude towards Americans outside the U.S.. Any sitting president with that kind of achievement would have sailed into his or her second term with little resistance in either primary or general election. The problem for President Cohen, Michele reflected, was the domestic policies, economics in particular. Being an extremely talented commander-in-chief, President Cohen has made some bad decisions in the domestic policy, or as others have called, bad lucks. The housing slump continued, after a brief small recovery. After the BP oil debacle in 2010, all off shore oil productions have been severely limited by much stringent government regulation on drilling permit and safety measures must be taken into consideration. The oil price continues to climb, and President Cohen resisted strong calls from both sides of aisle for strong price regulation and prefer to let the market determines the price. A large percentage of Americans feel, however, unlike other goods, oil is a necessity, and should be treated as rights, not luxury. While Michele is against some extreme measures (such as nationalize the oil industry), but she has argued forcefully that the price must be regulated. It is amazing how a \$5 per gallon gas price determine the outcome of the presidential election, as most pundits have agreed that have contributed to the downfall of President Cohen.

Michele has know President Cohen for many years, and while on the opposite political spectrum, has great respect for him as a person, an American hero, and a effective protector of American interest around the world. Now that it is all over, she feels somewhat guilty for personally putting an end to his exemplary public service.

But he does not seem to be unhappy at all!

Michele quickly walked over to the desk where the departing president traditionally leaves a note for the incoming president. Maybe there is something there that will explain it. The note is indeed there, handwritten,

Dear Michele,

Congratulations!

I am afraid that I have to pass on an unbearable burden to you, now that you are the president. Since FDR before the Second World war, all presidential election had been influenced, and some of us even suspected, pre-determined by a secret entity. This knowledge has been passed on from president to

president, I must say all the evidences we have so far are circumstantial, but beyond doubt. There appears to be no malignant intention of this entity, on the contrary, the presidents elected during the pivotal time of our national's history all seem to have done a superb job, FDR on WWII, Nixon in opening the door to China and change the balance of cold world, Reagan in helping ending the cold world. It appears no president has ever been contacted, not to say manipulated, by the entities behind the scene, and all of us are scared to death, literally, of the great turmoil if this information ever gets out. Imagine what will happen if the populace becomes aware of this fact. There will no more law and order, and it will be chaos, no less.

So as a group, all presidents have refrained from pursuing this entity, and it is kept as national secret to be shared among the presidents only. Clearly, you can also argue it is not in the best interest of the beneficiary of such conspiracy to bring it down. But this is left for the history and our conscience to judge.

Unfortunately for you, you do not have this luxury. I received credible information a few days ago that will require you to change this tradition. Please read carefully what I describe below and act carefully. Remember, you can never allow the information leaked, with the exception of your husband.

.....

”

“Michele, are you ok? Let me guess, your predecessor threatened you? You know, you are the new commander-in-chief.” Watching his wife’s face turned ashen, John tried to inject some light banter into the situation, thinking President Cohen must have revealed some serious crisis the nation faces.

“Come here, John”, Michele whispered.

“Are you sure, my dear? Maybe I should apply for my top secret security clearance first.” While still smiling, John sensed the urgency and distress in Michele’s demeanor. Being the first woman who won the presidency in the US, Michele is not the kind of the person who will easily get distressed.

“We are in deep shit, and I do not mean just you and me, the country might disintegrate, and god knows what will happen to the rest of the world.” Hearing this, John now really worried. Michele is a classy woman, she does not use this type of language unless, well, they are truly in a mess that can only be described by such appalling animal waste.

He quickly walked over to the desk in the most famous office in the world, and took the note Michele handed to him. It does not take long for him to grasp the gravity of the matter at hand.

“Michele, we have one week. We have a good shot at this.” They looked at each, knowing what they can achieve in the next seven days will not only determine the future of the United States as a country, but will also rewrite its history.

CHAPTER 1

Looking at the lights outside the window of the fast moving train, “This Acela is really a great idea”, thought Jack, and the Acela+, to be completed in another year, would be even better. In his previous life, as one of the best-known marketing professors (guru, in layman’s words), Jack was invited to give talks at many universities and companies, plus the conferences that he had to attend, it adds up to an average of 30 trips each year, with possible transfers, this means 80 flights he had to go on each year. These are 80 times that he had to convince himself that it’s ok to do that.

Being an extremely analytic person, Jack has tried to analyze himself on why he does not want to fly. As it is completely irrational, come on, everybody knows the probability of being seriously injured during a flight is substantially smaller than driving. And yet contrary to conventional wisdom, there is a large proportion of people who are not excited about flying. The conclusion he had reached is that he is actually not afraid of flying per se, he is afraid of being in a situation that he does not have control when things go wrong. If he were driving, at least he had himself to blame if something goes wrong.

