

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana
by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Chapter - 1 Sniper

Mark Williams lay perfectly still, despite the ants finding their way up his camouflaged BDU pants. He sweated silently onto the cheek pad of his National Guard issue M-24 sniper rifle, as the insect repellent washed into his eyes, causing them to burn and tear. He breathed slowly, evenly, and quietly as he peered through the riflescope. The soldiers some 600 meters below were a mixed lot, some moving slowly, cautiously and alertly. These soldiers held their rifles with their muzzles up, at a forty-five degree angle, fingers outside the trigger guard, their eyes and heads constantly on the move. They moved forward a few paces then stopped, apparently trying to listen. Although Mark was too far away to hear much beyond the occasional sound of voices, it was apparent that some of the other soldiers were screwing off, making too much noise. Mark mentally shook his head and grinned. The soldiers continued up the draw, their forward point men having past his position several minutes ago, one almost stepping on Mark and his spotter, Dave, as the point man trudged tiredly along the ridge, holding his M-16A2 rifle by the carry handle on top, rather than in the ready position. As the man had passed, Mark had put his face down in the dirt, fighting every instinct to jump up and attack or run. But he trusted his training to let the Ghillie suit hide him. He could hear Dave quietly let out his held breath as the point man stumbled and muttered his way out of earshot. Other than that, there was no communication between his spotter and himself.

Their Ghillie suits consisted of frayed strips of burlap of earth-tone colors tied to netting that was in turn secured to the BDU top. This turned them, to even the closest observer, into piles of very non-human looking forest debris. Human eyes and brain looked for man-shapes, straight lines, stand-out colors and movement, and the Ghillie suit camouflaged a man by breaking up the outline and coloring him the same as the forest floor. Even the M-24 sniper rifle had strips of burlap tied around it in various places to break up the outline.

It was a beautiful summer day, and aside from the stinging in his eyes, the insects in his drawers, and the hot Missouri sun filtering through the trees, Mark was glad he was here. It sure beat the hell out of working as the Produce Manager at Piggly-Wiggly. He had gotten out of the Marines six months earlier, disillusioned by the massive cutbacks in the military's budget. His unit didn't even have live ammunition for training, nor fuel for the vehicles. The final straw came when he talked to his buddy in an armored unit which actually was made to "walk through" a tank attack exercise in groups of five (an M-1 Abrams tank crew), calling out commands as if they were actually in the tank. It would have been funny if it had not been so sad. His enlistment was up soon thereafter, and he mustered out. He had been a squad leader in the Marines, but he had the opportunity to attend sniper school through his National Guard unit, and jumped at the chance. All in all, the Guard was a little better than the active military. The money came from the state rather than federal government, so there was at least some ammunition and fuel for training. There were still a few crusty Viet Nam era vets who had their sh*t together, and Mark bought a beer for them when the opportunity arose to listen to the stories. On the other hand he had to deal with fresh out of high school punks who didn't realize what they were training for. It was a big camp out with guns for them, and most of them took it as a wonderful opportunity to screw off and get paid for it.

Finally what he had been waiting for happened. A soldier in BDUs the same as the rest strode purposefully up the draw. A soldier with a radio walked beside him, then stopped suddenly. The soldier who had been striding

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

along stopped and turned to the radioman, then said something to the soldiers in front of him. They stopped, turned, and then said something to the soldiers in front of them, who also stopped. The word was passed up the line and soon everyone was stopped. The soldiers who were alert crouched down, weapons pointing outward, in a pattern that was supposed to ensure that a 360 degree area around them was covered in overlapping arcs by everyone facing outward. The problem was some of the soldiers down there had neither the intelligence nor the patience it took. He almost heard the more squared-away members of the unit below trying to get the other sh*t heels to do what they were supposed to. The purposeful soldier, whom Mark had already pinpointed as the lieutenant or squad leader, was on the radio and was gesturing wildly to the sh*t heel soldiers at the same time. About half of them complied with his pantomime to face outward and pay attention to the forest, while the other half edged closer to one another to whisper apparent witticisms between them. These men ignored the stern looks from the older veterans and giggled between themselves. Mark resisted the momentary temptation to punish them with the M-24 for their foolishness, and instead shifted his position ever so slightly to center the lieutenant in the crosshairs. The lieutenant was still talking on the radio, gesturing in an agitated fashion, and Mark decided now was as good a time as any. He tapped his left boot, which was in contact with Dave's and felt, rather than saw him tense ever so slightly. Mark closed his eyes and took three steady, deep breaths. He opened his eyes on the last breath, and only let half of it out. He gently and slowly squeezed the Remington's trigger until the round went off.

Working quickly, he manipulated the bolt with his right hand thumb, catching the brass cartridge casing between his ring and middle finger, while at the same time centering the scope's crosshairs on the radioman who was just by now hearing the sound of the first round being fired. Mark quickly but smoothly squeezed the trigger as the radioman looked dumbfounded by the noise. Mark worked the action, again catching the spent brass casing. He safed the M-24, and slowly inched his way backward over the crest of the ridge. He heard the distant beeping of the MILES gear, and even without optics, could pick out the lieutenant jumping up and down, and could only imagine what cursing was taking place. He flashed a grin at Dave as they both continued to inch backward, and Dave returned it in kind. Once over the crest of the hill, they got to their feet and began to dog-trot back to the Blue base. "Damn, I love playing Opfor!" he thought with an outward smile.

Back at work on Monday, Mark stretched his tired muscles as he lifted box after box of celery from the semi-trailer which in turn had carried it all of the way from California. Out of the Ghillie suit, Mark's six-foot height was apparent, along with a muscularly lean build. He had close-cropped reddish blonde hair and brown eyes. As he worked, he reflected on how his life had taken a few twists and turns in his twenty-six short years. His father had left his mom when he was quite young, and he had never really gotten to know him. Although this was hard on Mark, it was by no means a crushing, life-crippling event. Mark's mom had found another husband, a good man who loved Mark a great deal, and treated him as his own son. Mark had grown up in the country, enjoying hunting, fishing, and a little bit of trapping. These activities, combined with a chronic lack of money taught him self-reliance and humility. His stepfather, Jim, introduced Mark to hunting, and spent many hours in the woods, quietly explaining the way of the forest, combining woodsman's lore with American Indian teachings. Jim taught him not to kill unless it was necessary, to take only what he needed from nature, and above all, that there was a balance: The squirrel took of the tree, Mark took of the squirrel, and someday in the far future, a tree would take of him. It was the way of things, and has been since the beginning of time. Jim also taught him marksmanship, which gave him a leg up on most of the other students in the Army's Sniper School, most of whom had been city kids, not even getting to hold a real rifle until they joined the service. Marksmanship was only a small part of the Sniper School, much of the rest being woodcraft, of which he also had plenty. He had joined the Marines shortly after dropping out of college. He had not really known what he wanted to achieve in

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

college, and rather than continue throwing money into his slowly slipping grades, he decided to join the Marine Corps.

All Marines are riflemen first, but Mark joined the Infantry to really see the world. Besides, he enjoyed the dangerous aspect of the work. The thrill of the possibility of death made him feel excruciatingly alive. He had seen a little action in Somalia, not enough to consider himself a veteran, but enough to have actually pulled a trigger with the righteous intent of killing someone who was trying to kill him. Sometimes the memory of the black face, eyes half-lidded with the effects of the khat as the teen ambled up to his patrol, carelessly holding his AK-47 assault rifle by its wooden pistol grip would come to him. He could sometimes hear the distant memory-echoes of his own shouts and those of his patrol as the yelled at the teen to stop, and put the rifle down. The question of whether the kid was just too stoned to care, or didn't understand the pantomime of dropping his rifle was forgotten in the blink of an eye as the teen pulled the AK into a firing position at his hip. Mark had already shouldered his M-16A2 when they first noticed the kid and his rifle, and as the kid had approached, Mark had clicked off the safety to the single-shot position. As the kid had raised the rifle, Mark had pulled the trigger, simultaneously it seemed with two or three other members of his patrol. At the range of ten meters, it seemed that the world exploded in his ears as the kid stumbled and fell backwards, a seeming sudden wind plucking furiously at the front of his shirt. Mark shook his head to clear the past away, and set his mind back to unloading the semi trailer.

Max Jeager sat in the squad room, listening to the briefing and taking notes. Max was a serious cop, who cared a lot about doing his job and doing it right. In fact, just about the only thing that he loved more than his job was his family. The briefing was regarding the rapid increase in gang related activity they had seen in the past few months. At first everyone had assumed it was the "wannabees" that were tagging the local high school, and getting into petty fistfights. Things had escalated, he was learning. Last week there had been an honest-to-God shooting, and the investigators, in snapping up the usual suspects, were noticing the rising level of belligerence, disrespect and violence among these wannabees. As was inevitable, somebody started talking. The gangs from Minneapolis, Detroit, and Chicago were making their presence felt by organizing the wannabees into sort of a Hitler Youth for the gangs. Making them "lieutenants" in the fledgling branches of the organization, and rewarding criminal behaviors such as assault and possession with intent to deliver with praise, drugs, prestige, and money had begun to show results for the gangs. Crimes such as simple battery were up, mostly from the Hitler Youth of one organization battling another. That's what the murder had been about. Not content with pool cues and knives, someone had brought a gun to a knife fight. Drug related crimes such as burglary, robbery and prostitution were up as well. Max thought briefly of the fifteen year old runaway he had turned over to Social Services last night. Christ, fifteen and turning tricks to pay for a methamphetamine habit. She'd also been associated with one of the gangs, though more as chattel -a whore- than a member. He had heard the gal from Social Services talking to this kid in the interview room about the initiation: All the gang members got a turn or two between her legs. Max shook his head absently in disgust. Another life effectively ruined. This kid, provided everything else went exactly right in her life, might have a chance of appearing normal on the surface, but she would, no matter the amount of psychotherapy, live the rest of her life as a deeply scarred person.

Though most of the community members were white, there had been a sizable and relatively well-integrated number of blacks as well. As the mostly black gang members from the cities had moved into the area, racial tensions began to rise. Television news from the cities showed an endless parade of black faces charged with murder, arson, beatings, robbery, carjacking, drug crimes and even check forgery. Although there were certainly white criminals, they never seemed to attract the notoriety that the blacks had. For that reason, the acceptance

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

that the long time black residents had enjoyed was becoming more and more fragile. Local news rightly blamed gang members from the cities for the increase in problems with the youth, and everyone knew they were mostly black. While no one had yet attacked a long time black resident, there were folks on his "beat" that told him of increasing hostilities. It came down to be a big effin' mess. White kids trying to act black, blacks trying to sell drugs, and other blacks just trying to live in peace, and he couldn't see into the heart of anybody to see the right from the wrong. He suspected it wouldn't be long before the next shooting. If this followed the pattern seen in a number of other medium sized communities, these Hitler Youth would soon turn from high school kid to gang leader in a short while. Drug trade would be expanded, and the new crop would send out feelers into other communities, where the problem would begin all over again, but in the mean time there would be turf battles between the various gang affiliations, and sometimes between factions in the same gang. The new, disturbing development was in the way these gangs were now organized, both on the drug-and-money side, as well as the security and enforcement side. It was sort of a wicked cross between Amway and the Mongol Horde. The gang experts had warned of this for years, and now they were finally beginning to see it firsthand: Gang members who were former military.

It used to be that a judge would give a lad his choice between jail or the military, and the military would straighten him out. It was now not the case. Max's brother told him that while he was in the Navy, there were some parts of the ship that no one went to, for fear of the gangs. He found that incredible, but his brother just shrugged and mumbled something about the "new Navy." But the gang members he was concerned about weren't ex-Navy, they were the ex-airborne, ex-infantry, and ex-Marines. They would have knowledge of weapons, not just the stupid bravado that a thug with a gun has, but for real and for true knowledge about sights, fire control, ambushes, immediate action drills, and the like. Their preferred weapons would not be common, ineffective 9mm pistols, but the short barreled assault rifles like the CAR-15, or the AK-74 "Krinkov," both of which had the range and velocity to stand off and safely penetrate Max's standard threat level IIA body armor from a distance. Hell, even the entry team's threat level IIIA could only stop one or two rounds, and that was only because of the ceramic trauma plates. These hombres would also have some discipline. They would not lose cool and run like their non-military compatriots, they would choose targets and engage. These gangstas were a new and dangerous breed. He hoped that they didn't take the next logical step and start training the Hitler Youth. It would make his job infinitely harder to have an army of trained, armed, sociopaths intent on criminal behavior. They have already become more sophisticated in their use of cellular phones and pagers, and having lookouts, etc. for their drug operations. He prayed history wouldn't repeat itself, and that trouble would pass his little county by.

After the briefing, Max arranged his squad car as he liked it. He replaced the Remington 870 shotgun in the overhead rack with the AR-15 carbine. The shotgun was a good close in weapon, but Max preferred the AR-15 for his work out in the county. The range was greater, and the magazine held far more than the old reliable shotgun. He placed his black nylon carry bag on the seat next to him, and checked his watch. He had patrol for two hours alone before Andy would join him. His department was pretty good about allowing ride alongs. Of course, it didn't hurt that Andy was a paramedic and worked closely with the emergency response team as a "Special Deputy." That meant he wasn't a sworn officer, couldn't carry a gun in a law enforcement capacity, but was still covered by the county's liability insurance when he was the medic for the emergency response team. He hoped it would be a quiet night.

There was a lot of new and urgent information to discuss with Andy. One of his buddies from the service who had since become an officer in Army Intelligence had sent him a PGP encrypted message, mentioning some of

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

the developments in the middle east that were not being reported on the broadcast media. George was a friend from high school, who went to college with the help of Uncle Sam, and received his degree in Arabian culture and Arabic language. George used to joke that he got his degree just in time to have it be obsolete. In the late '80s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there were no longer the rubles to support renegade organizations like the PLO or Hezbollah or a myriad of others. The focus of conflict had shifted from the Middle East to Somalia, the Baltic, and Africa. Low intensity, mostly managed by diplomacy and air strikes, especially after the quagmire in Somalia. George's E-mail mentioned a dark purpose to the new Pan-Arab Coalition, that Hussein and Khaddafy had put aside their differences in the interpretation of the Koran, and had decided to do something about the last remaining superpower, the great Satan, the USA. With oil revenues and a totalitarian regime, both countries had amassed enough wealth to create a formidable enemy to the United States. Not in the sense of army vs. army, as the US military was indisputably the most capable and deadly in the world, but in the sense of state-sponsored terror. The collapse of the Soviet Union had been a blessing in disguise: Free of their Soviet "advisors" they began to think for themselves and formulate real, damaging options for destroying the United States. Additionally, the cash-starved former Soviet scientists were lured away from research facilities and weapons labs where they had not been paid in some cases for months with kept promises of new, state-of-the art European equipped labs, luxurious apartments, high salaries and prestigious automobiles. Soviet military officers of the Strategic Rocket Corps were not immune. Several became willing guests of Libya, bringing with them some twenty "suitcase nukes." There had been an uproar in the world community regarding the "misplacement" of thirty-one of these devices, but the Libyans had paid well and promised much, and without a paper trail or evidence, the incident quickly faded from view. To be fair, Libya only had twenty, and no one seemed to know where the other eleven or so were. Iraq had suffered a few setbacks in their assigned aspect of the destruction of the Great Satan, the chemical weapons. Saddam had been convinced by some over-optimistic advisers that the US would not object with anything more than UN resolutions if Iraq annexed Kuwait. This very nearly was the end of Iraq's chemical warfare program. UN air strikes by all manner of aircraft and Tomahawk cruise missiles nearly crippled the program, and only the fact that Saddam had multiple, redundant facilities kept the effort on schedule. George went on to mention the increasing alert status of the Iraqi and Libyan armies, the construction of multiple bunker-like facilities in the desert, and the interesting tidbit of ex-Soviet and European advisers increasing both countries combat troop's ability to fight. In the end of the E-mail, George gave his analysis: There would be a nuclear and/or chemical attack in the US. The Pan-Arab Coalition wasn't stupid: They knew they may possibly suffer nuclear retaliation for this act. Therefore, expect a massive, coordinated attack, with the intent of knocking out as much of the US command and control system as possible, and/or the maximum number of civilian casualties. With the civilian population out of their minds with fear, economic production would slow or cease, violence would erupt, and it would produce nearly the same effect, but be a damn sight cheaper for the Arabs, than nuking every major US city.

"Yeah," Max thought as he wheeled the cruiser out of the department parking lot and onto the county road, "we got a lot to talk about. It's raining **** and we don't have an umbrella."

"Hey, how's it going so far?" Andy asked, as he tossed his bag into the back seat of the patrol car, then plopped down into the passenger's seat.

"Nothing much going on tonight. A nice, slow Tuesday. All the good citizens are snug in their beds. We ought to have plenty of time to discuss our next moves." Max replied, as he watched Andy fasten his seatbelt, then put the squad in "drive," and rolled out of the EMS parking lot.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Andy unconsciously looked over at the radio console to make sure that the “transmit” light was off. He had not made the mistake himself, but had heard plenty of other medics and cops on the radio complaining about management, their sex lives, etc. Not only was this a huge source of embarrassment, there were also more serious repercussions if any of the folks out in “scannerland” heard the conversation between partners, and called or wrote in complaints.

“Well, I think we are fairly well set. We have pretty much every thing we need, just not enough of it. I have a couple month’s food, and I think you have about that much. We could use some more, I guess. I’d like to have about a year’s worth on hand. But that’ll come when we can afford it, I guess. You’ve got the propane heater, and I’ve got the kerosene, and about three weeks fuel for it. I’d like to double that, or put in a wood stove, or maybe both. Lights we have, in oil lamps, battery powered fluorescents, and propane lanterns. We’ve got about a month’s worth of water, more if we’re stingy. . . .”

“Are you counting the water heater?” Max inquired.

“Oh, no I hadn’t! Lessee, say thirty gallons, figure four gallons per day between Becky and me, that’s about another weeks’ worth! Good thinking. As long as we’re on the subject, I think we should plan on using the water in the heater first.” Andy said

“Why?”

“Well, it’s not treated, unless you count the municipal treatment. It’ll probably start to grow bugs sooner than the stuff we have in storage. Plus, if this ‘disaster’ is only short term, it’s not going to be as much of a problem to refill it as it might for the storage barrels.” Andy replied.

“Good thought.” said Max, “I’m not looking forward to pumping four gallons per day of water out of those barrels. It doesn’t seem like a big deal, but when we did a practice a couple weeks ago at home, I got real tired, real fast of pumping water. As long as we’re on this subject, how are you set for ammunition?”

