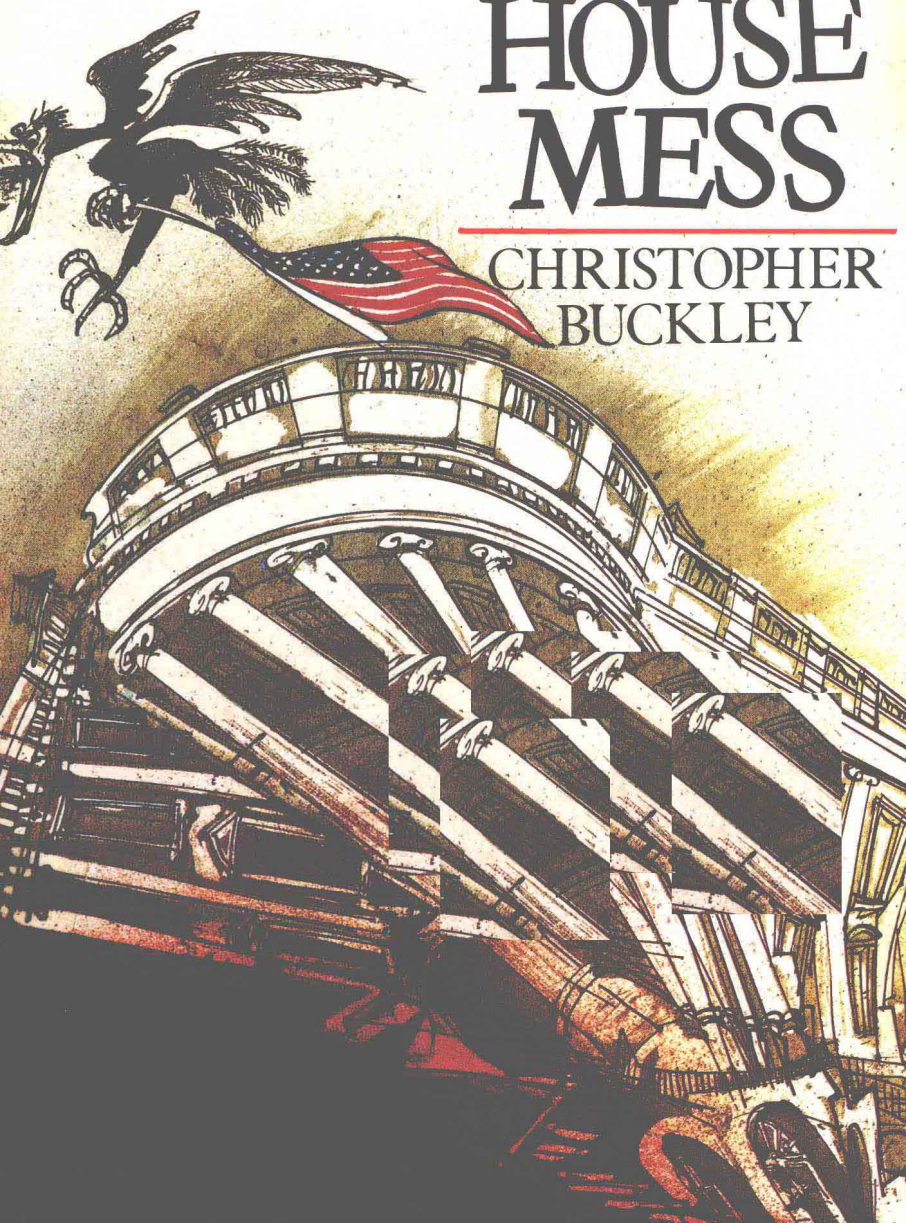


THE WHITE HOUSE MESS

CHRISTOPHER
BUCKLEY



THE WHITE HOUSE MESS

Christopher Buckley



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PROLOGUE

At 11:48 a.m. on Friday, January 20, 1989, the heavy iron gates of the White House grounds swung open and moments later the President-elect's motorcade drew to a halt beneath the North Portico. In accordance with custom, the President-elect and Mrs. Tucker were escorted inside, where they would escort President Reagan and the First Lady to the motorcade for the trip to Capitol Hill.