Ever since he took a really early retirement at the age of 48, Jack was very pleased to enjoy the fact that he no longer had to find excuse to turn down an invitation. It was absolutely easy to say no to strangers, especially those in the industries, who read his work and thought it might be good to see him in person. It is entirely a different matter for invitations from academic institutions and, in most cases, sent by his friends. After 20 some years in the field, he has made many friends, and Jack considers it rude to say no to a friend. Plus, it is almost an obligation for him to go as the academic tradition. He had benefit greatly from attending seminars given by the best people when he was a doctoral student at Sloan School of Management at MIT, and during the first few years when he was the lowly assistant professor at Wharton School of Business at University of Pennsylvania. Not anymore, Jack smiled to himself.

These days, Jack only flies when he has to go outside north America. A train trip from Philadelphia to San Francisco takes a long time, but then again, he is retired and what is the rush? Jack really relishes the idea of being retired. He does not mind working, but being retired, and simply being an emeritus professor on the faculty at Wharton, he can now remove himself from all administrative obligations that can eat up his time. Plus, he does not need the money anyway.

Very few professors can be this independently wealthy, but Jack is no ordinary professor. Graduated from MIT with an undergraduate degree in engineering, Jack went on to obtain two Ph.D.s from MIT, one in cognitive neuroscience and one in Management Science, and he did all of these in 10

years. It was hard to convince the people to allow him pursue two Ph.D.s simultaneously, but eventually he made it.

After joining Wharton as an assistant professor of marketing at the age of 28, Jack distinguished himself as a whole package, a top notch teacher, a star researcher, and an easy going colleague. The first year he was at Wharton, to the amazement of his colleagues (and much jealousy), he was the finalist for the most prestigious teaching award for teaching the MBA students, The Helen Kardon Moss Anvil Award. Since then, he essentially monopolized the prize, either winning it or being a finalist. The MBAs are an interesting bunch, Jack recognized it at the start of his career, there are two tricks to the teaching. First, they need to be challenged and understood at the end of the course, that they have learned something useful; Second, the delivery of material must be a show. It has to be highly scripted, with suspense, climax, jokes, dialogues, disagreements, etc. Imaging that in an engineering course! Jack always wondered this to himself. All of these must be done with the projection that the professor is THE expert in this domain and the students are so lucky to be in the same room hearing his/her insights on the topic.

If his teaching achievement is amazing, his scholarly output is nothing short of astonishment. Jack specializes in product development and human decision making, two domains rarely are studied by the same person. While it is not clear to a casual observer, that includes most MBA students as well, the discipline of marketing can generally be divided into two sub-fields. The first sub-field is called quantitative marketing, most people in this domain are trained in economics, statistics, and operation research, sometimes they have a PhD in these domains, other times they specialize in these domains during their PhD training in marketing. These folks use quantitative tools, such as game theory, empirical industrial organization, dynamic programming, classic statistical tools and more recently, the Bayesian statistics, to study relevant marketing problems. The second sub-fields is called behavioral marketing, most people in this domain are trained in psychology and sociology. Most of their work, like psychologists, involves experiments with human participants. While they also use statistical procedure to analyze the result, they emphasize on the theories behind it (either psychology or sociology) and the statistical tools are often straightforward and never the emphasis. People in these two sub-fields are in the same department, they go to lunch together, but when it comes to scholarly work, they are very much different. Each group goes to a different international conference to meet their colleagues. The disconnect is so big, that a person in one subfield may have no clue about some of the best people in the other sub-field.

Jack was one of the handful people who actually do both types of work and goes to both conferences, these are the two conferences he committed to go every year, despite his lack of excitement for flight. Fortunately, he was able to manage most of the conferences through rail or car. His stature in marketing was mostly due to his work that have led to the establishment of several fields within marketing, one of the best known is his seminal work on artistic products, such as music. Jack demonstrated that a combination of quantitative skills and a deep understanding of human decision can do wonders if you know what questions to ask. As some of faculty later told him, they made a career for themselves by following his work in these new domains, and Jack has always been supportive of other people's work in his own domain.

It's funny how one thing leads to another. His innovative approach to artistic products and unambiguous results, which is considered to be the realm of artistic creation, has received wide-range coverage in popular media, like Business Week, Wall Street Journal, and he was even invited by David Letterman, and designed several jokes based on his work for Letterman, all are well received. While Jack previous books on product development has received excellent responses from managers in the past, his book on his artistic products, jokingly suggested by David Letterman, is the one that had made him actually wealthy. Topping New York Time nonfiction best sellers, it sold 2 million copies in one year. Using the money he made from the book, Jack started a company that serves as a design firm for music studios, movie studios, TV stations, based on his work. Practicing what he preached, Jack always insisted on having some ownership on projects his firm worked on, being a hired gun is not the best way to run a design firm. His strategy paid off after helping generating several hit songs and mega-blockbuster movies. With the ownership in these successful products, a rich proprietary database, and a popular website that ranks various artistic products based on his own metrics, many mega-firms come knocking on the door. Eventually he sold the firm for something north of \$100 million. Not enough to be stinking rich, but enough for someone like Jack to take an earlier retirement.