Andy looked sharply at Max. “Why? What do you know?”

“Nothing! I just want to make sure that you have enough. It isn’t getting any cheaper, you know. Plus, well, there has been a lot of serious gang activity recently. If something big happens, that’s gonna be a factor. Gangstas gotta eat too, you know. They show no hesitation for shooting people for money or just for fun. Imagine what’s gonna happen when they’re hungry.” Max answered.

“Well, I think I have about twelve hundred rounds of .308 for the FN and the H&K, plus about five hundred for the .45, then a whole mess of .22. Probably three or four thousand rounds. That’s the long-term storage stuff in the ammo cans. I have probably two to three hundred rounds of everyday practice stuff.”

“Man,” Max said, “That’s pretty good. I know I should pick up some more of the .223 stuff for Lisa’s CAR-15 and for mine, but it never seems like I can get around to it.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Andy asked in amazement. “The department gives you .223 for you to practice with ! Just grab a few extra boxes every time we go shooting. It won’t take you long to get a pretty

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

good stash of ammo. Hell, you have the key to the range house on that ring if you are Senior Officer tonight: We could swing by at, say, 0330, load up a few hundred rounds and drop it off at your place at ‘lunch’!”

AGreyMan

Chapter - 2 The Old Ways

Khalid Atwa looked at the Edmunds Scientific Catalog, staring at the pages and mentally calculated all of the factors involved. Lift capacity, altitude at rupture, cost, volume . . . Ten apiece should do it. He lifted the receiver of the phone, dialed the order desk, tapping the gold, pre-approved MasterCard that had come in the mail just that day. After he placed his order, Atwa stood, put his keys in his pocket, and left the small, unassuming rented apartment. The payphone was several blocks away, and the “cyber café” was several blocks further than that. The weather was still warm -as it was late August- and he had no need for even a light jacket. As he walked, he stared steadfastly ahead. Internally, he recoiled in disgust at the bloated, fish belly-white people who passed and jostled him on the sidewalks. He longed for his family and his homeland, but knew that, short of a miracle, he would never see them again.

After several minutes, he arrived at the phone. Retrieving a convenience store prepaid calling card from his pocket, he set to dialing. The voice on the other end was not familiar. It was different each time, and the connection was often poor.

Khalid spoke in English with a cheerfulness he did not feel: “This is Ahmed. Big Stan’s gift is nearly ready for the party. I just need the secret ingredient, and his surprise will be ready. You can tell my cousins that the decorations will do just fine, but they will need to buy ten each to make the party a success.”

The voice at the other end said, “ That’s wonderful news! Your father will be so happy with you. You should prepare yourself for guests.”

“When should I expect them?” Khalid asked. “Soon, I hope.”

The voice chuckled. “Soon enough. I go now to call your cousins.”

“Goodbye.” Replied Khalid, replacing the receiver.

He then resumed his walk to the “cyber café.” His spirits lifted slightly as he walked: Soon enough. Soon enough.

Eli Yoder leaned back against the railing of the hay wagon, stretching his aching back. Maybe the English had the right idea after all: He sure wouldn’t mind sitting in an air-conditioned cab, sipping lemonade while the machines did all the work! A brief flicker of a smile crossed his lips as he thought of what the elders would say if they say him in a massive 8-wheeled green John Deere tractor. No need to worry about that, though. Besides it must be sacrilege to think thus. He removed his straw hat and wiped his brow. The plain, dark clothes intensi-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGreyMan*

fied the heat, and the dry flecks of hay stalk clung tenaciously to his skin, causing a fierce itch. His son, Jacob, was 14 and already adept at working the team of horses. Eli watched as Jacob guided the horses and the hay rake they pulled to the end of the field and began to guide them back. Jacob worked as hard as Eli, but always seemed to have more energy at the end of the day. That was the difference between 14 and 38, he supposed. With a sigh, he turned back to the pitchfork and the pile of hay yet to be pitched onto the wagon. It would be dusk soon. Time to go take a bath, then on to the prayer meeting. He had to keep an eye on Jacob: He spent far too much time looking at young Rachel and not enough time listening to Bishop Hochstadter.

AGreyMan

Chapter - 3 Warning

It was well past midnight before David finally shut down the computer, completed his nightly rounds to check the security of the house and then quietly crawled beneath the covers. Denise rolled to face him as the cold air whooshed under the warm covers.

“Honey you’ve really got to get to bed earlier.” She murmured half asleep.

“I know dear.” He affirmed. “Just needed to finish imputing the grades and then checked Jeff’s latest update.”

“Anything new?”

“Nothing really . . . but the Sergeant Major’s not happy with some of the message traffic he’s been catching bits and pieces of lately. Says we should be sure our tanks are topped off and we’re standing by locked and loaded.”

“Topped off.” She rose up on one elbow. “What’s he mean by that?”

“Well I suppose that means we should be sure our tanks ARE topped off.” David replied as he settled down for the night.

“I’ve known Sergeant Major for too many years not to listen when he says something, no matter how subtle.”

“You call that subtle? Locked and loaded is hardly subtle. You don’t actually think he’s serious do you?” Denise was now wide-awake.

“The one thing I can say for sure about the Sergeant Major is that he’s never NOT serious.”

Denise had met the Sergeant Major only one time before David hung up his anchor and traded navy blue for civilian “whatever”. A leathery faced, hard lined, sinewy coot with Marine Corps flowing through his veins, the Sergeant Major was an enigma of contradictions. None-the-less she had taken an immediate liking to him. Always polite and an absolute southern gentleman, there was an undercurrent of rage just below the surface. She knew they had served together in a grunt unit during the Gulf War, something her husband had never really talked about. But through all the years since the war, and the five years it took David to finish a college degree and land a teaching job after he had retired. David and Sergeant Major had kept a tight friendship going as well

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

as a frequent stream of correspondence between them. The Sergeant Major, or Jeff as Denise liked to call him, was due to finally call it quits after almost thirty years of service. Now a crusty Sergeant Major, Dave first met him back when he was the Company Gunny. Dave was always just “Doc” to the Sergeant Major and together they were a pair, of what, Denise was never quite sure. But they certainly were a pair.

“Men?” She muttered under her breath as she rolled over to sleep. “Still playing games after all these years.”

Little did she know that the games were about to begin. David knew full and well the meaning behind the latest message. He laid awake going over a mental readiness list in his head.

“The Sergeant Major must be really concerned about something . . . but what?” David began to warm up beneath the covers and started to drift off to sleep.

“I wonder what has him worried?” Dave started to drift.

“That old Gunny doesn’t sweat the small stuff . . . I better get ready . . . for . . . ?”

Meanwhile on the other side of the continent Sergeant Major Jeffery Lee Strothers, United States Marine Corps active duty, was just finishing up the last personal message of the evening. In thirty-nine days and a wake up he would be a member of the First Civ. Div. After twenty-eight years of honorable service, two marriages, two wars (not related) and several major conflicts he was finally hanging up his eagle globe and anchor. He hoped that his ol’buddy Doc would heed the message he had sent. Things were breaking loose even if no one else would believe him. He only hoped that every thing would hang tight until he was a free agent and able to choose his battlefield, rather than let some chickenshet democratic congressman chose it for him.

“Only thirty-nine more muther-friggin days!” The old battle weary Marine muttered to himself.

“Just hope the pencil necked jerks inside the beltway can keep it in their pants until then.”

The last light in his Staff NCO Bachelors Quarters blinked out and the cool Northern Virginia night engulfed the quiet. The Sergeant Major listened to the evening noise cataloging each one. He slid his hand beneath the pillow till he felt the cold blued steel of one of Colonel Colt’s best offspring, born back in 1911. Reassured he quickly drifted off to sleep.

“Only thirty-nine figgin days.”

Desert Doc

Chapter - 4 Call to Mom

Receiver held to his ear, Mark wrote himself a note as he half-listened to his mother. “Yeah . . . OK, Ma. I’ll see what I can do, but I really don’t have a lot of say in it.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

His mother didn't seem to understand the working world. Mark would love to visit on both Thanksgiving and Christmas, but the reality was he would be lucky if he got to visit her for either. It's not that his boss was a hard case, but it was a business and businesses these days needed to be open all the time. In addition, it was at least a ten-hour drive from Missouri to Wisconsin. That meant it wasn't just a quick trip. He needed a few days in a row off to even make it worth the effort.

"Well, maybe if you told him how much it would mean to me. Honestly, are you so vital they can't do without you for a few days? I'm not getting any younger, you know. Tell him that." His mom complained into the phone.

He sighed inwardly. "I'll do that Ma. Let me see what I can figure out. If I have to choose, though, which would you rather have me home for? Thanksgiving or Christmas?"

"Oh honey, it's so hard to choose . . . I guess Christmas. Your sister will be home then too."

"OK Ma. Like I said, I'll see what I can do. I gotta go, or I'll be late." "All right son. I love you. Good-bye."

"Love you too. Bye, Ma." Mark said, then hung up the telephone receiver. On the note, he wrote "Get Christmas off," then stuffed it into his shirt pocket. He turned to the task at hand, which was not, as he had told his mother, going to work. Actually, he had the day off. No, today was to be spent getting his tiny apartment in order. There always was the possibility that he could find a date and bring her home, and he'd like to have a relatively clean place to bring this as-yet unnamed date. Plus, the place was looking like a pigsty. He was already mostly finished with the domestic stuff. Dishes and laundry were done, and clean sheets were on the bed. He turned his attention to the closet. Half of it was taken up with Mark's Guard stuff, plus some miscellaneous camping equipment. He looked at the pile with distaste. That stupid sleeping bag was such a space-waster. A surplus extreme cold weather bag took up about the same space as a medium suitcase, and that was when rolled up! Well, the weather was going to get colder soon. "Even in Missouri, there can be ice storms." He thought. Mark set to rolling up the sleeping bag as tight as he could make it, then set to stuffing it into an empty, clean 5 gallon plastic bucket, then snapped the sealing lid in place. With much sweating and cursing, the task took about 30 minutes, all told. He set the bucketed sleeping bag next to the door, to take to his car on the next trip. In another bucket he placed other items selected from the closet. Snow boots, winter coat, and a change of clothes barely fit into the bucket, but again, after much work and re-arranging, he finally snapped the lid in place. Lastly, into a ratty old ALICE pack with a frame, he put other essentials, such as a canteen with cup and cover, a bottle of Polar Pure, a small toiletries kit, fire starting kit, Buck knife, and small kit with 2 Connibear 110 traps and some assorted snares. A few "Datrex" ration packs and a canteen-sized bottle of food tabs rounded out the pack, plus some other odds and ends. This "Emergency kit" usually sat in Mark's trunk, but he had used much of it on the last camping trip, and never got around to repacking the kit and putting it back in the car. With the cleaning frenzy, plus the prospect of a road trip on the horizon, Mark was glad he finally got around to putting it back in the beat-up AMC Eagle station wagon that he drove. The kit was his security blanket, and he was vaguely uneasy without it in the trunk. Frankly, though, the tool kit he carried in the car saw more use than his personal emergency kit. When the Eagle worked well, it was great, but 200,000 miles plus was asking a lot from an AMC. Still, it was old enough so he could do most of the repairs himself. It did have a "black box" albeit a primitive one, but he could still see the engine through the hoses, belts, and plastic covers, which was more than can be said about Dave's new Camero!

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

With the car loaded and the apartment cleaned it was nearly dark. Mark closed the curtains, went to the nightstand and withdrew his Glock 17. He had owned it for nearly ten years, and absolutely loved it. He had had the foresight to purchase two extra magazines when he had purchased the pistol, and thus had three high capacity pre-ban magazines for the pistol. Many people disregarded the 9mm, calling it a “Mouse gun” round, and a favorite of the gangs, but Mark lived by the old saw that you ought to “Shoot what you’re good with,” and he was pretty good with the Glock 17.

He spread an oil-stained towel on the coffee table and quickly stripped the Glock to its subassemblies. Peering at them, he lightly wiped the parts down with a clean cloth. He then went to the sink, reached into the cabinet underneath, and withdrew a can of automobile brake cleaner. Taking a few deep breaths and holding the last one, he liberally sprayed the action of the Glock, until he was certain that he had removed almost all traces of oil from the slide and frame. He shook the parts vigorously over the sink, then tossed them into the dish rack before scooting to the living room and drawing a deep breath. “Damn!” he said. The brake cleaner worked great, but sure stunk up the place! Minutes later, after the brake cleaner had dissipated from the parts (but not the smell), he took the components back into the living room. Mark opened his “gun bag” withdrew a small tube of powdered graphite, and lightly directed the extremely fine black powder into the areas of the pistol where friction occurred. He knew he was probably being overcautious: This was Missouri after all, not Alaska! But still, it wouldn’t hurt anything to have the graphite lubricant in place. Mark started using graphite after listening to his uncle tell stories about the effect of cold on his sidearm in Korea, and after talking to a guy in the Corps who had spent a few miserable months at Ft. Wainwright. Finished, he reassembled the pistol, racked the slide a few times and wiped the outside down to remove any stray graphite. Picking up the loaded magazine, he looked at the bottom. A small “2” was painted there. Mark unloaded the magazine, placing the 12 rounds of Federal hollow-point in the magazine with the “3” on the floor plate. Before returning the pistol to the holster, he re-checked the chamber, dry-fired it, then placed the loaded magazine in the well.

Walking to the bedroom, he placed the Glock back in his nightstand, then went to the kitchen to prepare his evening meal.

Andy glanced guiltily at the straining UPS man as he staggered onto the porch for the fifth time.

“Damnit Andy, you’re going to have get a broomstick to put my hernia back in,” he wheezed as he dropped the large box as gently as possible.

“My wife and that damn e-Bay!” said Andy as he reached for the electronic clipboard and signed his name. “Well, I hope the rest of your deliveries are lighter.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it.” Groaned the man in brown as he swayed, took his clipboard back and started down the sidewalk. “See ya!”

“Bye!” Called Andy as he swept his eyes over the boxes.

He already knew what was in most of it: Freeze-dried meat. In preparation for hard times, Andy had tried TVP.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Tastes just like beef!!” the advertisement had proclaimed. Tasted more like beef manure, Andy thought.

The only other alternatives were to keep canned beef, or freeze-dried. He loved beef, like any other Wisconsinite, and despite the canned venison in the pantry the freeze-dried beef was a welcome addition to the other storage food. In the basement prophylactically surrounded by mousetraps, were many 5-gallon pails lined with Mylar bags, full of storage food. His wife Becky had slowly come to realize the wisdom of such preparations. He cautioned her not to speak of them with anyone, and after he extracted her promise, she did not. She felt the calming effect of Andy's preparations during the Y2K scare several years before, although most of his preparations had been in place long before the media circus that surrounded the calendar rollover.

The preparations that Andy insisted on making had proved themselves on several occasions. Only last winter, the freezing rain dropped power lines, and their home was without outside power for three days. While most of the neighbors fled to relatives' homes, Andy's system to heat the house worked well. Although the LP tank that normally heated the home was full, the furnace would not work because there was no power. Andy's solution was to have two large golf-cart batteries connected to an inverter, and the furnace connected to the inverter. A float charger kept the batteries topped off at all times. The batteries alone were sufficient to run the furnace for nearly two weeks, but just for practice during the outage, Andy had recharged them by running a cord in from the small diesel generator in the detached garage. He discovered that with the different muffler and the garage windows only partially open, the little generator was acceptably quiet. Another preparation that proved itself during that outage was the well. The property already had a well in place before Andy and Becky bought the place, but the Department of Natural Resources had ruled that it was fit only for watering the lawn, despite a clean well test. It was suspected by many residents who had wells suffering a similar fate that the city somehow encouraged this, as it extended its municipal lines into the half-rural, half outskirts areas surrounding the town.

Andy had not dug up the well as many neighbors had done. Instead, he installed a 110V well pump, and ran the plumbing underground to the house. For drinking and cooking initially, they used water stored in plastic barrels in the basement. When that ran low, or they needed to take a shower (a hot shower, thanks to the LP water heater), Andy opened the valves that put the well water into the household plumbing. They had no concerns about the toilets backing up, as the city had not quite got around to extending the sewer out as far as their home, and thus, still had a perfectly functional septic tank and leech field.

“Well, to work!” said Andy as he hefted the boxes for the trip to the basement.

AGreyMan

Chapter - 5 Higher Education

David McMillan stood fuming outside the Senior Educational Director's office. Directors were not referred to by the antiquated and Politically Incorrect term of Principal. Such elitist terminology was no longer accepted in the secondary education system in the “Republik of Kalifornia”! David thought to himself.

David could hear the muffled conversation going on behind the Director's door and could well imagine the PC bowing, curtsying, and genuflecting taking place at this very moment.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *A GrayMan*

Suddenly the door opened and the Director, Ms. Janice “Torquemada” Torgelson, emerged leading an obviously distressed pair of aging yuppie parents.

“Yes Ms. Daniels, I fully agree with your concerns and we will take the appropriate actions necessary.” Torgelson said as she led the Daniels’ into the outer office, giving David a critical look as she passed him.

More genuflecting and hand wringing was conducted in the outer office before Director Torgelson stiffly marched back to her office and motioned David inside. David felt like he was back in the service standing before his CO’s desk about to get royally @ss chewed for something. The Director moved around her large executive walnut desk, sat down and began shuffling papers and arranged her desk ignoring David standing right in front of her.

“Isn’t this charming.” David thought. “Shall we pull another page from the Executive Leaders Guide Book?” He continued. “Hmmm that would be under Chapter 3, Intimidation of Subordinates and other arrogant procedures.” Ms. Director now looked up at David.

“You do know why you’re in my office Mr. McMillan, do you not?” She began.

“Frankly, no.”

“Come now, surely you recognized the Daniels, Rebecca’s parents?”

“Oh yes, I’ve met them.”

“Oh you’ve met them? I’d say you more than met them. They are quite upset and justifiably so, I should say.”

David could see the expression on her face-harden, as well as hear the vinegar begin to enter her voice.

“They are very disturbed by your conduct in the classroom the other day and the propaganda you are attempting to espouse to your students!”

“Propaganda?” David could feel the hackles on the back of his neck raise. “Just how is teaching the Constitution and the Bill of Rights propaganda Ms. Torgelson?”

“It is not what you are teaching, IT is the WAY you are teaching that is upsetting the students and the parents of those students.” Torgelson was starting to build up steam.

“It is the way you go on and on about individual rights and responsibilities. Bantering over and over again how it is each and every citizens right, no their duty to criticize their government. You are teaching anarchy in this very school!