It was a clear and cold Washington winter day, a fine day for an inaugural ceremony. There was an air of excitement and history in the air. For the Tucker team, this was not the end of a twenty-two-month-long road, but the beginning of a dream.

Mike Feeley, the President-elect's press secretary, and I waited in our own limousine several Secret Service cars behind the President-elect's. Feeley filled the inside with so much cigarette smoke that I began to worry I might have a bronchospasm.

Ten minutes passed. Feeley began to fidget. Then I became concerned. Presidential movements are scheduled down to the minute. A delay like this, with the entire nation waiting, was unusual.

An advanceman in the front seat of the limousine pressed his earpiece to his ear, then said into the microphone clipped inside his shirtsleeve, "Echo One Tango. Say again, Headmaster?" He listened intently to the repeated message and turned to face me.

"Mr. Wadlough, Firebird wants you immediately in the Roosevelt Room." Firebird was President-elect Tucker's Secret Service code name.

"Christ," said Feeley, looking at his watch. "This is an outrage."

"Relax, Feels," I said merrily, for I was feeling very gay that morning. "It's probably just a photo op."

I was escorted through the West Lobby directly to the Roosevelt Room. The President-elect, Mrs. Tucker, and several Reagan officials and cabinet members who were to accompany the President

up to Capitol Hill were clustered at the far end of the room. The looks on their faces were grave. The President-elect waved me over. As I approached, I was conscious of entering a scene charged with drama, though that may just have been the inset spot lighting.

"Herb," said the President-elect barely above a whisper, "we seem to have a situation here." He drew a deep breath. "The President won't leave."

I did not at first understand.

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"His doctor's in with him now. They're talking about maybe giving him a shot of adrenaline."

During the transition President Reagan's inner circle had privately and delicately confided to me that their chief had been showing increasing signs of his advanced years. (He was at this point only weeks short of his seventy-eighth birthday.) The Defense Department had recently drawn up a contingency plan to provide, in their gruesome idiom, "command-chain continuity."

My immediate concern was less for the integrity of our nuclear response than for the 120,000-odd spectators, VIPs, media, security agents, air-traffic controllers (I had even arranged for landings and takeoffs from National Airport to be suspended during the President's inaugural speech), and others who were waiting for the start of an inaugural that was now threatening to be a logistical nightmare.

"Have you spoken to him?" I asked.

"Yes, I have," said the President-elect. "He told me his back was bothering him, that he was feeling tired, that it's cold outside, and that he just didn't feel like moving out today."

"Oh," I said, for I could think of nothing else to say.

"He was very nice about it. Hoped it wouldn't inconvenience me."

"I see. Did he say *when* he might feel like moving?"

"Yes. Spring."

"Spring."

I had spent weeks drawing up contingency plans for everything, including the disposal of 1,800 pounds of horse manure that would be "processed" during the parade. I had not anticipated this.

Mrs. Reagan and Jim Knott, President Reagan's deputy chief of staff, were in the Oval Office trying to persuade him to get dressed. Apparently he had not changed out of his pajamas that morning.

President-elect Tucker turned to the cluster of officials and said softly, "Gentlemen, perhaps we should discuss this in private. Why don't we convene in the Situation Room?"

As we all walked down to the ground floor of the West Wing, Defense Secretary R. Hannibal Bowditch grumbled quite audibly, "Acting like he's already President."

A fine sentiment, I thought. The transition had been a difficult one.

Eight of us, a mix of Reagan and Tucker officials, took our places around the burled-white-ash conference table in the Situation Room. The room has the feel of the inside of a bank vault. A hissing sound emanates from the floor that makes the room impenetrable to electronic eavesdropping. Every time the door opens, a red sign lights up red and flashes: ROOM STATUS: NOT SECURE FOR SENSITIVE DISCUSSION. There were seven phones in front of us, six white and one red.