"Why the train is slowing?" the smart-looking young professional sitting next to Jack finally moved her eyes away from her laptop that she was so busy working on ever since they got on the train at Washington D.C.

Indeed, Jack realized this should not happen. It will be another half hour to Philadelphia, and there is nothing here they need to stop. It is pitch black outside in this time of year and this time of day, but it is clear they are pulling into a small train station that they normally never would have stopped.

"Man, I hope this train will not be delayed. I have got a meeting to go to." The young woman starts to look a little nervous.

“A meeting after 11pm in the evening?” Jack is a little surprised.

“I am a second year MBA student at Wharton, and we have to do a case presentation tomorrow. I just came back from an interview, and this is the only time my team can meet. I know, it’s crazy. By the way, I am Jessica Liu.”

Another eager MBA student, Jack smiled, and it feels good that he can be anonymous now among the Wharton MBAs now that he is no longer teaching the core Marketing Management course. There was a time that almost every MBA student at Wharton either have taken his class, or have heard about him through their friends who took his class. “Jack Groban.”

“Professor Groban? are you professor Groban who used to teach at Wharton?”

Upon seeing the confirming nod, in one second, the young woman has gone from a fellow disgruntled traveler to a MBA in hyperdrive for high powered networking. “this is truly a pleasure. my god, I have heard so many good things about you, many of my classmates would have wished that you were still teaching the core. You know, we still use the textbook you wrote.”

Maybe not that anonymous, Jack smiled to himself. “Thank you.” Jack is not interested in starting another conversation with a fan, so he switched the topic to the train that is now pulling to the stop at the station.

“This is interesting”, he pointed to a bunch of people on the platform, some are clearly police, but others look more like young professionals, except they are all in excellent physical conditions.

“We apologize for the unscheduled stop, but there is someone on the train who has a family emergency, and once we find him, we will be on our way to Philadelphia”, the announcement comes over the speakers.

“Professor Groban, did you check your cell phone and see whether this could be you?” the young woman eagerly try to be helpful.

“Thanks, I don’t give out my cell phone number to anybody, and I don’t think I will be contacted for a family emergency”, never married but extremely popular among female friends, Jack really would not have any close family members that will warrant such measure.

Watching the police and others getting on the train and going from car to car, Jack wondered to himself, this must be one heck of important family. But in that case, how many people in this time of era actually turn off his/her cell phone, and sever the link to outside world. Plus, it’s only 40 minutes to Philadelphia, why can’t these guys wait? Why didn’t they broadcast the name of the person?

CHAPTER 2

Watching the train slowly pulling to a complete stop, Brian Webster, veteran special agent and head of President Lee's security detail, couldn't help shaking his head.

Despite the misguided belief of the power of the federal government, this is the first time in his memory that anybody has actually stopped a commercial train on the east coast in a non-life-threatening situation, just to find one person. Of course, there is an argument that stopping a train in the middle of nowhere will guarantee they find the person, it is easier to lose a person, and probably cause more attention if they block the entire train station in Philadelphia. But the president is dead serious, so maybe there is more to it than what he has been told, which suits him just fine.

Brian understands the need of compartmentalizing information. After seeing so many secrets over the 20 some years in the service, from holy to disgusting, Brian understands sometimes it is in the best interest to deny knowledge to others, sometimes for their own benefits. Imagining I could write just even 10% of that stuff up, Brian shakes his head again, I can probably sell more copies than Harry Potter.

Ordering the local police to make sure nobody gets off the train, he motioned his team of 8 special agents to go through each passenger car. 2 of them went to the first car, and 2 of them went to the last car, and the other four went to the middle, and 2 of them of moving towards to the front, and 2 moving towards the end. These young agents are well trained, although they are normally used to high risk search. Brian is pleased to have the calibers of young men and women who want to join secret service. He had just interviewed a senior at Duke University, a young man, by all accounts, has all the right stuff and connections to become a successful wall street executive, and yet decided to dedicate his life to secret service.

The plan is, he will wait on the platform while his people searching the train. Once a team identified the individual, they will call him immediately but making no contact with that person themselves. This part should be easy, Brian stares into the brightly lit interior of the passenger train, the rest, well, will be the challenge of my life.