“How is it anarchy when it is clearly stated in the Bill of Rights . . . ” She cut him off.

“I don’t need one of YOUR lectures Mr. McMillan. You are constantly degrading the present administration, finding fault with all its policies. You rant on and on about the unconstitutionality of decisions being made at the

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

highest levels in our government and how Americans are losing their rights and becoming subjugated by the very organizations that are meant to protect those rights. You, Mr. McMillan are teaching a warped and twisted view of our political system and are quite frankly scaring the kids in your class, and upsetting their parents at home!” Herr Director was just starting to warm up.

“Ms Torgelson” David began quietly. “I am teaching a class on U.S. Government, in order to do that I must discuss, in detail, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. They ARE somewhat pivotal documents and quite necessary in order to explain how our system of government is supposed to work. That also includes comparisons to present day situations and the application of these documents in our modern world today. When what the founding fathers wrote down blatantly conflicts with the current administration’s actions, just how do you propose I justify that to my students?”

“You have twisted those documents to serve your own agenda and I will not have it in my classrooms!”

“I have done no such thing. I have merely taught the information as required from the states approved educational material list, *when it was correct*. I have only added supplemental material when it was necessary to clarify or correct gross oversights and/or outright errs in those approved materials.”

“Your own materials!” She was standing up now. “Right-wing propaganda is more like it.”

“I hardly consider the Federalist Papers, Poor Richards Almanac, and the correspondence of our first presidents right-wing propaganda, would you?” Dave was struggling to maintain a calm profile.

“That is ancient history and material no longer applicable to today’s problems!”

“No longer applicable!” Now David was now starting to get steamed. “It is more applicable now, and has greater need than ever before in our nations history!”

“Oh is that so! Just like your little tirade the other day on the Second Amendment. That antiquated so called right! You openly compared the current program of restrictions on gun owners as “Neo-Nazi Jackbooted politics” . . . right in class! You then so far as to make a direct comparison between our current governor and Adolph Hitler!” Torgelson slammed her fist on a stack of paper. “And called the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms a group of SS Thugs!”

“If the shoe fits.”

“I have about had enough of your warped right wing politics.” She stammered out. “I should have known better than to hire a . . . a . . . a . . .”

“Vet.” Dave injected.

“That’s right!” The color was now rising in her face. “You’re nothing but a bunch of brainwashed killing machines! We should never allow your type out in public among civilized citizens!”

Dave just stared back in disbelief. He was seeing Torquemada in full colors for the first time.

“Let me remind you Mr. McMillan, that you are a ‘probationary’ teacher and as such your position can be terminated at my leisure.” She moved out from behind the desk. “From this point forward all lesson plans will be screened by me and will contain only material I personally approve of. There will be no deviation from accepted themes and outlines. Is that understood?”

David just stood there stoically.

“You Mr. McMillan” She shook her finger at him. “are officially warned, any deviation, any deviation at all, however slight will result in your immediate dismissal. Your propaganda will not be tolerated here, do you understand? NOT HERE!”

David looked down at this weasel of an administrator. “I will speak the truth Ms. Torgelson, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.”

And with that David spun on one heel in military fashion and walked squared shouldered out of her office.

“You get back here Mister!” She yelled after him. “I am not through with you yet! Do you hear me, GET BACK HERE!”

The secretaries and students in the outer office just stared in disbelief as David walked quickly past leaving the Director fuming and spitting curses in his wake.

“Well I guess school is out a little early today.” David muttered to himself as he rounded the corner and headed towards his office. “So much for my teaching career.”

Desert Doc

Chapter - 6 Sergeant Major

Sergeant Major Strothers swing the last duffle bag into the back of his tan Suburban. His last checkout was finally completed. He had been thoroughly poked, probed and prodded by the Doc’s and handed a clean bill of health, and last but not least received his final debriefs by the various “S”-shops on his way out the door. He knew that they where not sad to see him go. He was the last of the “Old Breed” and no longer politically correct in the modern Marine Corps. It was now about “Image” and not effectiveness. Not whether they got the job done, - but whether they looked good before the camera’s doing it. As his last and final CO had phrased it during an Officers and Senior Staff Call a few months back.

“Impression is Everything, Sergeant Major, Impression is Everything.”

To which the combat experienced ol’ Salt had replied flatly. “Impression is an illusion Sir.”

“I would have to disagree with you there Sergeant Major. If your troops look good then they will perform equally as well, it’s the impression that counts.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Iraq had an impressive army on paper at the beginning of the war back in ‘90. It was rated as the third or fourth largest standing army in the world. Didn’t last squat when it came down to putting the metal where the mouth was. They rolled up like yesterday’s newspaper.” Strothers sipped his drink. “The Somali’s on the other hand looked like punks, not impressive at all - but handed us our @ss and backed us out of that hole because we couldn’t take off the kid gloves.”

The Colonel just looked at his Sergeant Major in disgust.

“We need warriors, Colonel, not bookends. That is what wins wars, hard, cool headed, warriors.”

“Your days are long gone Sergeant Major. The days of Chesty Puller are over and will never come again. The world is a different place now, no more big wars, and no more pitched battles, no more heroes. We’re the policepersons of the world now and that requires finesse, something that you and your old breed totally lack.”

“Amen to that Sir, Amen to that.” Strothers muttered under his breath.

“Sergeant Major?”

“Oh nothing sir, just reminding myself of something. With your permission, Sir.” Strothers lifted his glass to the Colonel, thereby excusing himself and he quickly began looking for the bar. He needed a fresh stiff drink, his was feeling watered down.

As he drove out beneath the main gate of Quantico and headed for highway 95, he felt a bit of remorse. We’d had a good Corps back when he’d joined. It was right at the end of the Viet Nam war. They had trained hard for real combat. The DI’s back then were some of the toughest Marines he had known. They were hard tempered steel, quenched by cold reality in the heat of battle. To a young blue-eyed seventeen year old kid from the back woods of South Carolina they WERE the God’s of war and “the Private” Strothers hung on every word they spoke. This was a time when Honor, Courage, and Integrity actually meant something. They lived and breathed it daily under the constant tutelage of Staff Sergeant Minde, survivor of the Walking Dead, and Staff Sergeant AuAu, the biggest Samoan (the only Samoan) young Private Strothers had ever seen. Strothers smiled to himself as he headed south on 95 towards Richmond. He could see the faces of his many comrades through the 28 years of military service. He sighed, thinking of all the good times in the bars overseas as well as the bad times eating dirt and sleeping in fighting holes.

“Hell of a life so far.” He said to himself as he reached over and patted the broad head of his Rotty. “Well Rurger, it’s just you and me now.” He checked the map on the dashboard.

“Just hope Doc doesn’t mind a little company.”

The ol’ Sergeant Major, now retired, shifted his backside a little in an attempt to find a more comfortable position for the long drive ahead. He had a few stops on the way to check in on some old warhorses like himself - now, put out to pasture. But he knew that he had more than a few races left in him. He just hoped that he would be up for the task ahead. He hoped that they all would be up for the tasks ahead. Strothers shook his head at the thought of all those soft Americans that wouldn’t be ready.

“Sorry b@stards.” He whispered to himself. “D@mn sorry b@stards.”

Desert Doc

Chapter 7 - Checkpoint

Sgt Maj. Strothers (now retired . . . as of 37 minutes ago) crept slowly along in his Suburban with the rest of the southbound traffic on 95 just north of Fredericksburg, Virginia. The travel checkpoints had become a routine pain in the behind for commuters. But as usual, people eventually got used to them and the loudest complaints had by now quieted down to mere background grumbling. The Home Security checkpoints started showing up shortly after the second terrorist attacks that followed a little over a year after the World Trade Center disaster. Established primarily on the main highways between major cities their initial purpose (as reported) had been to track and inspect the millions of big rigs that crisscrossed the nation to preclude their use in another terrorist strike. It didn't take long before the checks were extended to all vehicles regardless of size. Before the smoke from the Third wave of attacks had begun to clear, the Checkpoints and National ID requirements were established facts and all travel was restricted without the proper paperwork. If it moved on the American highways big brother knew about it. This was all in the name of National Security, and these restrictions were for the common good . . . of course. The fact that these restrictions not only came about so quickly but also were manned up and enforced with such efficiency was amazing. It was almost as if this entire scenario had been preplanned.

The bored Homeland Security guard quickly waved Strothers's big '72 Suburban, the “Blue Moose”, through the checkpoint once he noticed the military decal sticker in his front window. The Moose rumbled away from the choked traffic flow and a few minutes later cruised on into Fredericksburg. He had to make one last stop at Carl's before leaving the area for good. Carl's Ice Cream shop, off of Princess Anne St., was one of the last independent mom and pop ice cream shops in existence. It didn't look like much as you drove up to it, but sure had some of the creamiest, sweetest ice cream ever, made right there on the spot. Ruger popped his head up as they rolled to a stop around the corner from the little white building. Carl's ice cream was one of Ruger's favorite haunts as well.

“Seems kind of silly I suppose.” The ol' Sgt. Maj. said to the dog as they both headed over to stand in line. “But this may well be the last time we're out this way for a while, eh Ruger?” The big Rottie just squirmed in anticipation. “How about a little treat for the road? Hey fella!”

There was always a line around Carl's when they were open. Ruger sat obediently right beside his master and watched the scene, waiting as patiently as he could. After they each had finished their treat they climbed back up into the “Moose” and headed for the self-storage lot at the south end of town.

The Sgt. Maj. backed up to the trailer he had prepacked and stored there inside one of the larger rental storage garages. Its contents safely secured within the trailer and locked within the storage garage, which resulted in a form of double protection. He had picked up the old 15 foot ex-Ryder trailer several years back at an auction. It had been pretty rough to start with, not too different shape than the way he had found the “Moose”, but after a little work, a beefed up frame, new suspension, a few replacement panels, fresh tires and a new coat of paint,

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the trailer looked almost brand new. The Moose on the other hand had required considerably more work and had taken several years of patient painstaking effort before the Sgt. Maj. was satisfied with the final product.

It began as a complete off the frame restoration for the '73 [¾?] ton 4x4 Suburban. The 350 V8 had been totally rebuilt, blueprinted and balanced. The "Blue Moose" as she was finally dubbed had been rebuilt for absolute rugged reliability. Expeditionary reliability Strothers liked to think. From the Huge "Roo" bar on the front, through the beefed up bullet proof suspension, extra long range gas tanks to the heavy-duty roof rack on top. Even the tires on this behemoth were the toughest tread going and run flat designed. This blue monster could go just about anywhere or through anything. The trailer was like wise reinforced and heavy duty. Rather than a conventional towing ball connection, Strothers had installed a heavy-duty pintal hook connection taken from a 5-ton military truck and trailer to hold the Moose and her caboose together. Whether on or off the road the Sgt. Maj. could take this rig just about anywhere and had.

Strothers double-checked everything before he was finally satisfied. All fluids were topped off. Tire pressures within specs. The cooler was stocked and ready just behind the center console between the front bucket seats. Ruger was waiting in the copilot position to get underway. All gauges were steady and reading normal. Ready to go and with everything in place he flipped up the center console top and reached inside. His fingertips quickly located a small hidden button, and pressing firmly triggered the side panel that sprung open and revealed his cherished old Colt. With the familiarity bred from years of use he quickly dropped the magazine out, jacked the slide and checked the charge. She was locked and loaded. He slid the magazine back in firmly, set the safety and slid the .45 over into it's ready position beside the his bucket seat in a specially constructed holster. Drop your hand down into what looks like a map pocket and it is likely to come up packed and ready for action. The big dark blue beast rumbled out of the storage yard and out onto the highway. Next stop: Master Guns - Lin Ashley's "End of the Road Hollow" in Arkansas. Strothers had both a drop off and a pickup to take care of before he continued west.

Strothers made fairly good time down 95 through the Richmond checkpoints over to the 64 highway and out 81 into Knoxville and finally onto the 40. Just before Knoxville one of the more prudent Home Security guards started to get a little too nosey.

"Must have just been promoted" Strothers thought to himself.

The upstart NCO started ordering him to get down out of his rig and to bring all his travel papers as he walked around the rig poking his nose everywhere. Ruger must have made him nervous, and for good reason. The skinny twerp would hardly have been a much more than a quick chew toy for Ruger once he got going.

Strothers complied quietly with the order and started to lay out his travel permit, discharge papers, moving orders etc. The weasel looked through the papers like he knew what he was doing.

"Quite a rig you drive there Citizen." The Corporal began. "Mind telling me what it's for and where you are going?"

"Oh the Moose?" Strothers smiled his best - I could snap your weenie little neck smile. "Yeah it's sort of a toy of mine. Built her between missions over the last dozen years or so. Figured when I retired that I'd do a little exploring, sort of see the country before I decide on where I'd finally settle down."

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

The Corporal slid the Sgt Maj's National ID/drivers license through the scanner. Then checked the information against the papers spread out before him.

"What's in the trailer Citizen?"

"Personal and Household effects is all. You can check the packing manifest there." Strothers pointed to the stapled multicolored forms. "All inspected and sealed at Quantico before I left this morning."

The Corporal harrumphed as he scanned over the list of personal effects. Just then an older senior NCO walked back into the inspection shed coffee mug in hand to check on things, looked over the Sgt. Maj.'s shoulder and began reading the official military papers spread out on the counter.

"Tompkins, just what the hell are you doing? Are you trying to loose those new strips already? For crying out load, quit fussing with this Marine!"

Strothers turned to look at the Master Sergeant now beside him.

"Evening Top". He remarked.

"Evening - er ah." He leaned forward to get a close look at Strothers papers on the counter. "Hmmm, oh Sergeant Major. Yes Sergeant Major!"

"I'm just doing my job Top." The Corporal whined.

"Hell Tompkins, can't you see the date on those discharge papers! The Sergeant Major just retired and on his first day out you're going to hassle him. Get a clue Son, and stamp the damn papers and let him get on his way!"

Tompkins now red faced began stamping Strothers paperwork.

"Sgt Maj I've got a fresh pot over here, care for a nip?" The Top motioned him aside and lowered his voice. "Sorry for the hassle, he's a good kid just a little too energetic with his new stripe." The Top said as he poured a Styrofoam cup full of steaming hot java.

"No sweat Top." Strothers said as he accepted the cup. "We were all greenies once." The pair chuckled.

"So where you headed now Sgt. Maj.?"

"Not really sure to tell you the truth Top. I've got a one year free travel permit, thought I'd visit a few old war horses like myself that have already been put out to pasture, drink a few beers, tell a few worn out war stories, and then . . . who knows. Perhaps I'll find a nice place where someone can still fish and hunt without too much hassle."

The Corporal was now standing beside them with Strothers papers in hand.

“Yeah, that sounds like the ticket there Sgt. Maj., Hmmm looking forward to that day too in a few years.”

Strothers took the papers from the Corporal, who was now more obliging and subdued. Raised his cup to the Top Sergeant and thanked him for the help.

As Strothers drove off into the night the pair of Homeland Security guards watched him from the guard shack.

“I was just doing my job Top . . . just like you told me to.”

“Son there are times to follow the rules and times to use common sense. Did you see list of medals on his Discharge papers, almost 30 years in the Marine Corps! Hell boy, he had a unlimited one year Free Travel Permit! When was the last time you saw one of those? They don’t just give those out to anyone anymore . . . Nope, not these days. That is someone you don’t need to mess with Tompkins. That there is a Real American Patriot, they don’t come any tougher.”

Truer words were never spoken, but if the Top Sergeant had known just what kind of Real American Patriot he had given coffee to and sent on his way, he probably would have wet his pants.

Desert Doc

Chapter 8 - At the Hollows

It was a little after midnight when Strothers finally rolled up to the outer gate of the “End of the Road Hollow” of Lyndon “Lin” Ashley deep in the sticks of Arkansas. They had served together at various duty stations through out their careers. Lin had retired five years earlier with 24 years under his belt and disappeared into the back woods of northern Arkansas. They had competed together on various Marine Corps shooting teams and when Strothers stepped down by retiring, the Marines had finally lost their Old Man of the High Power Circuit. Lin was one of the few shooters that could give the ol’ Sergeant Major a run for his money and often did. They had become fast friends after their first shooting match back as Sergeants and Jeff (as Strothers was called by his old pal) had stood up as best man at Lin’s marriage to tiny Maria.

“What an odd couple” he remembered thinking when he first met Maria.

She was probably the cutest Philippina he had ever seen, long dark hair, perfect olive skin, petite, almost doll like in everyway. While Lin was more easily described as a shaved gorilla that had been house broken and trained to behave in doors. Strothers chuckled to himself just thinking about it. When Lin wrapped his paws around any long rifle, which is what it usually looked like, it seemed as if the rounds didn’t dare strike anywhere else but in the black. Lin had a rare gift with weapons and there was no one that could truly tune a piece better than Lin, ex Master Gunnery Sergeant and Master Gunsmith to the Marine Corps, now retired. And as tiny and frail as Maria seemed there was no question that she ruled the roost in her house. Strothers’ never thought he would ever see any one, let alone this tiny gal, bring Lin into line. That had been difficult enough for the Marine Corps to do, but there was no doubt that Lin’s boss was a little 98 pound, dripping wet, fire ant from the Jungles of Mindanao.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“What a pair”. Strothers muttered to himself. “What a pair.”

Strothers dimmed his headlights and waited. He heard the crackle of someone keying the mike twice on his CB speaker. He keyed his mike twice back, paused, and then twice again. Suddenly the chain link gate opened and started to slide to one side. He still had a mile or more to drive up the winding rutted dirt road. It was dark and foreboding and he was glad he was a friend and not a foe. It would not be easy to storm this place judging by the thick underbrush and heavy forest. Suddenly the forest opened up into pasture and sky filled with stars. He never got tired of looking at the night sky when he was away from the lights of civilization. He could still remember lying out at night in Saudi Arabia desert before the ground war started and just gazing up into the full glory of the Milky Way. What a sight! The dirt road suddenly turned to gravel and the ruts smoothed out, as the Blue Moose got closer to the house. Strothers could see a big bear of a man wearing coveralls sitting out on the porch waiting for him as he drove up and parked.

“Let Ruger out Jeff. I’ve got the dogs in the house, give him a chance to stretch a bit.” Lin came off the porch and in just a few large steps reached him and gave the smaller man a great bear hug. Not that Strothers was a small man, at five foot ten inches he was about average, however next to Lin’s six four Paul Bunyan frame almost anyone appeared small. Ruger bounded out of the truck and sniffed the ground earnestly, chasing the strange new scents off into the darkness.