Steady, Wadlough, I said to myself. I confess that red phones make me nervous.

Apart from the President-elect and myself, the others were all Reagan inner circle: Bowditch; Knott; Mortimer "Skip" Billington of the National Security Council; Virgil "The Butcher" Hooper, Office of Management and Budget; Attorney General Atticus Simpson; Commander William Crimmins, the President's physician. Vice President Bush had injured himself playing racquetball the day before and was still in the hospital. I rather missed Bush. He would have brought the average age of those assembled down considerably.

It was now 12:06 p.m.

"Gentlemen," began the President-elect, "I know this is awkward, but I think we'd better try to find a solution quickly. There are a lot of people waiting for us up there. You know the President much better than I do. Do you have any suggestions?"

Bowditch volunteered his. "Go to DefCon Three."

Def(ense)Con(dition) Two is the designation for a high-level nu-

clear alert. The lowest is DefCon Five; the highest is DefCon One. DefCon Two puts U.S. forces worldwide on a virtual war footing. The Secretary's suggestion was thus, well, surprising.

The President-elect said in what I thought was a very reasonable tone of voice, "I see. The reason being—?"

"Mr. President-elect," said Bowditch heavily, "we have here a situation of extreme"—he lingered on the word—"criticality. Never during my four years at Defense have I moved higher than [DefCon] Four."

"For which we are all extremely grateful, sir," interjected the President-elect.

Bowditch furrowed his brows. "This speaks to the President's and my temperance, *despite* the more"—he cleared his throat noisily—"intemperate charges made during the campaign."

Here it comes, I thought.

"Your friends in Moscow—"

"My what?" said Tucker. It was an interesting contrast, the forty-eight-year-old President-elect and the hoary Bowditch.

Bowditch let the question pass. He then launched into a harangue the point of which—as I understood it—was that the Soviet Union was at this moment undoubtedly about to take advantage of our present dilemma. When the President-elect asked him why he thought this was the case, Bowditch merely harrumphed that it was "instinct" and then rambled for some minutes about his lengthy career of public service. It was necessary to interrupt this flow of words, which seemed greatly to annoy him.

Faced with this rather awkward and deteriorating situation, President-elect Tucker turned to Mr. Billington, the seventy-nine-year-old director of the National Security Council, and asked him for his assessment. Unfortunately, Billington had not been following the discussion, owing to his hearing problem.

The President-elect rubbed his forehead with the tips of his fingers. "That's all right, sir," he said wearily.

He turned to the President's physician. "Commander," he said, "is there something *you* can do?"

The Commander said that the President might respond to two cc's of adrenaline, but that at his age it might provoke an "undesirable

reaction." When the President-elect asked what sort of undesirable reaction, the commander replied, "Death."

A tabloid headline played before my eyes:

REAGAN KILLED BY INJECTION
GIVEN ON TUCKER'S ORDERS

I am not usually forceful at meetings, but I spoke up and offered my frank opinion that this was not a viable option.

Virgil Hooper of OMB began speaking of actuarial tables and the savings on Secret Service protection and pension in the event of President Reagan's demise. I was beginning to understand how he got his nickname, though I do fully understand the need for a tough helmsman at OMB.

One of the white phones rang, interrupting Mr. Hooper's gloomy discourse. Jim Knott took it.

"Trouble," he said. "The networks are reporting a White House news 'blackout.' It's affecting the stock market."

"Mr. Tucker," said Bowditch, clearing his throat, "I think it's time I made that call."

"In a minute," said Tucker with a trace of annoyance. "In a minute."

Atticus Simpson, the Attorney General and at eighty-one the second oldest member of Reagan's cabinet, rasped that he thought Tucker should invoke section four of Amendment 25, the constitutional provision whereby a President is declared unable to serve out his term of office.