"Car #2, we got him"

Upon hearing the words, Brian walks quickly towards the front of the car and climbed onto Car #2. The first class car in the Acela is really nice, although still no comparison to first class on an airplane, they are certainly being comfortable and affordable.

"Seat #23, next to window, on your left", one of his agent whispered to him while he walked past her.

Looking towards where #23 is, Brian saw the man he was ordered to bring back to White House. Looks much younger than his real age, he is clearly in excellent physical shape, with a childlike innocuous curiosity.

“Professor Groban?” Brian smiled to the man sitting in seat #23.

“This is really my lucky day,” Jack smiled back, “I have met two people who call me professor within one hour. You know, I retired to get away from this nonsense, it really makes me feel old!”

“Professor Groban, your sister has a family emergence and needs you to go see her right away.” Pulling out a cell phone from his pocket and punched a number, Brian handed the phone to Jack, “she would like to speak to you first”.

“What sister?” Jack thought to himself, but the serious look on the man’s face clearly shows it is better that he listens to the phone first.

“Jack?” The voice from the other end of the phone is unmistakable.

“Ha!” Jack gave out a big laugh, startled both Brian and the clueless Jessica, and surrounding curious passengers.

“This is my sister alright”, Jack muttered to the people.

“You dragged me all the way to DC today, then refused to let me stay in your guest room, did you change your mind?” Jack spoke to the phone.

“I need to borrow your brain for a couple of days.”

“My brain is very expensive, but I am happy to barter with you, you got quite a few things I am interested in”.

“Name your price, but I think this is something that is more intellectual challenging than anything you have done so far.”

The caller certainly knows Jack’s weakness and did not waste any time getting to the point. Like an addict to cocaine, Jack is drawn to any intellectual quest, especially those that has real life impact. Having a real impact is very important, even as a business school professor, he was one of the people who insists on doing work that have impact to managers, instead of doing work that catch the fancy of their academic colleagues. Long graduated from doing cross-word puzzle, Jack has been picking up cold cases in police files over the last 10 years, sometimes at the invitation of the police, victim (or their family, friends), or third parties, and he has done some quite impressive work and garnered such a reputation that he is now known in the law enforcement in the United States as Professor Holmes, in a nod to the famous detective character in Sherlock Homes.

“You have my undivided attention now, sis.” Could not help emphasizing the word sis, Jack is now transformed into a hungry lion, can’t wait to devour the mystery. Like anything in like, the really good ones, including intellectual challenging problems, only come once in a very long time. Jack is a pragmatic guy, he will only work on problems that he thinks there is a reasonable probability to be solved in a short time period. At one time, Jack was tempted into going into astrophysics professionally, but after a careful analysis, he concluded that what he could do in that field will have limited impact in his lifetime. Now, astronomy is simply a hobby.

“Excellent, I will tell you the whole story when I see you, just follow Brian, the man who gave you this cell phone, to come back here. Don’t say anything to anyone, we will wait for you, joined by a nice cup of venti white chocolate mocha.” The line went dead.

The Starbucks coffee was a case that Jack used to teach in class. Starbucks roasted its coffee beans much longer than its competitors to produce a stronger flavor and an aroma. The company has never acknowledged, however, this also means there will be a lot more caffeine in a Starbucks coffee than its competitors. While acknowledged but ignored by most coffee drinkers, caffeine is an additive substance. Like any additive substance, once you are used to a high dose, your brain will no longer respond to a lower dose, regardless whether it’s nicotine or caffeine, or any of the soft and hard drugs out there. By priming its customers with high caffeine coffee, Starbucks essentially built up a segment of coffee addicts whose quench for caffeine can only be satisfied by Starbucks’ coffee. A Starbucks addict himself, Jack uses this as an extreme example in his marketing strategy class to highlight consumers’ preferences can be molded. At one time, he thought about putting it into his best-selling textbook but decided against it, there is no reason to get himself banned from Starbucks. At the end of discussion in class, he always confess that he needs a venti Starbucks coffee if he has to tackle challenge problems. This has become some material to his friends who use to poke fun at him, venti Starbucks coffee, either in the form of its real form, or a drawing on a whiteboard, or a picture on a PowerPoint slide, and all possible incarnation, has appeared magically, whenever people to want to his attention.

“Everything is ok, I apologize for delaying your trip. Let me get my butt out of here, otherwise Jessica here will miss her important group meeting.” Jack stood up and made a not so serious apology to the other passengers.

“Your sister must have some powerful friends.” Someone who has the look of a lawyer gave Jack an almost envious wink.

“You have no idea, my friend, you have no idea!” Jack turned to Brian and said, “I am all yours, take me to see my sister.”