“Well Hoss I guess you’re one of us now.” He growled as he let Strothers down and handed him a cool one.

“Not if I have to wear those hillbilly trousers like you’ve got on.” He welcomed the cold beer and let the first taste slide down his throat.

“Wheew that was good.” He said catching his breath. “Looks to me like you’ve gone native on us there cowboy.” Strothers motioned to Lin’s coveralls. They turned and headed off towards the porch.

“I’m just a good ol’ boy now, Jeff.” He chuckled. “And like you taught me in jungle training, doesn’t pay to stick out in a crowd. Just blend in with the vegetation, Hee, hee, hee.”

The two old warhorses seemed to shed the years away as they walked up the steps on the porch. They were two young cocky Marines out on liberty once again. Just looking for a good time for a little while before they had to go back on duty.

“Maria’s got Lumpia and Pansit waiting for you and there’s plenty of cold beer in the frig.”

Maria was waiting for them when they came into the house. “Wipe your feet Marines, I keep a clean house here.” She said with a hint of her Philippino accent. The pair looked at each other and roared with laughter, but they did wipe their feet. The next several hours were filled with old jokes, old stories and old times. It was getting close to three in the morning before they finally called it quits and Lin showed Jeff to his room.

“Best bunk this side of the Mississippi there buddy.” Lin pointed to the full sized feather bed covered with one of Maria’s country quilts.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Whoa, you do run a hotel here Hoss. You’ve really gone soft of me haven’t you?”

“Well you just wait until you spread out on that there cloud. You’ll be sleeping like a baby in minutes. Of course there’s the cold, damp ground outside if that’s more to your taste.”

Strothers stretched his back in anticipation of a good nights sleep; it had been a long 18 hours of driving. “No thanks, been there and done that.”

“I thought so . . . you’re going soft already, and you not even a silly-villy-ian for twenty-four hours yet.” Lin chuckled. “It’s a sad, sad thing to see a Marine go soft so quickly after all those good years of training.”

Strothers slapped the ol’ gorilla on the shoulder. “Just following your lead there Master Guns, just following your lead.”

Lin had been right, when Jeff finally plopped down on that feather bed he felt like he was floating. He didn’t even last minutes before he was sound asleep.

The following morning found the pair up at the crack of dawn. Strothers could smell the fresh java brewing as he descended the stairs. “Lin had built himself a nice little home back here in the hollow.” He thought. The house was solid oak timber frame construction with river rock and brick infill. It was a basic saltbox design that was infinitely adaptable and Lin and Maria had done a beautiful job of building and furnishing their home. Lin already had a cup of hot steaming Joe waiting for him when he walked into the kitchen.

“So how long until I can sleep in like normal folks till noon?” Jeff asked.

“Well first off you have to be normal, and folks like us just don’t fit that mold Bubba!” Lin handed Strothers his cup. “It’s been five years for me and I still don’t need an alarm clock.” He took a sip. “Doesn’t matter how late I stay up working . . . come oh five hundred hours and my eyes pop open like a damn robot. I’m awake and might as well get up.”

Strothers just shook his head and sipped his coffee.

“But I do take some real nice nooners.” Lin chuckled. Referring to the military habit of an afternoon nap after the noon work out. If you could work it right, you took off early for lunch, worked out hard for an hour, showered up and still had time to get in a forty-five minute to an hour nap before you had to be back on duty.

“So what presents did you bring me Sergeant Major?” Lin motioned to the trailer behind the Blue Moose parked out front.

Strothers turned to look out the window. “Everything you had on your list Bud.

“Everything?!” Lin seemed amazed and almost choked on his coffee.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Yep . . . well almost everything. I didn’t bring the dancing bears you asked for.” Referring to the dancing strippers that used to entertain GI’s back in the P.I. early in their careers. “I didn’t figure Maria would go for that and I don’t think you could out run her Butterfly knife there sport in your bubba utilities.” They both chuckled.

“Oh no, mamma wouldn’t take kindly to that at all.”

“But aside from that I think I picked up everything you’ve been asking me to look into for you.”

“The CNC machine?” Lin asked unbelievably.

“Well that took some doing to find one worth the effort, but yes even the CNC.”

Now Lin had that look you see in a five year olds face first thing Christmas morning when they first lay eyes on all the toys under the tree.

“And everything else?”

“I think so. Had a hell of a time getting everything crammed into the trailer along with my stuff. You don’t mind me bringing some of my stuff along do you? But yes, I think it’s all there.”

Now they were walking out on to the porch. Strothers continued.

“The tools and tool metal weren’t too much of a problem, some of the electronic stuff took some doing. After all we didn’t want to leave a paper trail and I couldn’t purchase too much at one time. But you’ll find everything and then some. Thought I’d pad the list a little if I got some good deals. The parts kits on the other hand . . . well let’s just say I managed to pick up everything and then some but I was skating on pretty thin ice there with all the new restrictions.”

Lin just stared in disbelief when they started to unload the trailer into the storage room next to his shop. Forty minutes later they were inventorying the treasure now stacked on the concrete floor.

“The large crates are spent 50 cal brass. Those cans are the AP you wanted. I’m keeping a couple of cans for myself. Most of it is linked so you’ll have to deal with that.”

Strothers walked along checking off his list.

“Those two crates are the Browning 50 cal barrels you wanted. You should check out those suckers Lin, they are still packed in the cosmolene. Talk about cherry.”

They walked on. “Those boxes are all your tooling and the tool metal is back over there. These here are the FN part kits. They look pretty good, you’ve got some nice chrome lined barrels and three of them are heavy duty. Every things Metric as you requested,” He said as he kicked the wooden crates.

“The CNC is broken down and still in up there in the front of the trailer. The rest of these boxes are the little odds and ends that you and I’ve have talked about over the last year or so.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Lin just stood there flabbergasted. “I still can’t believe you managed to pick all this up.”

“Well Merry Fricken Christmas cowboy! Santa has arrived!”

The two looked at each other and broke out laughing. Lin couldn’t believe his luck and Strothers was tickled pink at his friend’s reaction.

“Ok buddy, well I’ve got a few prezes of my own now that its show and tell time. Follow the master blaster.” Lin said as he led the way.

Lin’s shop was made up of four specialty shops in one. Much like a large box with internal dividers each area was a craftsman’s dream. They had unloaded the trailer on the auto shop side. Complete with a walk down pit and air tools, there was just about every tool and device one would need to rebuild a vehicle from the ground up. The double doors in the middle of the north wall brought them into the metal shop. Setup with a foundry, a blacksmiths forge, a complete welding shop and a metal mill and lathe, Lin could manufacture just about anything out of metal that you could need on a homestead, or an armory for that matter. Through the door on the east wall of the metal shop they entered into the gun shop. From simple trigger work to boring barrels Lin had both the tools and the knowledge to build it. It was here that Lin brought Strothers. Lin walked over to the main workbenches that sat in the middle of the room and stood beside something draped with a canvas cover.

“OK smart @ss, do you want to hazard a guess as to what’s under curtain number Uno?” Strothers could tell that Lin was just waiting to show off his new baby, whatever it was. “Naw, not particularly . . . isn’t there somewhere we could go fishing right about now?” He smiled at his old buddy.

Lin’s hand was on the cover. “Now don’t start playing mean on me you ol’ fart. Come on and guess!”

“Lin you’ve had five years out here to come up with something, how the hell should I know what you’ve got under there. Come on . . . share nice now.”

Lin gave him a big frown but still lifted the cover. The fact that Strothers’s eyes got as big as dinner plates gave Lin all the satisfaction he needed.

“What in the hell is that?” Strothers said in amazement as he leaned forward and reached out his hand.

The shape and style looked very familiar but the sheer beauty of the machine work and finishing was beyond expectations. Strothers looked at Lin in amazement.

“That my scrawny little friend is a Lin Ashley version of the Barrett Simi-automatic 50 caliber BMG sniping rifle.”

“May I?” Strothers motioned to pick up the piece.

“Sure, go ahead.” Lin said with a big smile on his face.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Strothers hefted the big gun easily. “It’s a lot lighter than any Barrett I’ve handled before.” He said in amazement.

“Well, now you know what I’ve been doing with all that high-speed, low-drag metal I’ve been asking you about. Without the magazine she’s about the same weight as our old M60’s, but will a hell of a lot more punch, I can tell you.” Lin showed his buddy how to check for safe on this custom rifle.

“I’ve solved the accuracy problem with the recoiling barrel system, as well as tweaked a few other things myself. She’s as accurate as any 50 BMG ever made and I would probably put hard money on her that in the right hands, yours and mine, she couldn’t be beat in any competition.”

Strothers noticed the different sized magazines on the table. “I recognize the five and ten rounders there but that isn’t . . . ”

“A twenty round magazine . . . hmmm sure looks like that to me. I’ve even played with a thirty round mag but it was just too heavy to feed properly. Twenty is the limit and it really works best with the Ten.”

Strothers couldn’t take his eyes off the Ashley/Barrett 50BMG. He set it down carefully. “It’s a beautiful work of art Lin . . . I’m impressed.”

“Well you should be it’s yours.”

“What?!”

“You know it’s not often that I get to see your jaw hit the ground, but this was worth it!” He slapped Strothers on the shoulder. “Not only that, it’s got a twin also with your name on it.”

“No way!”

“Well I figured that that nephew in-law of yours, that corpsman could probably use one if he was going to go out shooting with you. Besides I’m not hurting for big toys, don’t worry about me in that department.” He chuckled.

“Well I’ll be . . . ”

“I know, I know, you’ll be grateful mush mush mush. Come on we’re not done yet. Now lets go and check out some serious toys.”

Lin walked over to one of the steel cabinets against the wall and reached up and triggered something. It opened up and swung out like a door revealing a dark staircase leading down.

“Let’s go check out my personal toy room, shall we?”

Desert Doc

Chapter 9 - Jihad Arrives

Khalid Atwa looked at his watch again. The sun was just now breaking through and chasing the last gray night vapors away. Allah would be pleased with this new attack upon the infidel. Now they would hear the cries of their starving children as he had in the refuge camps. Now they would feel the gut burning prangs of hunger. Their vast seas of golden grain would in just a few days become brown wilting and rotting cesspools of starvation. Now they would know fear! He chuckled to himself.

“Here is a new fad diet for you America!”

He waved his arm and watched as ten large helium balloons lifted silently into the dawn sky. Stationed a mile apart on this back road in Colorado these ten balloons along with over fifty more would blanket the great grain belt of the American Midwest with the deadliest combinations of plant diseases known to man. Khalid’s colleagues had spent the last three and a half years brewing and mutating plant viruses, fungi, and bacteria for just this moment.

While the Americans foolishly focused on the remnants of the Afghan Al-Qaida and chased Muslim guerillas through the Mindanao Jungles, he and many groups like his had quietly gone about their work. The Americans even funded many of the elements of this operation, they were so naive. They paid for their own downfall. It was as his uncle had said.

“These are a people with vast weakness. Money being the greatest of them all! They are unwilling to bow their heads to Allah, but only to money do they give their allegiance. It will be their downfall.”

Much of the vast billions of dollars given out in foreign aid by the U.S. every year was quickly channeled to the freedom fighters of Allah. Khalid’s own education and training was the results of grants from the Infidel’s own purses. He had trained at the best schools that American money could buy and when he completed his Masters degree in Viral Botany he was recalled to join the Jihad.

His was only one prong of this attack, like the crescent moon of the faithful the second prong was rolling through several American cities as Khalid climbed into the pickup truck and drove away. In a few hours he too would be airborne but instead of raining down death to the breadbasket of the Great Infidal, he would be headed home.

Hamid Fakiri bounced through the back streets of Chicago in his worn out Peterbilt truck. He was not unlike the hundreds of other truckers rushing around the city in the pre-dawn hours trying to make their deliveries before the rush of the Windy City’s traffic choked the blacktop arteries of this midwestern metropolis.

The diesel beast he drove belched out its black smelly soot as he geared up and down navigating the vast web of roads over the last several hours. He was not lost or searching for some hidden location in this maze of canyons. He had been making his deadly delivery as he worked his way across the vast city and suburbs of this metropolis along the great lake.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

He knew that there were other delivery trucks like his working this city as well as the other targeted cities. It would be several days before the evidence of this predawn attack would surface. Days before the doctors in the clinics and hospitals began to realize that they faced something far more sinister than the common cold. But by then it would be too late.

Hamid did not know what pestilence he carried aboard his rig. He was not well educated and had actually been a truck driver for these last fourteen years before he had received the phone call.

He did not understand the politics involved, or why this was necessary. But they had promised to protect and safeguard his family. It was not that he particularly disliked the Americans. There were a few that he actually thought of as friends, but life had not been easy, especially since the World Trade Towers. His son had been beaten up several times, once so severely that he ended up in hospital for weeks. Had it not been for the financial assistance from his Mosque he could have never hoped to pay for the expensive hospital bills and rehabilitation for his son. So now he found himself suddenly on the forefront of the Jihad.

He looked down at the gauge they had mounted on the dashboard. He was almost empty. The sprayers had just about completed their job. Over five thousand gallons of deadly virus was drifting through the air as Hamid drove south out of town. It drifted quietly, silently in through windows, across the city and the suburbs coating everything. It did not discriminate, it did not care . . .

Eli Yoder and his son Jacob looked out over their fields. Something was wrong, something was very wrong. Corn that stood tall and proud just yesterday looked off. The bright green of health was now dull and splotchy. Eli had seen bad years before, but there was something more with this. All his crops, corn, wheat, rye, alfalfa were beginning to show bad signs. Even the vegetable garden looked off, not really ill but not healthy either. He felt it in his bones, this was an evil omen of some kind.

He and Jacob quickly walked back to the house. He needed to speak with Mary. They needed to inventory the preserves and the root cellar. He had a feeling this would be a very lean year.

Dr. Nathan Anders shook his head as he covered the child up. Her parents weeping beside the bed.

“What the hell is going on here?” He thought to himself. This is the second child today and there are more coming in by the hour. He had called several colleagues and even the local CDC (Center for Disease Control) representative. There was an epidemic brewing up, a storm front moving in and he just knew that they were standing at the leading edge of it. Yet he was getting nothing from the damn bureaucrats!

He looked up to see Sheila, his lead nurse motioning him leave the room. Once he stepped out she bent his shoulder down so that she could speak quietly into his ear.

“Nat we’ve got another three going south like little Lisa in there, nothing is working and five more just showed up. I’ve got two nurses also showing signs of coming down with this . . . what do you want me to do?”

Desert Doc

Chapter 10 - An Ill Wind This Way Comes

The well-polished expensive Italian shoes echoed in the near empty corridor. The gait was swift and purposeful on the tile floor in the long hallway. The young well groomed man moved quickly, not running; yet not walking either. This was not sort of news that a young upcoming and aspiring Young Turk wanted to present to his Director, but there was no choice and little time. This was serious!

He moved briskly through the outer doors, past the receptionist, down the short corridor to the security hatch. He placed his palm on the hand scanner that checked his fingerprints and the chip implant in his right hand against the security records. He looked into the retinal scanner and spoke his name into the voice recognition sampler and heard the soft click and buzz, as the door unlocked.

He quickly moved past the armed inner security guard and turned right at the reception desk. The echo of his steps seemed like an echo of his heart pounding in his ears as he reached his destination. His feet stopped. He grasped the door lever and took a deep breath. Paused. And entered the outer office of the Homeland Security Director for the United States. Janice his secretary tried to stall him as he moved toward the Directors door.

“The Director is in a meeting . . . ” She tried to say.

But he was already opening and moving through the door. Several powerful looking men were sitting in front of the Director who sat behind his dark polished walnut desk. The Director looked at him with a slight scowl. He didn’t like unannounced visitors, especially when he was deep in discussions with influential people. The Young Turk moved around the desk.

“Please excuse me gentlemen, but I have vitally important information that needs the Directors immediate attention. My apologies.” He said as he placed the black folder before the Director and then leaned down to whisper into his ear. “The data is confirmed Sir. The situation is critical.”

The messenger stepped back and stood by awaiting the Directors needs.

“Excuse me Senators, apparently there is something that needs my . . . ” He paused mid sentence. The look of shock slowly scrolled across his face. He looked away and then quickly back at the folder, flipping through the pages rapidly.

“Simpson, has the President been notified about this?”

“No Sir, you are the first to see this information outside of the surveillance officers that gathered the data.” The messenger answered.

“Is there a problem?” One of the gentlemen sitting to the right asked.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Just a second Senator.” The Director swung his chair around to face the messenger.

“Are you absolutely certain of this information?”

“It’s gospel Sir, beyond question. I’ve verified the data three times myself.” He paused. “In addition Sir, I’ve already implemented a news quarantine on the situation pending your review. We have . . . ah . . . isolated at least four delivery devices and we are looking for others as we speak.”

“You’ve confirmed the cities?”

“Yes Sir, this is not, I repeat, not a random occurrence. We have absolute confirmation that the cities listed in this report have been targeted. CDC has verified the species involved and the virulence.”

“Oh my God.” The Director whispered.

“Director, would you like to inform us as to the nature of this shocking news?”

The Director slowly stood up and walked away from the desk towards the window.

“Simpson, would you please brief these gentleman as to the contents of that folder.”

“Sir?”

“It’s OK lad, I’m sure the Majority and Minority leaders of the Senate have the necessary clearance, and will be hearing about this soon enough.”

“Yes Sir.” Simpson picked up the black folder. “Senators, the United States is under biological attack and has been so for the past three days. The population centers of New York, Chicago, Memphis, Atlanta, Houston, New Orleans, Denver, Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles are facing disease outbreaks of Pandemic proportions.” He paused. “In addition . . . ”

“There’s MORE?” The shocked Senate Majority Leader asked.

“Yes Sir . . . in addition to the attack on the population centers there is strong evidence to suggest that the central agricultural production regions of the U.S. have been seeded with biological agents designed to destroy our food producing capabilities.”

“Suggesting . . . in what way suggesting?” Asked the Senate Minority Leader.

“Virulent plant plagues are suddenly sprouting up through out the region. We will have confirmation cultures within the next 48-72 hours that will verify our suspicions, but the empirical evidence thus far points to widespread multi-layered biological attack.”

The Director turned back and strode purposeful to his desk and picked up the phone.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Janice, get me the President on the phone, this is a Code Red Omega-3 emergency. Then as soon as I’m on with him, activate all emergency systems, I want an executive officers meeting in my office in thirty minutes and inform the appropriate Homeland Security Area Commanders that I want the borders closed right now, start preparations and I will have Presidential confirmation within the next fifteen minutes.