The President-elect was silent a few moments. Then he said, "I don't want him to go out that way."

Bowditch snorted. "Didn't think you cared *how* he went."

For a moment I thought the President-elect was going to speak sharply to this rhinoceros, but he displayed admirable reserve.

I looked at my watch. 12:25. We were now alarmingly late. I asked an aide to switch on one of the television monitors. The camera panned the front row of the west front of the Capitol, where justices of the Supreme Court were conspicuously looking at their watches. I had a fleeting glimpse of my wife, Joan, sitting to one side of a

pillar. She looked very presentable in her new overcoat with the beaver trim. There was much hubbubbing, everyone looking at their watches and shaking their heads.

Think, Wadlough, I said to myself. But no solutions presented themselves. It was most vexing.

A phone rang—the red phone, to my great dismay. Both the President-elect and Bowditch reached for it. Bowditch practically snatched it out of his hand. Most unseemly.

Bowditch listened, grunted, and cradled the receiver on his collarbone.

“Mr. President-elect,” he said with great solemnity, “we’ve just received word a squadron of Blackjack [long-range bombers] has just passed out of Soviet airspace.”

The words sent a *frisson*—French for “a tingling sensation”—up my spine. For a moment all that could be heard was the hissing noise.

The President-elect was obviously taken aback. “I see,” he said. “Are there hostile indications?”

Bowditch treated the question with impatience. “Do you consider forty megatons hostile?”

The President-elect considered this. “If they’re dropped on my head, I do,” he said.

He reached over and took the phone from Bowditch. He asked if the flight pattern appeared other than routine. His face creased into a smile. “Thank you,” he said. “Thank you very much. You’ll keep us informed, then? Thank you.” He hung up and shot Bowditch a hot glance. Bowditch’s lower lip protruded unpleasantly.

“Where were we, gentlemen?” said Tucker.

One of the white phones rang. Knott took the call.

“That was the First Lady,” he said after hanging up. “It’s no use. He won’t change out of his pajamas. And I’m afraid he’s just ordered lunch.”

There was murmuring around the table. I leaned over and said to the President-elect in a hushed voice, “We have to leave for the Capitol in five minutes. With or without him. We can’t wait any longer.”

We huddled. “Let’s look at this rationally,” he whispered. “We’ve

got a doctor who may kill him, an Attorney General who wants to declare him bananas, and a Defense Secretary who wants me to start World War III."

I agreed. The options were not encouraging. First, we ruled out starting World War III. We were down to killing the President or having him carted off by the men in white when the phone rang. An aide handed it to me.

"What the *fuck* is going on in there?" It was Feeley. In a hushed voice I quickly explained the situation.

"For Chrissake," he said. "The nets [networks] are going out of their heads. Tell him the Soviets are attacking and he's gotta get the hell out of there."

I whispered Feeley's idea in the President-elect's ear. He nodded. I also made a mental note to speak to Feeley about his language.

"Gentlemen," he announced, "I believe we have a solution. Mr. Bowditch, please inform the President we are under attack by the Soviet Union and that he is to assume direct command of operations."

With the expression of a bulldog that has just been given sixteen ounces of fresh red meat, Bowditch picked up the phone. The red one.

"This is Caesar," he said. "DefCon Two, stand by." Cupping his hand over the receiver, he said to Tucker, "Intelligent decision, sir. My compliments."

It took a few moments for the President-elect to realize what had just happened. "Mr. Secretary," he said, "what have you just done?"

"I'll call the President. He'll need to be briefed."

"Wait a minute. Do I understand you have just ordered a nuclear alert?"

"As you directed, sir," said Bowditch.

"Cancel that order, Bowditch. Immediately."

Bowditch scowled. "If this is to appear convincing—"

"Cancel the order, Bowditch."

Beneath the oceans, submarine commanders were requesting verification. From Guam to South Dakota, bomber crews were scrambling.