Yes dear, I’m afraid so. Now get on with it and let me know when you have contacted the Area Commanders.”

A few seconds later. “Yes Mr. President . . . we have a situation.”

Dr. Anders sat slumped over with his head in his arms in the hospital staff lounge, more asleep than awake. The last forty some hours had become a macabre nightmare that surged on without let up. There seemed to be no end of the patients streaming into his facility, torrents of sick people that he could do nothing for, nothing except watch them die. And he was not alone. Every hospital in the city was overwhelmed with the sick and dying. This was a scene too surrealistic to imagine. A modern Dante’s Inferno.

His calls to the civil authorities went unanswered. Public Health was aware of the situation and was “working on it.” Working on it? What was there to work on? Even his own staff was falling victim to this new plague. Finally when the obvious became overwhelming Nathan ordered reverse sterility procedures for all his staff. They absolutely must, protect themselves from this unknown killer. But before he had initiated this procedure over ten percent of his fellow physicians and nurses began to show the first signs of the infection.

It was now over forty-eight hours since the first victim had died on his watch. Forty-eight hours of frustration as he and his colleagues tried every drug at their disposal, every technique in their kit bags, every means possible to save just one patient and it was all for naught.

There was no rhyme or reason; no single factor save it was a bronchial/pneumonia infection that quickly choked the life out of its victims as the lungs filled rapidly with fluid. Nathan recognized the symptoms, reminiscent of the Spanish Influenza that descended upon mankind just after the turn of the last century. But this version was far more deadly and vicious in its nature. He had never felt more alone, more frustrated . . . and more useless in his entire life. He was bone tired and out of options.

“Dear God.” He thought. “What have we done to deserve this?”

The steady hum of the ventilation system droned on in the background. The sound of the hum was broken as one of the nurses opened the door and called to Nathan.

“Dr. Anders . . . Dr. Anders.” He looked up slowly. “It’s Sheila, Nat. She’s calling for you. I don’t think she has much time left.”

Dr. Nathan Anders slowly pulled himself erect. Every fiber of his body screamed for rest, but this was not the time. He had to go.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

The corridors of the hospital were overflowing with patients in the various stages of the disease. Wet mucoid coughing echoed off the tile and plastered walls while the constant wheezing filled the background as they walked. There was the sweaty smell of death in the air that even the surgical masks could not keep out.

“So many patients, so many patients, and they just keep coming.” He muttered to himself.

The nurse led Nathan through the throngs of dead and dying patients. To a small room off the main corridor. Sheila Nordstrom, his head nurse, lay under an oxygen tent they had rigged up. The cyanotic tint of her lips and pallor skin hinted at her limited time. Nathan took up her hand under the plastic drape. She smiled weakly.

Slowly she moved her lips, but no words came out. She started coughing, expelling mucoid clots of choking phlegm as she fought for breath. After five minutes she finally calmed down, sweat dripping off her forehead, eyes bloodshot and watery. Sheila signaled for some paper and a pen. Nathan handed her his useless prescription pad, holding it for her to write upon. She wrote just three words. But those three words spoke volumes and resonated down to his very bones.

The attending nurse looked over his shoulder and slowly made out the wretched scrawl on the medical prescription pad. Sheila had written: “ESCAPE NOW - GO!” Nathan was staring unbelieving at the pad.

Sheila slowly dropped the pen as her eyes glazed over. She was gone. Nathan just sat there. He sat there and cried. He had tried everything, everything, everything and had lost every battle in these last few days and now he had lost more than a medical colleague, he had lost a true friend. All his years of training and learning were totally useless in the face of this new threat. She was right, he knew it but couldn’t bring himself to abandon the patients he was powerless to help.

He awoke several hours later. He didn’t remember walking out of that tiny room with only the husk of a dear friend remaining. He didn’t recall the walk back to his ready room and the nurse removing his shoes and covering him with a blanket. He didn’t remember if he had dreamed or was dreaming now. Perhaps it was all a bad, very bad dream.

“Dr. Anders . . . Dr. Anders, you need to come out here Sir, something strange is going on outside the hospital.” Mickey Davis one of the hospital’s EMT’s was shaking him awake.

“What . . . what’s going on.” Nathan said as he tried to wake up.

Mickey put something into his hand. “It’s the last of the coffee Doc, tastes like cr@p but it’s hot.”

Nathan took a sip of the bitter liquid and started to cough. He screwed up his face at the taste.

“Told you it tasted like cr@p, Doc.” Mickey grabbed Nathan’s shoes and started to push his feet into them.

“What’s going on?”

“Well, Doc . . . it looks like the National Guard has been called out and we’re being surrounded by barbed wire.” Mickey answered, slipping the other shoe on.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Come Doc, you’re the senior Doc on duty. Hell you’re about the only Doc on duty.”

“What? Where are the other doctors.”

“Sick, dead, or run off. Oh, and they’re not letting anyone in. We’re cut off now.”

“Cut off?”

“Yep, the Guardsmen outside are stringing up barbed wire all around the hospital and keeping everyone either in or out with guns.”

Nathan stood up. “Show me.”

The pair quickly walked through the ever-coughing throng of patients, but Nathan noticed that the intensity of the noise was much lower, and more and more patients were covered completely by sheets and blankets.

“Why aren’t these bodies being moved to the morgue?” Nathan asked.

“Morgue’s full, and there is hardly anyone here to move them. There are only a few of the staff still left.”

“Sh*t!”

Nathan and Mickey walked out the Emergency entrance of the hospital. The National Guardsmen had strung coiled concertina wire across the driveway and parked a 50 caliber Humvee in the center of the ambulance access way. Together Dr. Anders and his EMT walked up to the camouflaged soldier manning the outer perimeter of the wire.

“Just what the hell is going on here soldier!” Nathan demanded.

The soldier brought his weapon to port arms and turned to face them. “Back away from the wire Sir!” He ordered with a muffled voice through the gas mask he was wearing.

“Not until I speak to someone in charge!” Nathan answered angrily.

The soldier sitting on top of the Humvee suddenly swung the big 50-caliber gun around and pointed it at the Nathan and Mickey. At the same time the near Guardsman brought his weapon up and pointed it at the pair also.

“Step back from the wire Sir, or we will open fire.”

“My @ss! We’re unarmed you stupid sh*t!” Mickey answered him.

“Sir step back from the wire . . . this is your last warning!”

The pair slowly took one step back from the wire. “I want to speak to the officer in charge right now soldier.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

The near soldier turned to look at the third soldier in the Humvee who was talking on the radio. The radio talker gave him the thumbs up signal. The near Guardsman turned back to the Doctor and the EMT.

“He’s on his way, Sir. Now if you will step back further from the wire and wait a few minutes he will be here to answer your questions.”

The pair turned around and walked several paces back towards the hospital. “Mickey, just what the hell is going on here? When did this start?” Nathan asked in a hushed breath.

“This all just came down less than thirty minutes ago Doc. I heard the commotion outside and then came looking for you. It seems that most of the staff is either sick or has split. You’re the only healthy Doc I could find.” Mickey paused.

“Oh and forget calling out or getting any news. The phones are locked up, busy signals on both landline and cellular. There’s no news on cable TV or radio. Everything is blacked out . . . I don’t like it Doc. No sir-ree, I don’t like this at all!”

Ten minutes later Humvee arrived, the Guardsman that stepped out was saluted and talked quickly to the soldiers at the Humvee. Nathan walked forward to the wire. He noticed that all the Guardsmen, including the new arrival were wearing their gas masks. He didn’t like the implication of this.

“Sir, that is far enough.” The original guard yelled through the gas mask. Nathan stopped several feet shy of the wire. The newly arrived officer stepped forward to the other side of the wire.

“I’m Doctor Nathan Anders the senior physician in charge at the moment and I would like to know what is the meaning of this wire and these gunmen?”

“Doctor Anders, I’m Colonel McCray, Section Chief of this military control zone sir. You are under armed quarantine by order of the Homeland Security Director and Presidential Executive Orders.” He answered, his voice muffled and metallic through the gas mask.

“Armed quarantine?” Nathan said in amazement. “What the hell is that Colonel?”

“Simply stated sir, nobody in and nobody out. All centers of infection are under martial law per Executive Orders as of 1300 hours today. Anyone violating those orders will be shot without hesitation Doctor Anders.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

“I wish I was Doctor, I wish I was.

Desert Doc

Chapter 11 - Escape

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Mickey could tell by Doc Anders posture and animation that things were not going well with the National Guard officer. He could hear enough bits and pieces to figure out that they were locked in and the guardsmen were not going to let them out. The gears started turning on the problem before him. How to get out and how to get away.

Dr. Anders suddenly stopped talking and spun about and started walking briskly back to the hospital.

“Well Doc?” Mickey asked.

“We’re scr*wed Mickey, totally scr*wed. They’ve slapped down martial law everywhere. The entire city is under military control. We can’t leave and no one can come in.”

“So what now Doc, do we get out of here or sit around and wait to die?”

“Didn’t you hear me Mickey? We’re locked down, we can’t leave!”

“Oh I heard you loud and clear Doc. Now do you want to get out of here or do you want to sit here and wait to die?”

They both stopped just shy of the emergency room doors. “What the hell are you talking about, we can’t leave. The Colonel . . .” Nathan stammered, still p*ssed from the encounter.

“The Colonel don’t know squat, Doc.” Mickey leaned closer. “Look Doc, there’s nothing we can do for these people in here. Nothing we’ve tried so far has worked, and it’s likely that nothing is going to work. We’re not the only one’s in deep sh*t here. Just before all the communication gear went cold I was talking on the dispatch radio with a couple of other ambulance crews around town. This sh*t is happening everywhere. Do you understand . . . EVERYWHERE! There’s not a clinic or hospital in town that isn’t over run with people just like these in there!” He pointed towards the door. “This ain’t no accident or act of God, you can bet on that Doc, this ain’t no f*cking accident.”

“You don’t mean . . .” Nathan stopped and thought for a moment. He had at first suspected some sort of Legionnaires Disease type of outbreak, but soon he became just too busy to consider any other possibilities. “Sh*t! —Sh*t!—Sh*t!”

“Doc?”

The realization suddenly came over him. “It’s a Bio-weapon, that’s why nothing has worked . . . that’s why it’s spread so rapidly, and that’s why the National Guard is standing outside our hospital!” He turned and looked back at the 50 cal Humvee. “And now we’re trapped in here with no way out!”

“No Doc, we’re not trapped.” Mickey said matter of factly. “I think I know a way out of here . . . if you’re with me that is.”

“But the patients, I can’t . . .”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“—Do a damn thing to help them Doc.” Mickey finished the sentence for him. “You know that as well as I do. We haven’t been able to do sh*t since this began and now we have to decide if we’re going to survive! Because we sure know that no one that stays here is going to walk out of here. . .if they ever let us!”

“But my oath . . . ”

“Your oath says to do no harm, well whether you stay or go is not going to change the outcome for these people. They are dead! Dead regardless of anything you do. They are DEAD DOC!” Mickey grabbed him by both arms. “But we’re not! And just maybe if we clear out now, we’ll stay alive.”

Mickey pointed to the armed guardsmen in the distance. “They’re right Doc. They’ve contained a source of contamination, this hospital is a big source. All the really sick people are here . . . think about it! We’ve got to get out of here NOW or we’ll be the next ones on those gurneys in there. We’ve got to leave right now while we still can.”

Mickey still had a hold of Nathan's arm. “Quick follow me.” He pulled him along.

They passed through the choked main corridors filled with the dead and dying, around to a back janitorial passageway. Nathan had never been in this part of the hospital. Mickey still had him by the arm until they passed through a door marked engineering and began to descend a metal stairwell. The air was dank and steamy as they went down the steps into the dimly lit room below.

“The boiler room?” Anders asked.

Mickey led him walking quickly through the basement room filled with steamy drippy pipes and oily machinery.

“We’re headed to the other side.” He answered as he disappeared around one of the immense old oil fired boilers. “This is a shortcut Doc . . . we’re almost there.” Mickey held the door for him and they stepped into another passageway.

“Where is this?”

“We’re down in the old sub-basement area. Nothing much here anymore, mostly junk rooms and stuff.”

Mickey walked up to a gated passageway that disappeared off into the darkness. The chain link gate was secured with a large dusty padlock. Mickey looked around.

“Hang on Doc.” Mickey said as he ran back the way they had just come. Nathan heard something breaking in the distance and a few seconds later the EMT returned with a fire axe.

“Stand back.” He said as he swung the axe down on the padlock. It took several attempts until he finally nailed the lock and broke it apart. “Not pretty but effective.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Mickey led the pair into the darkness with his small paramedic Maglite swinging from side to side in the long corridor. “We’re under the main street now. Just a little further and we’ll be under the old building across the way.”

They had arrived at the end of the corridor and stood before a poorly finished brick and mortar wall.

“Now what?” Nathan asked.

“Here hold this.” Mickey said, handing him the flashlight. “Give me some swinging room and we’ll see just how tough this wall is.”

The big EMT flipped the axe around and using its pick began swinging into the brick wall. His aimed improved with each stroke and he soon was chipping out large chunks of mortar between the bricks. After a good dozen or so whacks he wrenched out the first brick and then the second. There was an empty void behind the wall!

“Doc, take a look . . . what do you see?”

Nathan leaned into the wall and flashed the light through. “Looks like a storage room Mickey, mostly filing boxes and old chairs.”

“Great! Then we’re out of here. Step back and let me give is a few more whacks and I’ll have a hole big enough for us to get through.”

“But what is this?” Nathan asked.

“This was the way over to the old morgue and funeral home that used to stand on that corner across from the hospital. Probably built back in the twenties or thirties. When the new morgue was built downtown and more central to the other hospitals, this building we’re breaking into was sold and later remodeled into office space.” He paused. “Kind of creepy when you think about it.” He continued swinging the axe.

“Later during the height of the Cold War they turned the rooms off here and this tunnel into storage rooms and a bomb shelter. Still have some of the supplies stored down here I think.”

After another five minutes Mickey had enlarged the hole, pushed back the garbage on the other side of the wall and was out through the storeroom door. He called back to Nathan still on the corridor side of the wall.

“OK Doc, we’ve got a clear shot out of here. This leads to a boiler room and then up to the first floor. It’s clear all the way.” Mickey’s voice grew louder as he crawled back through the opening over of the storage junk he had pushed his way in through.

“Now we’ve got to get our gear and the others and get the hell out of here.”

“Others?” Nathan looked at him startled. “I thought we were the only one’s left?”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Not quite Doc, there are a few of us still on watch that haven’t gotten sick, not many, but we can’t leave them behind if they want to split.”

The pair quickly retraced their steps back up onto the main floors of the hospital. Mickey led him to the dispatcher’s office. There he introduced Nathan to Isaac, the other half of Mickey’s ambulance team. Isaac had been monitoring all the radios and was more than frustrated by the time they arrived. Mickey quickly explained the plan to his partner and then asked if he had been able to pick up any new information.

“Everything is being jammed man! All the local stuff is totally weirded out.” Both landline and cellular is nothing but busy signals. All two-way and even the cops freq’s are strangely quiet. Man we’re in Chicago . . . the cop’s are always busy! TV and radio are just passing canned cr*p. It’s like there’s nothing going on . . . nobody sees anything!”

Isaac was more than animated as he flipped switches and twisted knobs on the console.

“But hey Mic . . . check this out.” He began as he spun his chair around. “Just after all the local stuff went weird I checked out the Short Wave freqs, that is before they went quiet too. There’s something big going down dude. New York, Denver, Seattle, San Fran, New Orleans, and us . . . all the major cities were screaming about plague or something and then everything . . . and I mean everything everywhere just clammed up! Too weird dude!”

Nathan and Mickey looked at each other and then back at Isaac. Mickey was the first to speak.

“Isaac, get on the hospital wide intercom and have every able bodied staff member meet us . . . ” He looked at Nathan.

“Cafeteria?”

“No Doc, that’s the overflow morgue . . . ”

“The Doctors conference room outside the directors office.”

“Perfect!” He turned to Isaac.

“Got it Mic . . . I’m on the stick.” Soon the hospital was echoing the message.

Thirty minutes later only a handful of hospital staff had arrived. Nathan could not believe that this was all that was left of over a hundred medical and support personnel that manned this hospital at any one time of the day. He quickly explained the situation and what he felt was the best course of action for them. Several were shocked that he advocated the abandonment of the hospital. While he agreed with them, he pointed out that he also felt that there was no other survival choice left open to them. That they had managed to avoid the infection thus far was surely a matter of luck and that could not hold out much longer.

One of the nurses argued that they all might be carriers of the disease that hadn’t surfaced yet and by this action could be spreading the infection even further. She argued that surely government support would soon arrive and

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

they would be safe. Mickey informed the group about Isaac's discoveries and that their situation was not an isolated event.

"We're on our own now, like it or not." Mickey added flatly. It was getting dark outside as the individuals that had decided to follow Dr. Ander's advice gathered in the janitor's passageway. Mickey led the eight escapee's down into the bowels of the hospital to the passageway under the street. About halfway down the dark corridor he paused and opened a side door and led them in. Above the door was the old faded Civil Defense symbol. They quickly filled the small room as Mickey found the light switch. It reminded Nathan of high school shower room with wood benches and clothing hooks on the wall.

"These are the decontamination showers of the old Civil Defense shelter. I thought it might be best to leave as much of the infection here behind us." Mickey stepped into the shower area and tossed his gym bag and medical kit across to the other side of the shower room. There were two shower passages with the spouts on the central wall. He motioned the females of the group to use the other side. Everyone hesitated until Dr. Anders spoke up.

"Look we've made it this far, Mickey's right, lets decontaminate ourselves and get on with it." He said as he started to peel off his clothes and stepped into the shower.

Twenty minutes later the group assembled on the other side and dressed in a mix of civilian clothes and clean medical scrubs, Mickey handed out replacement surgical masks for the ones they left at the entrance to the shower. The somber group followed quietly as the EMT and Doctor lead them back out into the corridor and into the basement of the old morgue building.

The building was quiet as they climbed up the stairs of the old building. Mickey slowly opened the basement door and moved out into the hallway. There were no sounds of occupation. He could see through a distant window down the hallway that the evening was almost upon them. The group moved through the first floor almost serpentine fashioned. Most of the office lights were out, just one or two here and there. They found the main hallway and moved quietly towards the back of the building away from the side facing the hospital.

Mickey whispered to Nathan. "If we can get to the back of this building there's an alleyway there. Cross that and into one of the buildings behind here and we'll be over on the next street and only a half a block from the parking garage where my pickup is located."

"Damn . . . I totally forgot about my car." Nathan exclaimed.

"Forget it Doc. If you left it in the physicians lot at the hospital you'll never get past the weekend warriors to get to it."

"You're probably right, Damn." They had arrived at the janitor's door to the alley.

"Now what?"

"Now we'll see if there's anyone keeping an eye on this alley." Mickey said as he slowly pushed open the door.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

The alley was dark and damp as they emerged into the gray dusk. Mickey crossed the alley and moved stealthily against the back walls checking each door as he moved along. He smelled the garbage of the little Chinese restaurant that he often grabbed take out from on the way home. He listened at their back door but didn't hear the normal clatter of pots and pans and restaurant noise associated with such an establishment. For the first time he noticed that the entire town was deadly quiet. Wrapping the fire axe in his coat he used it like a battering ram to force the door open. The casement shattered with minimal noise and he motioned the others to follow.

The Chinese restaurant was empty and dark. They crept through the kitchen and headed towards the front of the restaurant. Mickey motioned them to stay put and he inched forward. From the corner of the storefront window he glanced up and down the street. It was empty, save a few scattered cars parked here and there, nothing was moving. Mickey signaled for everyone to move quietly forward.

In a heavy whisper he called to his EMT partner. "Isaac, get up here and take care of the front door alarm."

Isaac move quietly forward grabbing a stool on the way and set to work on the magnetic sensors above the front door. Taking out his leatherman tool he flipped up the Phillips head screwdriver and began to unfasten the door sensor.

"Someone find me some rubber bands." He whispered as he finished the second screw.

Lisa the nurse from the OB/GYN clinic quickly rummaged around the cash register and found one in a drawer. With it Isaac banded the two sensors together and set them on the metal rail above the glass door. After which Mickey moved to the center of the double doors and pushed the fire axe blade between them and using it as a lever popped the one side open.

The noise seemed overly loud in the still night air. He dropped down and listened and watched. A full five minutes went by before he pushed open the door and crept out on to the sidewalk. From there Mickey quickly lead the group across the street one at a time. It was agonizing slow, but far safer than the entire group groping their way across to the other side. He had them spread out and with Isaac bringing up the rear they moved further away from the main streets and down back alleyways and finally over to the parking garage.

Two hours and many shattered nerves later Mickey followed by Isaac pulled up in the parking area behind Mickey's flat, a the warehouse district not far from the lake. Twice they had been shot at by National Guardsman who where stationed at the numerous checkpoints scattered throughout the city. But one thing Nathan had to say about their two getaway drivers, they knew their city. He had heard of back street and alley driving, but he had never been a witness to it before and he hoped that he wouldn't have to go through that again too soon.

The weary group slowly climbed out the vehicles and followed Mickey into the walkup and into his loft apartment where they collapsed on the floor and across the furniture. The first part of their ordeal was over. Tomorrow they would plan the next part of their escape.

Desert Doc

Chapter 12 - Out of a Jamb

Courtesy of Preparedness Educational Services, Inc. Visit us at http://www.frugalsquirrels.com/friends_links.html

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Mark glanced down at his gas gauge. Enough for about another hour at this speed and he figured he could make it to the next big truck stop. Things had been getting “curiouser and curiouser” to quote Lewis Carroll. There had been a lot of traffic on the interstate. He figured it had something to do with the reports of the disease cases in the cities. Most radio stations were obvious in their silence on the matter. Mark usually listened to unabridged books on tape in the car anyway, and didn’t give it much thought. Sounded a lot like the few cases of anthrax that had been found in ’02, from what little he did hear. People were driving, well, crazy. Speeds were faster than usual, as well as taking more chances. Tensions slowly rose as people began to, cut other drivers off, flash headlights to pass, and in a couple instances, pass on the shoulder. Crazy.

The miles clicked by, and Mark noticed more and more traffic in the opposite direction. If he thought things were bad on his side of the interstate, things were getting really thick on the other side. He tried to pay attention to his driving, as well as watch the other lanes. Sure enough, suddenly there was very little traffic from the opposite direction. The cause became obvious a few miles later: A semi tractor had crunched a Geo Metro into a two foot tall metal pancake, but the pancake caused the trailer wheels to skid, and the trailer then tried to swap ends with the front of the rig. The whole mess came to a stop pretty near completely astride the two interstate lanes.

The scene was chaos. It reminded Mark of the add that ran in one issue of “American Survival Guide.” It was a crude drawing of a stream of cars headed away from a city with a mushroom cloud looming over it. In the drawing, people were out of their cars with the hoods up, staring in befuddlement at the now-dead engines. The advertisement was for a replacement ignition system.

“It’s going to take a lot more than an ignition system to get that mess going again.” Thought Mark nervously.

Glancing back he could see that things were degenerating seriously. Cars tried to edge around the wreck. The four-wheel drives had no problem taking to the median initially to get around the wreck. The trouble was that people in Ford Tauruses and Chevy Cavaliers tried to do the same thing, and got stuck. The four-by-fours went around them, too, until the Toyota Corollas tried to emulate them, and got stuck too, ad infinitum. Soon there was an impenetrable wall of cars blocking any means around the wreck. One brave soul in a Blazer had made it through, then backed up to pull a car out of the mud. Mark knew that such an action, while noble, was ultimately useless: The next vehicle behind the one being pulled out attempted to go through the hole made by the towed car, and became stuck. There were no police in sight.

Mark became more than worried. He got scared. Here he was, about as far from his home as his mom’s place, and the roads were nuts. He rounded a corner, and his worst fears were realized: A sea of brake lights shown red in front of him. He eased to a stop in the right lane, with a little less than a car length of open space in front of him.

In normal traffic jams, there would be a good 6 inches of movement every few minutes or so. Not this one. Mark wondered if somebody from the other lane tried to cut across the median and drive on the shoulder, and maybe got whacked by somebody trying to pass on the shoulder.

After fifteen or twenty minutes, people up ahead were getting out of their cars and milling around. Mark decided this was a good time to get out his CB and FRS radios. He exited the car and walked to the rear. Carefully,

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

as the occasional idiot roared by on the right shoulder, he opened the Eagle's rear hatch and reached in to grab the hand-held radios. As he reached in, he was struck by a thought. Pausing for an instant to mull it over, he quickly reached up to shut off the rear hatch dome light. As surreptitiously as possible, he then pulled the Glock 17 from its case and tucked it into his pants front, pulling his flannel shirt over it. He'd rearrange it into a holster later.

Straightening, he turned on the CB radio to channel 19. It was a mishmash of voices. Some swearing, some pleading, but most scared. There wasn't much information. Everybody was asking what was going on, and nobody had any answers. There was all sorts of opinions. Some people said that the cities were fine, that you f%\$king idiots were panicking for nothing. Others said that the cities were full of the dead, that they were all going to die unless they could get away. Some said that military jets were napalming certain areas of town. Some people said that Christ had returned. Some people said it wasn't Christ, it was the aliens. He turned off the CB and turned on the FRS radios. Mostly it was people convoying together, unaware of what was going on, and more speculation.

Mark clicked off the FRS radio, and cast about. Things were definitely beyond normal. He walked to the front of his car and climbed to the hood, then the roof of the car. He looked in the direction of travel: Nothing but stalled cars as far as the eye could see. Even the shoulders were beginning to get backed up. He spotted a two wheel drive small truck with an array of antennas on it, about 100 yards ahead. He recognized them as the same sorts of antennas his uncle, a ham MARS operator owned. Mark jumped down, and began walking toward the mini truck. He passed groups of people, most chatting amiably, but with a note of worry detectable in their voices. Mark smiled and waved occasionally at some of the small children who were staring wide-eyed from some cars.

He finally reached the mini truck, and looked in the window from several feet away. A grizzled elderly man with a big, bushy white beard was speaking into a microphone. Mark pasted a smile on his face, and waited for the old man to notice him. After several minutes, the head turned toward him, and the elderly man rolled down the window.

"Yes?" the man asked with a note of suspicion.

"I couldn't help noticing your Ham antennas, sir." Mark began, "And I was wondering if you had any news."

"About the traffic? Sorry son, I'm not monitoring the CB bands." He said as he started to roll up the window.

"No sir. I mean in general." The man paused in his rolling, and Mark spoke quickly. "People are talking about the military. A plague. Now this traffic. I just want to know what you have heard."

The man paused a moment. He looked at Mark, noting his haircut, his fit physique, and his consistent use of "Sir." He took a deep breath and let it out as a sigh. "Look son. This is all speculation. Nobody knows for sure what's going on. But I have heard for a couple days from hams saying crops are dying. I have heard hams talking about rising numbers of really sick folks in the cities. Lots of reports from all over. And damn it," the man said with a brief instant of desperation "I'm afraid if I don't get out of this traffic soon, I am going to end up walking."

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Mark thought about what the man had said. He rapidly began to think about what was the worst that could happen if the reports were correct. He thought about the worst that could happen if he was wrong. He felt numb for a minute. He glanced at the sky. It was getting dark.

“Thanks, sir. Good luck to you. I hope we all get out of this soon” Mark said, turning and walking away back to the Eagle.

He began to shiver, but not from the cold. He broke into a jog. At the car, he again opened his trunk and reached into the pocket of the ALICE pack that rested there, and withdrew a Garmin GPS. He activated the GPS and got a fix on his position, then shut the machine off and reached into his car for the “Atlas and Gazetteer,” turning to the page that had his approximate position. He peered closely at the map's markings denoting latitude and longitude, then took a pencil and marked the interstate with a small “x” to remind himself exactly where he was. His eyes then roved the area beside the interstate on the map. It showed a gravel country road about a quarter mile to the east. Mark lifted his eyes from the map and looked east. Beyond the somewhat steep swathe of land that bordered the interstate, there was the standard interstate fence, and most discouraging, a single line of 20’ pine trees, spaced about 4’ apart. Beyond that, a gentle ridge. The trees ran as far as the he could see in both directions parallel to the interstate.

Mark thought for a moment. He glanced at the row of cars becoming backed up on the shoulder.

“Well,” he thought, “If I’m gonna do this, I’d better get to it before I’m blocked in.”

He climbed in to the driver’s seat, and started the engine. Many heads turned his way. Most all car owners had shut the engines off to conserve fuel, and the Eagle turning over startled some. It was dark enough to make the headlights a good idea. He looked back over his right shoulder, and eased the Eagle onto the shoulder, then down the embankment, parking parallel with the interstate fence. He then shut the car back off and sat in the dark for a few moments. Many people had some form of camping gear out, and were “tailgating” in the largest parking lot Mark had ever seen. Mark sat quietly until he figured most people’s curiosity about him had faded. He reached up to make sure the dome light was off, then exited the car. Once again, He opened the rear hatch and dug in the ALICE pack. He pulled out a small can, roughly the size of a tuna can. He then reached in the tool kit of a pair of 36” bolt cutters. “A little overkill, but they’ll do the trick.” Mark thought as he walked to the front of the car, and began to cut the strands of wire that constituted the interstate fence. Five minutes later, he pulled the entire 20 foot section between wooden posts away. Leaning the bolt cutters against the fence, he reached into his pocket and unscrewed the top on his “Short Kutt” brand pocket chain saw. Mark had found the little gem after becoming gravely disappointed with the so-called “wire saws” that lasted about 10 minutes in real life. He bent and began sawing at the base of the first pine tree, as low as he could get. Pausing only to shuck his flannel shirt and briefly look around to see if anyone noticed his activity, he was through the first tree in about 15 minutes. If anyone heard it fall, no one came to investigate. Most people had returned to their cars and were intermittently running the engines. The second tree took longer. He grunted, heaved, and finally got the two trees out of the way. He collected the bolt cutters and re-stowed them along with the pocket saw in the car. He paused long enough to let his breathing return to normal from his exertions, as well as taking several gulps from his water bottle. He then took a small Photon LED flashlight, and started walking due east. He hid the beam of light with a hand, holding it close to his body to hide it from the cars stalled on the interstate behind him. The ground was relatively firm. There was knee-high hay, brown in large patches, in the field. It again sloped down for a distance, but then took a dramatic turn uphill. Mark crested the hill, then began to walk down

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the other side. After a short walk, he found himself across the ditch from a gravel road. It took another 20 minutes to find the culvert spanning the ditch.

Mark walked back to the car. Doing his best to memorize the distances, especially at the end. He figured he'd be safe to turn on the headlights after he was on the far side of the crest of the hill. Mark cautiously approached the car, but it seemed no one had become curious and wandered down to check on him. He climbed into the driver's seat, fastened the seatbelt, rolled down the window, put the car in four-wheel drive and began to drive. As he started, he cursed himself as he remembered that the brake lights would tell everyone where he was if he stepped on the pedal. Instead, he reached for the handbrake. After some slow maneuvering, Mark felt himself crest the hill. Another 50 feet and he turned on his parking lights. His eyes had adjusted to the dark well enough that they were pretty much all he needed.

Mark breathed a sigh of relief as he crossed the culvert and turned north onto the gravel road.

"Well," he thought, "I'm not sure what comes next, but at least I'm mobile again."

AGreyMan

Chapter 013 - Crackdown!

The Undersecretary for Transportation was late for the meeting. Security was getting so tight and the delays so time consuming that any movement around the capital was all but impossible. As soon as the computer and communication geeks could get everything rigged up and hard secured they would be able to conduct these meetings remotely. Davis couldn't wait until that happened, but until the kinks could be worked out and it actually happened, he would be forced to jump through the gauntlet of ever increasing security hoops now in place. He passed his hand through the Biochip scanner and was cleared by the armed Marine guard at the last checkpoint just outside the conference room.

"You're cleared Mr. Undersecretary, the meetings already commenced Sir, but there's plenty of seats left." The Marine politely said as he opened the door for Davis.

The Director for Home Security was at the podium speaking as Davis slinked into the first empty seat in the back. "Chicago five point three, Los Angeles two point six, and Houston one point two. Cities with loses under one million are: San Francisco four hundred sixteen thousand, Atlanta three hundred sixty-eight thousand, Denver two hundred forty-nine thousand, Memphis two hundred . . ."

"ENOUGH! ENOUGH!" The President viciously called out as he suddenly stood up sweeping his arm towards the Director. "That is more than enough . . ." He paused, and stepped towards the podium. "What's the bottom line?"

"Sir . . . ?" The Director cleared his throat. "Sir, ah by our best estimates . . . we have . . . suffered . . . ah . . . er."

"Spit it out man. . .spit it out!"

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Yes Sir er ah, Mr. President . . . we have . . . um . . . estimated losses of somewhere between sixteen and eighteen million Americans from this single biological attack over the last two weeks . . . Sir . . . and . . . um.”

The air suddenly rushed out of every lung in the room. Not even one’s own heartbeat could be heard in the stillness that followed. Time seemed to have stopped as they sat there in total shock. The air was thick and electric and seemed to suddenly close in and suffocate everyone sitting in the room. Davis felt like he was going to lose his hastily eaten lunch. The mere thought of that many people suddenly dead in less than two weeks . . . was beyond comprehension.

Someone whispered under their breath. “Oh my God!”

There followed a louder. “Sweat Mother of Jesus.” And “F*cking B*stards” echoed from over near the corner.

The room started to spin as Davis suddenly burst from his seat and ran for the exit. He pushed through the double doors and spewed this lunch across the Pentagon’s tiled floor before collapsing to his knees and dry heaving. His heart pounded in his ears and he could suddenly feel the strong hand of the Marine guard on his shoulder just before he passed out.

“Sir . . . Sir . . . are you all right? Sir . . . take a breath . . . SIR BREATH SLOWLY, SIR, SIR!”

The sound started to drift away into the encroaching mist. The last thing Davis remembered was the Marine’s voice . . . “Get me a Corpsman down here quick, this guy’s going out . . .”

Dr. Nathan Anders slowly drifted awake. The floor was hard beneath him but someone had covered him with a blanket and placed a small pillow beneath his head. An odd smell filled the air, oily, machine like. He slowly sat up against his complaining cramped muscles and joints. He remembered now; the hospital, all the death, their escape through the old tunnel under the street and that insane run through the back streets and alleyways of old Chicago. The Guardsmen shooting at them and they ended up finally at the EMT’s place down near the warehouse district . . . Mickey . . . ah . . . Mickey Davis, yeah that’s right.

Nathan looked around and could make out several other still sleeping lumps scattered across the carpeted floor. The loft was large and roomy, somehow fitting a bachelor’s life style.

“Coffee’s on the counter Doc.” Mickey called to him from the other side of the room.

“Ah . . . Thanks.” He answered as he grudgingly rolled over and stood up. Mickey was sitting at a large picnic table covered with a blanket and with a pile of mechanical looking parts strewn across it. He was polishing something with a cloth as Nathan staggered past, still half a sleep and started to pour himself a cup of coffee.

The steamy brown liquid smelled rich and earthy and Nathan welcomed the soothing aroma. He felt alive. Alive for the first time in as many days. He walked back over towards Mickey and suddenly realized that the tabletop was covered with gun parts. Mickey was in the middle of cleaning and assembling a large rifle. Several other weapons were leaning against the nearby wall; he recognized a couple as M-16’s, two shotguns, and some mili-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

tary looking rifles. Several pistols, 45's he thought remembering them from a Bruce Willis movie, were setting on the corner of the table.

"Did someone start a war?"

"Well you don't kill a couple of million people and simply walk away without a fight."

"What?" Nathan asked shockingly as he sat down.

"Well apparently, from what I can gather from the BBC Short Wave and the Emergency Civil Defense broadcasts . . . the US was hit with a biological attack last week. We've been smack dab in the middle of it Doc, and somehow managed to survive. But several million of our fellow Chicagoans didn't make it." He paused as he snapped the weapon back together and rubbed it lightly with a silicon rag. "They hit a bunch of other cities as well. New York got really nailed, L. A. is toast, we got banged pretty bad here and a bunch of other cities got smacked hard; Memphis, Atlanta, New Orleans, San Fran, Portland, Seattle, and Denver plus one or two others but I don't remember which ones. Needless to say, Washington is not very happy right now and the sh*t has seriously hit the fan!"

"Did Washington get attacked as well?"

"Nope, strange that. You'd think that they'd have gone for the nation's capital too. But so far they've walked away clean. Scared sh*tless though I'm sure."

"So where does that put us Mic?"

"Well . . . for right now we're sitting fat in the middle of one of the major ground zero's. Total, and I mean TOTAL martial law has clamped down across the country. Oh and just be glad you're not Arabic or Muslim right now. Remember what they did to the Japanese American's during World War Two?"