"It seems to me, Mr. President-elect—"

"It seems to me, Mr. Secretary, that you have taken leave of your senses. *Cancel that order.*"

With a histrionic clearing of phlegm, Secretary Bowditch reluctantly gave the command and rescinded the nuclear alert he had moments previously issued. Around the world, U.S. forces stood down. The President-elect loosened his tie.

The President-elect left the Situation Room for the Oval Office. There he told President Reagan that NORAD had confirmed over two dozen incoming SS-28 missiles which would strike their targets on the eastern seaboard within twenty-one minutes. He told the President that it was essential to the national security, under the provisions of established White House Emergency Procedures, that he leave at once for Andrews Air Force Base aboard his helicopter, Marine One. At Andrews he would board NEACP (the National Emergency Airborne Command Post, a converted 747 nicknamed "Kneecap"), from which he could conduct World War III. Apparently the President was quite animated by this last prospect, and began immediately to change out of his pajamas.

Arrangements were conducted swiftly. Five minutes later Marine One was on its way to the South Lawn of the White House. Once the President's helicopter reached Andrews, he would be transferred not to NEACP, but to Air Force One.

There was, however, a problem. What if he began issuing retaliatory atomic orders? He *was* still President. It was decided that if he started giving orders to annihilate Soviet cities, his military aide would go through the motions of following his orders. Indeed, the President could have himself a grand old time on the way back to the ranch.

At 12:41 President-elect and Mrs. Tucker finally embarked in their limousine. He instructed me to work with Feeley on a speech insert explaining the delay. We had seven minutes to come up with it.

I suggested putting out the story that a gun barrel had been sighted along the motorcade route and that Secret Service had delayed departure until the area had been "sanitized," as they say.

Feeley said the *Washington Post* would find out it was phony and

we'd be accused of lying to the American people on our first day in office. "Listen," he said, "I think we should just tell everyone the man went crazy, pissing on the drapes, the whole works, and tried to start a war. It's not *our* fault we're late, goddammit."

"No," I said. "I don't think that's the approach he wants to take."

Muttering, Feeley began scribbling on a legal pad. He finished just as the motorcade pulled up at the Capitol.

The press was swarming, but at a safe distance. The Secret Service kept them well back. We could hear the shouts, however: "Where's the President!? What's wrong!?"

The President-elect merely waved at them, despite his well-known propensity for marching over to the roped-in area and taking any question put to him—an unfortunate tendency, in my opinion, and one which had led to some of the more spontaneous, troublesome moments of the campaign.

Feeley and I rushed to join the President-elect as he was hustled through the marble corridors of the Capitol. Feeley handed him a sheet of legal paper.

He read it quickly and frowned.

"'Emotionally disturbed'? Feeley, this is terrible. What were you thinking?" He crumbled the page into a ball. "Now I'll have to wing it."

It all seemed to happen very quickly after that. I remember coming through a doorway into cold January air, the bright blue sky, television lights, and Marine band striking up the theme music from *The Magnificent Seven*, our campaign anthem.

"Where on earth have you been?" hissed Joan. "People are *furious*."

"Averting disaster," I said enigmatically.

To judge from the looks on the platform, Joan was right. They did not look pleased. Some looked downright incensed. The twenty-five-degree cold had not helped. Justice Marshall had turned cerulean, and was apparently experiencing cardiac trouble. My stomach muscles tightened into a Gordian knot. I reached into my pockets for milk-of-magnesia tablets, but they had crumbled. All that remained was a linty powder.

The President-elect moved to the podium. A murmur rippled

through the crowd as it took stock of this unprecedented breach of protocol: the President-elect was about to speak before taking the oath of office.

"Mr. Chief Justice, Senator Hastings, distinguished members of Congress, friends and fellow Americans," he began. "I guess I have some explaining to do."

Alas, those words would become a *leitmotif* of the Tucker Presidency.