"You mean internment camps?"

"Yeah that's it. Well right now the army is out in force rounding up anyone that looks the least bit like an Arab and forget it if your name is Mohammad or anything that even sounds like it. That's a sure ticket straight to the camps!"

"I can't believe it, they're using internment camps? But isn't there some kind of protest or resistance?"

"Are you kidding? We're talking MILLIONS of Americans dead Doc! They're lucky that they aren't being shot on sight. The country is pretty p*ssed off right now." He locked open the bipod support legs and set the rifle on the table. "Besides which, ATF is having a field day kicking in doors and confiscating guns all over the place. It's total martial law, no private ownership of arms, no travel, no hoarding, no nothing!"

"ATF?"

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the candy @sses of the federal bureaus, real wanna-bees. Only now they’ve really got a mission. They’ve closed all the gun shops across the country; any registered owner has twenty-four hours to turn in all firearms and reloading equipment when they arrive in your area. THEN they start going from house to house. If you’re found with any contraband they haul your @ss off to one of the camps.”

“But they can’t do that, there’s due process of . . . ”

“HELLO DOC, did I fail to mention the ENTIRE COUNTRY is under MARTIAL LAW? They can do what ever they want. And right now they want vengeance and an entirely disarmed population.”

“So where does that put us . . . here.” Nathan pointed to the rifles and such against the wall. “How long until they come for these?”

“Well first they have to know about them. You don’t think I’d be stupid enough to register any of this?”

“But they will be coming, right?”

“Oh you can bet on it, but this isn’t a normal rent district you’d be expecting to find people living in, is it? “We’re gonna be OK for now, but I don’t think any where in Chicago is going to be a good place to stay for quite a while. And right now we’re still inside the ‘Red Zone’, too much bio contamination to start scr*wing around near us.”

“So now what?” Nathan asked and took another sip from the mug.

“Well Doc . . . Isaac and a couple of others are going to try to get back home. He’s out scouting a route right now. As for the rest of our little clan. Well you’re welcome to hang out here for a while, but I wouldn’t stick around too long. I’ve already heard shooting off in the distance. No telling what it’s from. Could be more Guardsmen, could be gangs, could be anything now. There’s not enough National Guard to totally lock down the city and the cops are still nowhere in sight, hell they could all be dead for all we know. Do the math . . . it’s not a good situation.”

“And you, looks like you’re preparing for a war. What’s with all this hardware?”

“Oh me. Well Doc . . . I’m one of those Survivalist-Patriot-Militia types that the media is always warning you about.”

“You?!”

“Yep, here I sit, redneck and all.”

“But . . . you don’t seem the type. Why you even work with a . . . ah . . . ”

“A Blackman, you can say it Doc . . . yeah Isaac is black. Say I wonder if I should remind him sometime about that?”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“But I thought that . . . well I mean . . . er . . . ah.”

“Look Doc, don’t believe all the hype that gets spewed out by the media. They have their agenda and we have ours. Yeah there are some total jerks running around professing to be righteous militiamen and patriots etc., but don’t you believe ‘em for a second! Bunch of whinny @ss wannabee’s if you ask me. Isaac’s agenda and mine are one in the same. ‘You works hard you gets paid a fair wage.’ Nobody gets cut a husk ahead of anyone else. That’s why we get along so well. He jerks my chain when I get out of line and I jerk his. I don’t cut him any slack and he don’t cut me any.”

“Beside which he’s the best damn EMT I’ve ever worked with! Did you know that he was in the Gulf War? Got wounded dragging Marines out of hell-ova hot firefight. He was one tough Corpsman I heard. He never talks about it, but I got it on good authority from some of the other EMT’s.”

“So where are you headed Mickey?”

“Well I can’t get in touch with anyone right now. Phones are still down, emergency use only. But I’ve got a couple of hunting buddies that have some land up across the lake in Northern Michigan. Figure I’ll load as much of my gear as I can, and borrow a boat down in the basin and skedaddle out across the pond and hole up there until things get back to normal. Which may not be for a long time.”

He got up and added the lethal looking rifle to the others leaning up against the wall. “You’re welcome to join us if you like Doc.” He paused. “Your family as well.”

“There’s just me Mickey. Well and my ex-wife, she’ll miss the alimony.” He chuckled. “I won’t! We didn’t have any kids.” Nathan looked up from his cup. “There’s my brother, he’s out in L.A. and a sister down in Arizona, but we haven’t been very close for years and they’re too far away now I suppose.”

“Yeah, right now they might as well be on the moon. Nobody but federally authorized vehicles are allowed on the roads. There’s no way you could get to them now Doc and probably not for some time . . . so what do you think . . . are you up for some rugged living? A full on Doc would be welcomed.”

Nathan sat there for a bit ruminating over the idea. He took another sip of the coffee and could feel the warmth ease down his throat. He really didn’t have any other options. His work had been his life and that was pretty well shot now. He certainly didn’t relish the idea of walking back into another hospital for a while. He had seen enough death in the past several days to last a lifetime.

“Hmmm perhaps a little vacation is in order Mickey. But I’ll warn you, I’m pretty much a city boy and not much good in the woods.”

“That’s not a problem Doc. Hang with me for a while and I’ll be happy to teach you everything you’ll need to know.” He paused. “And perhaps you can teach me what I need to know to be a PA.”

“Physicians Assistant?”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Yeah, I’ve been taking night classes to get my AA degree with the idea of going on and applying to one of the local PA programs.”

Just then the downstairs main access door’s buzzer sounded several times. Someone was pressing it frantically and Mickey ran across the room and cautiously looked out the window. He could see Isaac being supported by two people, one he recognized as Isaac’s sister.

“Sh*t !” Mickey slammed his hand on the door release, grabbed one of the rifles against the wall and raced down the stairwell. Dr. Anders followed close on his heels.

When they arrived at the bottom of the stairs they could both see the blood soaked clothing on Isaac and the pale gray color of his dark skin. He was going into shock.

“He’s been shot! He’s been shot! Oh it’s all my fault.” Salina blubbered.

Isaac raised his head. “Got ambushed Mic, they’re not far behind us. Sorry man . . . no where else to go!”

Nathan and Mic helped him to the ground and Nathan took over. He had been shot on the left side just below the breast.

“We’ve got a sucking chest wound Mickey. Through and through. Damn I didn’t bring any equipment to deal with this!”

“I’ve got some stuff upstairs Doc. Here help me get him up.”

The pair picked him up in a two man chair carry and carefully crabbed up the stairway to the loft. Everyone was up by the time they reached the top landing. Mickey motioned for one of the nurses to take his place and he quickly moved to prepare a operating table for Isaac. He bundled up the gun cleaning supplies and the weapons and moved them over to the corner. Then raced off to a back room and came out with a duffle bag that had a heavy-duty zipper down one side. After clearing off the counter he tossed the bag up on it and opened it up. By then they had positioned Isaac on the table.

“Here’s two bags of Ringer’s Doc, Heimlich valve, Dressings, Surgical Kit., I’ve got a big Kelly’s here for the chest tube.” Mickey was rifling through the contents tossing medical and surgical equipment at Nathan and the two nurses.

The action was fast and furious. For the next forty odd minutes Nathan was clamping, tying off, and sewing up bleeders as quickly as he could. This was meatball surgery, he didn’t even know if the equipment he was using was sterile or not. At this point it didn’t matter. If he didn’t stop the bleeding and control the shock it would all over well before any infection could set in. Then suddenly he was done. That was all he could do. The rest was up to Isaac. Nathan walked over to the easy chair and collapsed. Mickey came up and put his hand on his shoulder.

“Nice work Doc, very nice work.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Don’t know if it will do any good. I just plugged him up as well as I could. Thank God it was a clean shot through.”

They stood there quietly for a few minutes and watched the two nurses clean up the patient and then they helped them move him in to Mickey’s bedroom. Salina grabbed the doctor’s arm and cried softly, thanking him for saving her brother.

“He’s not out of danger yet dear, but he’s got a fighting chance.”

“Mickey . . . we’ve got company.”

“Sh*t ! I forgot about them . . . damn, damn, damn!” Mickey ran over to the window and peeked out. “Where are they?”

Sheila, the 17-year-old Candy Striper that had survived the nightmare in the hospital with them pointed off beyond the immediate buildings. “I saw some movement back there behind that short building.”

Mickey raised his bino’s and scanned the distance. “Nothing, nothing, oh oh . . . yep, I see ‘em, Salina were those street punks that ambushed you?”

“Yeah it was gang-bangers. They shot up the car and was acting all crazy like, blocked the street with wrecks and Isaac had to drive clear up on the curb and through a yard to get by them.”

“O.K . . . @ssholes . . . well now you’re on my turf and I don’t play nice!”

Mickey handed the binoculars to Sheila “Keep an eye on them for me.” He said as he walked across the room to a wall locker. He quickly started dressing out for combat. Over the camo’s he was wearing he pulled on a military looking flak vest. A vest had pockets that he started filling up with magazines, and gear. He walked back to the Doctor and handed him a small radio.

“This is so you’ll know what’s going on and you can let me know if you’re in trouble. Do you know anything at all about guns?”

Nathan shook his head. “Very little I’m afraid.”

“Well there’s no time like the present.” Mickey quickly gave the group a brief overly simplified course on the AR 15 and the 12-gauge pump shotgun before handing them out.

“Now remember you’re not to get involved UNLESS I call for help. Just sit here and pray these punks are as stupid as they look. At the most all you’ll have to do is make noise with them. BUT STAY HERE! After I leave this loft anything I run into out there is gonna get shot. SO DON’T BE STUPID . . . UNDERSTOOD!”

“Mickey are you sure that there’s not something more I can do.” Nathan pleaded.

“Doc, you stay here and keep Isaac alive . . . he owes me ten bucks on a bet. And I intend to collect.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Wallace Danfort stepped forward. He had been a custodian at the hospital. “Look here son, I may just be a janitor but I do know how to use one of these civilian M- 16’s. I was in the Army back during Nam. Wasn’t in combat unless you count bar fights while stationed over in Germany. But you ain’t going out there alone . . . that is plan stupid!”

“Can you keep up?” Mickey asked.

“You just lead sonny and I’ll be there to cover your six . . . can I keep up, damn boy I ain’t that old!”

Mickey pulled out another vest and handed him one of the AR’s. “Grab the bandoleer’s and that gun case and we’re out of here.”

The pair, heavily loaded down with gear, moved out quietly from the warehouse. They circled back behind and moved as fast as they could away from the loft as possible. There was no sense to draw these punks to his retreat. Better to draw them off and catch them well out of the line of fire from Doc and the others.

“What he hell is in this case Mic? Fricken thing weighs a ton.” Wallace puffed.

“That’s the enforcer. We use that if everything else fails.”

“Well it’s damn heavy.”

“Yeah, well just be glad you’re not carrying the ammo for that thing.” They continued to maneuver for position and arrived ten minutes later where Mickey wanted to set up.

“Ok Wally, you set here and make real quiet. You’re my back up. This is my line of retreat and our redoubt. I’ll try to pick them off up ahead of here. But if not, this is where I’ll be coming . . . so don’t shoot the first thing you see, it will probably be me. OK?”

“Gotcha Mic.”

With that Mickey moved out. He quickly covered the ground between the redoubt and where he figured the gang-bangers would be by now. He checked his weapon, his AR-15A2. He would have rather carried the FN or the M1A but he was looking at multiple targets, close to medium range and needed the massive firepower that sheer numbers of rounds headed down range would provide. Not that the 62 grain .223 round is anything to laugh at. Inside two hundred meters the round is devastating against human flesh. Added to that he was carrying ten thirty round magazines in his chest pack, another six mags on his web gear and counting the one in the weapon, was packing over 500 rounds of close up and nasty. A couple of hand grenades would have been nice. But as his old Gunnery Sergeant had said. “Sh*t in one hand and wish in the other . . . see which one gets full first.”

“Damn! Wish that Gunny was here with me now!”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

He could hear noise up ahead; some was idiot beating in a metal door. He lowered him self to the ground and looked quickly around the corner of the building.

“Yep. Those idiots are trying to break into the storage garages.” Whispered to himself.

He could see several gang-bangers outside and hear several more inside one of the units they had managed to break into. Boxes and household goods were being tossed out into the driveway between the row of storage units. While they were half in and half out of the storage garage he couldn’t hope to ambush enough at one time to finish the job. He looked around for options. “HMMMM just maybe.”

Suddenly Mickey heard several voices coming around the corner behind him. He was momentarily hidden by several fifty-five gallon drums and a low stack of crates, but now he was caught between two different groups and his only escape was in the open between them. “Sh*t !”

Three bangers walked around the corner. All were armed. Mickey clicked the safety over to full auto and began tapping the trigger sending two round groups rapidly into the unsuspecting hard @sses at point blank range. The first two bangers were caught completely by surprise and never had a chance, but their off balanced descent to the ground partially blocked and protected the third member and he did manage to return fire, ineffective, but far too close for comfort. Mickey tagged him several more times to make sure he wouldn’t get off another round. Mickey was now exposed.

Spinning around he could hear shouts and gunfire coming from the invaded storage garage less than thirty yards away. Clicking back to Semi-auto and feeding in a fresh magazine into the AR he inched up to the edge of the building. He needed a distraction. The drum beside him was partially empty and not too heavy. Mickey pushed it over and kicked it to get it rolling. He waited until it was six or eight feet away before he quickly whipped his rifle around the corner.

Tap-tap, one down! Tap-tap, second down. The third and forth bangers are running for cover of the storage unit firing back blindly. Tap-tap . . . Tap-tap . . . Tap-tap, another down. “Sh*t !” the forth dove into the garage. Mickey let fly a rapid fire barrage into the opening of the storage garage. When the AR locked open on empty he retreated quickly back, reloaded, picked up the earlier emptied mag and took off running.

Twenty yards . . . fifteen . . . ten . . . five . . . Crack-crack-crack. They were out of their hole and hot on his trail. CORNER! He switched to a left hand hold and poked out around the corner of the new building. There were seven more of them! They had just reached the position he had vacated and discovered their dead partners. “Sh*t ! Now they’re p*ssed for sure!” He could see that most of the second group he tagged were still on the ground.

“How many of these b*astards were there to begin with.” He tried to steady his breath. “Make a note to self . . . Self, must radically improve recon methods. Best to have an idea of how big a bucket of sh*t you’re jumping into BEFORE LEAPING!”

He poked back around the corner, sighted in on the baddest looking banger and proceeded to empty the third magazine into the group. Two more dropped but the rest quickly ducked for cover and started to return fire. Mickey disappeared back around the corner, reloaded and took off again.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

"I wonder how long before they wise up to this tactic." He thought to himself. Then he heard the squeal of tires in the distance and got his answer. He was at least one hundred yards away from Wally through a maze of factory and warehouse buildings. One hundred yards too far he was sure. "Screw it!" He took off running at full tilt.

He had covered nearly half the distance when he heard the car slam on the brakes behind him and shots rang out. He dove behind a ramp, rolled and came up shooting. The carload of bangers was less than forty yards away and several of them had what looked like AK's and MAC Submachine guns. Sh*t was whizzing past fast and hitting all over the building walls behind him.

"Hits count" . . . tap-tap . . . "hits count" . . . tap-tap . . . "hits count" . . . tap-tap. He kept saying to himself as he took aim and let out a steady stream of fire. THAP! Suddenly his head got knocked back with the force of a baseball bat and his helmet almost pulled itself off! He laid there stunned for a couple of seconds before he realized that he had been hit.

"I got him! I got him!" He could hear coming from the bangers in the car. Mickey's head was pounding but he was alive. They couldn't see him from where he was, but he couldn't leave without exposing himself right in front of them. "This really s*cks!" He thought. He rolled over and tried to clear his head.

"Are you sure Man? Did you get him good?"

"Yeah man I totally capped him in the head! He's wasted man, totally wasted!" Mickey blinked his eyes but everything still seemed watery. "This is not cool." He muttered. He could hear car doors slam, they would be moving in now to check their kill. Mickey fumbled around and pulled out a fresh mag, ejected the near spent one and prepared for a last stand. His vision was starting to clear and it was now or never. He popped up suddenly and two bangers were less than a dozen feet away. He flipped to full auto, sprayed and prayed.

But something strange happened to the banger to his right. He suddenly jumped over thirty feet through the air sideways back towards the car. Mickey blinked, and blinked again. Something suddenly burned his left thigh and he came back to focus.

He locked the AR into position. "Hits count" . . . tap-tap . . . "hits count" . . . tap-tap . . . "hits count" . . . tap-tap. WHAM! . . . WHAM! . . . WHAM! The front of the car started to shatter, glass, metal and people began flying everywhere. The last banger gun went silent. Mickey stood there his weapon empty, his head pounding, his ears ringing and his leg burning, but he stood there alive, dazed but alive.

Wally had come up to provide him cover and with him he had brought the Barrett 50 caliber BMG that he had been hauling around in the gun case. Somehow he had managed to quickly figure out how it worked and set it up at the end of the factory lane only a little over a hundred yards away. The firepower of that gun at that range quickly turned the tide of the firefight. Wally turned the car into Swiss cheese and every one in it as well.

When they got back to the loft, Nathan quickly patched the leg wound, just muscle . . . "Ouch Doc!" and Mickey admired the now ruined Kevlar helmet.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Man that must of hurt!” Wally said. “I thought you were a goner for sure when I saw your head snap back.”

“Would have been if it hadn’t been for this helmet. My head is still pounding, but that is better than the alternative.”

“Thanks for disobeying my orders and coming up and saving my @ss.” Mickey said to him.

“Youth and enthusiasm . . .” Wally said pointing at Mickey. “Age and deceit.” His thumb now pointed at himself. “A tough combination to beat wouldn’t you say.”

“Yeah Wally, Yeah I’d say it was . . . do you suppose you could teach me some of that age and deceit sh*t . . . cause that youth and enthusiasm cr*p just about got me killed out there.”

“Sure we can work a deal Mic . . . say . . . do I get to keep the big gun?”

Desert Doc

Chapter 14 - A Taste of Things to Come

Max Jeager walked slowly to the patrol car head down, and deep in thought. Things were going bad, and going bad fast. The Chief had given them a pep talk, all about how this was a great and powerful country, that the top people in the nation were working on the problems of the disease, and the crop failure. There were strategic reserves of fuel, and we were having a surplus of grain, for Christ’s sake, besides all the government cheese!

“Don’t worry about this.” The Chief had said. “It’ll be back to normal in a few weeks. Count on it.”