"The President is not with us on this occasion. He . . . could not be with us. He is about to leave the house and city he has lived in for the past eight years. He told me he hopes you would understand and that you will forgive him. He could not trust his emotions at such a time as this. And so he asked me to say goodbye to you for him."

The audience was hushed.

"And so we do, knowing that as he takes his leave of us, our prayers and our thanks go with him."

The sound of rotor blades was heard in the distance down the Mall, at first faint, then louder. The President-elect paused. Tens of thousands of heads turned. Few Americans are unfamiliar with the dramatic television footage, the poignancy of the moment, as Marine One banked its rotor blades in what everyone took to be a gesture of farewell before disappearing over the edge of the Capitol. I heard sniffing around me as the noise of the blades receded in the southeast and the stunned, almost reverential silence set in. I remember thinking, *How moving*. But possibly it was the beginnings of the flu that so many people got on that historic day.

BOOK ONE
HONEYMOON

1

IN THE OVAL

The President appears not to understand the gravity of the situation. Are we destined to spend the crucial moments of the Presidency huddled in lavatories? I worry.

—JOURNAL, FEB. 12, 1989

I do not propose, as so many White House memoirists do, to give the last four hundred years of my genealogy. But since I am frequently asked why I speak the way I do, I shall explain.

I was born in England during World War II. My father had been wounded by a malfunctioning crane while serving with the Corps of Engineers. He recuperated at an English Army hospital, where he met my mother, a nurse. Eventually they married, and I was born. At war's end Father moved back to Boise, Idaho, where he resumed work as assistant manager of a paper mill. Though she liked Idaho well enough, Mother missed England and inculcated in me a fondness for my maternal country. I was sent to school there, and it was there I fell in love with chartered accounting. But, being an only son, I returned to Boise to be with Father and Mother in their autumnal years.

It was while working at Dewey, Skruem and Howe, Certified Public Accountants, that I first met Thomas Nelson Tucker. He was then a figure in Boise society, scion of Thomas Oglethorpe Tucker, the lumber and tinned-trout impresario. My wife, Joan, and I did not participate in the glitter and glamour of *le tout Boise*, as the French say, so I knew him only from the gossip columns, which I read infrequently. Mr. Tucker, as I called him until the day of his inauguration, had been put in a spot of trouble with the Internal Revenue Service because of some sloppy tax

preparation. Old man Tucker's returns were done by DS&H, and so I was called in to clear them up. I was only too glad to help.

Thus began a friendship that—aside from religion and my own family—has been my most enriching life experience. I knew right from the first moment that this was a young man destined to go places. I was not disappointed. I served as finance chairman of his successful gubernatorial races. I also became a sort of counselor without portfolio, managing the personal arrangements, such as travel and accommodation, making sure the household ran smoothly. If I had a coat of arms, it would read: SEMPER IBI. Always there.

And I *was* there, from the beginning—unlike so many others, such as Chief of Staff Bamford Leland IV and National Security Council director Marvin Edelman. During Governor Tucker's celebrated courtship of Jessica Heath, it was I who snuck her into the Governor's mansion in the back of my Ford station wagon. And during their engagement it was I who prevailed on her to take his name in marriage. When their son, Thomas, was born, I stood by him at the baptismal font as godfather.

I had my finger in the policy pie, as well. I well remember the night the Governor told me he was going to announce his controversial demand that the federal government remove all Musclemann missile silos from Idaho and that the state be declared a nuclear-free zone. While I might have recommended a more cautious approach, I said to myself, *Courage, Wadlough. This is just the story of bold initiative that will land Thomas Tucker in the White House someday.* I was not wrong.

When the great moment arrived on election night and Ohio put us over the top, I began almost immediately to worry about moving to Washington. How would it affect Joan, who had never been further east than Denver; and our children, Herb, Jr., and Joan? I resolved that the transition should be a smooth one. Instead of renting a house in fashionable Georgetown or Maclean, I found a pleasant and modest house in Arlington, with a small garden and within walking distance of church.

. . .