Max was less than reassured. So far the grocery stores were still full of food to buy. He thought that would last a few days at the most, several hours at the least. The news was still talking only vaguely about the problems of the disease and crop damage. There were an inordinate number of “happy stories” on the network news. Stories about kids who won spelling bees or bicycling grandmas. But the guard had been called up to go into the cities, and their family members weren’t stupid. They knew something was up. The state patrol was having their hands full with the interstate corridors. They were scheduled to close the interstates nationwide at 1800 tonight. Three hours from now. It was being kept pretty hush-hush, but even several counties away from the “I” the State Patrol was informing Max’s department that they may be requesting personnel, and were willing to pay overtime costs to the department. The reasoning given was a “precaution” to prevent the spread of the disease.

Max figured that tonight was the night. When they closed the interstate, people would no longer be able to ignore what was going on. The happy talk from the news would suddenly be seen to be lies. The panic would begin, and panic -like fire- had a way of feeding on itself to grow and spread. People would rush out to get gas for their cars and groceries for their stomachs. A couple million lemmings all with the same idea. Tempers would flare, punches would be thrown, triggers would be pulled, windows would be broken, and the dark ages wouldn’t be far behind.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“I should have called in sick.” He thought with a sigh as he sat down into the driver’s seat of the patrol car. Three of the others on his shift did. He wondered how long the department would function. If there were a sufficient level of anarchy and lawlessness, he knew that most officers would bag it, and go take care of the people that really mattered to them.

Like many officers, Max was growing a tiny seed of the “Us vs. Them” attitude that law enforcement personnel seemed to develop over time. There were three classes of people: The Good Guys. Cops. There was the general public. Stupid, idiotic, thought-free. The bad guys: Thugs, punks, perps, scrotes, etc. The public was to be tolerated, but that was pretty close to all that could be done. Intellectually, Max knew this was wrong. But the simple fact of the matter was that the majority of smart, well-adjusted normal people rarely had the occasion to call a cop. They took care of problems before they were problems. Therefore, most of the public that cops were exposed to - while not actually criminals - were not exactly the cream of humanity’s crop. Max figured he and his fellow officer’s loyalty to this public would last only so long after the paychecks started coming in.

Max wheeled the cruiser into the gates at the city shops. The place was like a ghost town: Deserted except for a few mechanics working on a street sweeper, and one attaching a snowplow blade to the front of a bright orange dump truck. He spotted one of the mechanics that he sometimes shot the breeze with while filling the patrol car or having it serviced.

“Hey Tommy. Where is everybody?” Max asked

“Hiya Max.” Tommy replied, wiping his hands on a shop rag. “Some called in sick, some are up at the “I” getting ready to put up Jersey Barriers. There’s a coupla guys round here someplace. Then there’s me. Something weird’s going on. This just ain’t right.”

“Tell me about it. That’s why I’m here. I have a feeling it’s going to be a hell of a night. I came to see if you had any 5 gallon gas cans. It might be a while before I can refuel tonight, and I don’t want to be stuck out in BFE without gas.”

“Well . . .” Tommy started, “It seems you aren’t the only one with that idea. We had a bunch of them for refueling the mowers and the like, but a lot of ‘em seemed to grow legs lately and walk away. I think I can scare you up a couple. Gotta sign for ‘em, though.”

“No problem Tommy. I’ll sign for ‘em.”

“Plus the city says you aren’t supposed to carry them in the trunk.”

This was Tommy’s fun. He pretended to be a by-the-book city shops employee, but it was just that: Pretend. He’d bent the rules plenty of times if the reason to do so made sense, or if the person requesting the bending was “a decent guy.” Today Max had both on his side.

“Well Tommy, I won’t tell if you don’t. Plus if it’ll ease your conscience, you can just hand ‘em to me and go do something else. I’ll do the rest.” Max said with a grin.

“Aw hell. There aren’t any supervisors for miles anyway. Pull the car up to the pumps. I’ll meet you there.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Max drove the squad around the huge shop building to the fuel pumps out back. On the night shift, the officers were supposed to pump their own fuel, and thus knew where the switches for the pumps were located and had keys to the gates. There were two pumps, one for diesel and one for gasoline. Most of the city's larger equipment ran on diesel, but the squad cars, city pick-ups, lawn mowers, sidewalk plows and a myriad of other equipment ran on gasoline. Thus, the city bought thousands of gallons every month to feed the vehicles it owned. Max began to fill the cruiser, and soon Tommy rounded the corner of the shop carrying three red "jerry cans."

Tommy set them down next to the pump, and said, "Say, are you OK here? I have to get some stuff done around here. We really are short handed."

"No problem. Thanks for the help. Oh, where do I sign for these?" Max replied. Tommy tapped the side of his head with a finger, "You already signed right up here. Just bring 'em back when you're done with 'em, will you?"

"Will do. Thanks again." Said Max as he turned to fuel the gas cans.

The next few hours were the worst of Max' life. It started with a call to a fight at a bar next to the grocery store. Max pulled up and there were two men rolling around in the parking lot. Like most fights, this one had degenerated from throwing punches to a kind of wrestling. Bystanders were watching, trying to separate the combatants, trying to stop those who were trying to separate the combatants, and the usual drunken cheerleaders. At three thirty in the afternoon, no less. Max got out of the car and walked over. Most of the bystanders had backed a little away, but many were now shouting at Max. He shoved a couple of people back, then grabbed one of the combatants by the shirt and yanked him a couple feet away from the other guy. Max's backup wasn't too far away, but there were only two other cars on duty, due to the sick calls. Dispatch was having no luck getting anybody to come in, either. One of the heroes made a drunken lunge for the other, which Max stopped with a boot on the shoulder, and a gruff "Sit down." This riled the drunken crowd who began shouting at Max even louder. Max chose the most non-compliant of the two and began to cuff him and hustle him to the back of his squad car. It was best to get done what needed to be done, and get the hell out of there. When he went for the other one, a drunken woman in a tube top staggered between Max and the other fighter.

"He din't start it. You leave him alone." She screeched

"Ma'am, step back." Max said. He learned you can't argue with drunks: Their logic knew no bounds.

"You keep yer f*kin' hans of him. He din't do nuthin', you stupid cop!" She replied.

The crowd sensed a good show, and their volume level rose considerably. Max was uncomfortable, but not scared. He did wish backup would show the hell up, though.

"Ma'am," Said Max, unsnapping the pouch on his belt and withdrawing the pepper spray, unconsciously giving it a shake, "I'm not gonna tell you again: Step back away from him. He's going to jail, and unless you step back, you are too."

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“That shee-it don’ work on me. I’m a-moon.” She slurred.

Max let fly with a stream of pepper spray at her face. For all of three seconds, it seemed as though she was immune. Then she dropped to her knees.

“Aaagh” She screamed, dropped to her knees, then added “Auuogh!”

As mucus ran in long, stringy strands from her nose, her eyes were pinched tightly shut. Her face became as reddened as one of those baboons he had seen once on PBS.

The crowd grew even louder. To them, a great injustice was done to the Drunken Nation. How best to avenge this terrible tragedy?

Max was cuffing the second fighter, who had become quite compliant, and was walking him to the squad - past Xena the Warrior Princess, who was rolling around on the gravel parking lot - when the first beer bottle flew. The first missed, but a subsequent bottle hit Max squarely in the back of the head. White lights burst brightly before his eyes, and he stumbled briefly, bumping into the cuffed drunk in front of him, bringing them both to the ground. Max reached to the radio hanging at his belt and hit the “panic button” that sent a tone to dispatch, letting them know he was in trouble. More beer bottles flew, another striking Max in the chest. Another hit the squad car, shattered, and a shard cut Max’ cheek. The crowd was coming closer, sensing a victory, when Max, from a kneeling position hosed the crowd with his pepper spray. His vision has not completely cleared, so the aim was not what it had been with Xena, but it was enough. He emptied the entire can in the crowd’s general direction. They backed off, and dispersed, most looking for water to try to wash off the pepper spray.

Max’ back up rolled up about then. Max stood and shoved the last fighter in the back of his squad.

“Jesus, Max” said Kass, the first back up to arrive. “You look like sh*t . You all right?”

“I think so.” Max reached up to feel the blood running from the cut on his cheek, and from the great and growing welt on the back of his head. “Listen, I think I’m gonna need some stitches. Will you take these guys to the station and start on ‘em? I’m gonna head to Mercy.”

“Sure, Max. What about her?” Kass said, gesturing to the moaning, swearing form with the tube top around her hips.

“Her too. Obstruction for now. Until my bell quits ringing and I can think of something better.” Max said, climbing into the squad.

Things were going to get a lot worse for Max in the next few hours.

AGreyMan

Chapter 15 - Grandma’s Cookies

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

She could hear the laughing on the other side of the door. She could still smell their fetid breath, the stench of their filthy bodies sweating all over her. She could barely see out of one eye and the other was swollen shut . . . THOSE B*STARDS! Thankfully she had passed out, earlier, but now she had to find a way out . . . any way out! Her one hand was still tied to the bedpost. Somehow, somehow she must get free.

The old green '53 Willys Overland Station Wagon cruised slowly but steadily down the dirt gravel road. It had been well over month before Betty had ventured out the first time, "just too much silly stuff going on." her Murray would have said. She wished Murray was with her now. All those years of preparation, all those plans they had worked on to be ready for just such a day and now, well . . . he had fought the cancer like the old soldier he was. Just like that day back on the Normandy beaches he would tell her about when the Scotch got to him a little too much, but this final battle he couldn't win. Still he had prepared her for this day. She just wished she wasn't alone . . . "Well", she thought patting the dark rump of the Rottie looking out the passenger window, "Maybe not quite all alone."

She could hear footsteps coming closer to the door, then the knob turned and the door suddenly opened and filled the room with loud music and the smell of stale beer, urine and cigarettes. She froze, as if she was still unconscious and prayed.

"Naw . . . the b*tch is still out! Geez Ben did you have to hit her that hard?" The door slammed shut and the footsteps moved away.

Through her one good eye Samantha looked about the shabby room. Early welfare trash. She was laying in the middle of a bed, naked, battered and bruised. Her right hand was free but she could hardly feel her fingers, her left was still tied to the poster of the bed by some sort of heavy cord. She tired to move and every inch of her body screamed at her in pain. But she had to move, it was the only way out of this nightmare. She knew that if she didn't get out there soon, there would be no later. It was move or die.

Betty finally reached the black top road and turned the Willys left on to it. Just another ten miles and she'd be in the small community of Monte Vista in the mountains north-northeast of San Diego. It wasn't much of a town as far as towns went; a bedroom community of perhaps twenty thousand give or take before the Bio attack. She had lost a good many of her friends in those first days. According to the short wave radio she monitored religiously things had been really bad in the major cities where millions were said to have perished. She still found it hard to believe, so many people so quickly. Betty believed that only her isolation out in the sticks where she and Murray had built their home had probably saved her. Even the little community of Monte Vista had not escaped the plague and had suffered the loss of almost a thousand of its citizens. Of the remaining survivors less than half still remained, most had gone off elsewhere to wait out the storm or moved into better-policed suburbs. Things had been getting pretty rough since the out-break. Murray's old police scanner seemed to be getting busier and busier lately and level of violence was steadily increasing.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Samantha worked at the knot on her left wrist with her teeth; her right hand was still almost useless from the lack of circulation caused by the ropes still dangling from it. At last the final bit came loose and she was free from the bed, now she had to get out of the room and out of the house. She slowly eased off the bed and looked for something to cover herself with. The remains of her clothing was piled across the room in the corner, but she remembered that most of that had ripped and cut off.

“Prioritize, prioritize.” She kept thinking. “Focus - focus on the problem. My god what a nightmare!”

She limped over to the window. It was partially open. All she had to do was slide it the rest of the way open and climb out through the torn screen, the ground was just feet below. It seemed like it took hours for her to move a rickety chair over below the window, slide the window quietly open and then finally she managed to push/fall through the screen to the ground five feet below. She landed with a muffled thud in a lump on the cold wet grass knocking the wind out of her, but she was outside that room. Pitifully, painfully she pushed herself to her knees and then leaning against the stucco side of the house, its coarse grit like sand paper finish tearing at her already traumatized skin. Slowly she clawed her way up until she was standing, then step by agonizing step she limped forward, out the side gate, across the front of the neighbors yard and slowly down the street. Naked, bloody, and filthy she looked more dead than alive, a hideous creature of the walking dead loping down the side street and alley.

She hadn’t managed to get very far away when the animals that had spent the last twelve hours raping and beating her discovered her absence. Off in the distance she could hear the hollering, cussing and shouting suddenly drowned out by engines starting up.

“Oh my God . . . Oh my God!” She felt the sudden surge of panic flood through her and she drew from that deep well of desperation in her very soul and started running, running, running anywhere but here.

Betty arrived at the edge of town. It appeared unseemly quiet and strangely vacant, especially for the middle of the week. Granted it was getting close to the end of the day, in about an hour or two she figured it would start getting on towards dusk. She didn’t want to be out after dark. Just a quick run into town for some fresh supplies and such, and then back to the ranch. She pulled up in the alleyway of the local Carniceria. She had been getting her meat and spices there over the last forty years from the Sanchez family. Manny always gave her more than a fair price and usually a little something extra was always thrown in, especially some nice juicy bones for Patton. Betty’s husband Murray had built Manny’s home, and three of his daughter’s houses as well. Maria, Manny’s wife had taught Betty the secret to making good tortillas and tamale’s as well as many other traditional Mexican dishes. It was a small community and the roots ran deep. While the rest of the world seemed to have increasing problems between the different races and religions getting along, Monte Vista had somehow been spared that ordeal.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Samantha ran in sheer panic down the sidewalk towards the boulevard. There was no one about, no one to help her or hear her cries for help. The sound of the motorcycles and trucks were still way off in the distance, but it was only a matter of time she knew before she would be fighting for her life. Her feet were bloody from the blacktop and concrete tearing at them. She had fallen too many times to remember, her skin covered more with weeping and bleeding abrasions than the manicured tan that she usually sported. Her custom nails that she had preened every two weeks were broken or ripped off. God what a bloody mess she had become in less than twenty-four short hours. From a cultured well-dressed college coed studying journalism at one of the top western universities to a naked and bleeding panicked creature looking for any kind of shelter from the rabid animals stalking her now.

Betty arrived at the Carniceria and pulled around behind into the alley as was her habit. She parked near the back door to ease loading her purchases in the wagon and shut the Willys off.

“Patton you stay here and guard the wagon.” She said as she climbed out of the Willys. She hesitated for a second, remembered what Murray always said then adjusted the fit of her shoulder holster under her Levi jacket. The Browning High power was locked and loaded and ready if she would need it. Not that Manny’s was a difficult place to shop or anything, but as Murray had always reminded her: “When in doubt, be ready.” With that done she grabbed her shopping list and entered the rear door. She loved Manny’s shop, so full of the aroma of herbs and spices.

“Seniora Betty, how nice of you to visit my shop today.” Manny greeted her as she came in through the back door.

“Hi Manny, how’s Maria doing?” She asked.

Maria was getting over the Influenza plague when a secondary infection of pneumonia jumped in and that nearly did her in. Betty had been bringing her fresh herbal treatments from her garden as well as strong antibiotics from her cache. It had been touch and go, but over the last week or so Maria seemed to slow getting better day-by-day.

“Oh, she is getting much better I think. The new medicine seems to be helping. We are so grateful for your help.” Manny walked over and gave her a hug. Then stepped back and looked had her strangely.

“Oh don’t worry Manny, it’s just insurance in case things got a little strange coming into town today.” She said opening up the left side of her jean jacket to show him the holstered auto.

“Si, I understand Seniora, since the plague things are not going so good these days.”

“Are you having any problems Manuel?” She asked concerned.

“Oh, no, not me. But there are more gangs, more criminals and problems now since the plague. More empty houses are being broken into everyday. The Sheriff can not stop them, there are just too many and he is too

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

few.” He walked behind the counter. Bent over and brought up an old double barreled shotgun laying it on the counter top.

“Maria does not like me to have this in the store, but I think it is a good idea.”

“I would have to agree with you on that Manny.” She answered as she picked up spices and chilies and added them to her cart.

“So what can I do for you today Seniora Betty?”

“Well I’ll take about a half order today Manny and throw in some of your special spicy sausages if you have any.”

“Oh Si, I have a fresh batch that will send your taste buds straight to heaven they are so good.” He smacked his lips and got busy with his task.

Samantha looked up and down the street. There was no one in sight. She was on the edge of the business district, surely there would be something open, someone that could help her, but everything looked dead. Nothing was moving, no cars, no kids, nothing. And dead was where she would be if she didn’t find help soon. She could hear the motorcycles off in the distance getting closer. So far she had managed to hide twice when they had come close before, but she was quickly becoming too tired to fight, too tired to run. She looked again . . . then . . . there, a sign. OPEN. At the end of the street the Mexican butcher was open. She started to move in that direction almost unconsciously, as if drawn by the light of that sign. Her bloody feet screamed with each step, she started crying and laughing and crying again. She was on the edge of madness and the only light at the end of her tunnel, her only salvation was fifty yards away in a neon red sign. The sound grew louder behind her and she started to run.

“Well how much do I owe you?”

“Oh Seniora Betty, take this as a gift. For you help with Maria.” He held out his hand.

“No Manny, I couldn’t do that and you know it. I only did what a good friend would do. Now how much is all that Manny, Please.”

They haggled for a few minutes, it was the ritual, before Betty put the money in Manny’s hand and made him take it. She gave him a hug and walked out the back door. She had just opened the door and was about to get in the Willy’s when she heard a horrific crash from inside the store and Manny’s voice loudly calling on the saints in Spanish. Without a thought she reached up above the visor and grabbed Murray’s old carbine from the spring-loaded rack. She quickly snapped in a thirty round magazine and racked the slide back and let it go. Popping the slide with her palm to insure it was locked forward she grabbed two more thirty round magazines and

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

stuffed them in her jacket pocket. There were two fifteen round magazines located in a pouch on the rifles stock, she looked down and checked those quickly . . . this would have to do.

She entered the back of the store cautiously in the combat crouch that Murray had taught her. She flipped the safety off. Up in the front of the store she could see Manny with his double barrel shotgun pointing towards the door. There was something, no someone sprawled on the ground just inside the door. They had knocked over the potato chip display and were partially buried underneath the bags of chips. There were small arms and legs sticking out from under the pile. But that was not what had Manny's attention, it was what was now coming in the door.

Betty moved to the right sliding along the wall aisle trying get a clear view of the situation. "I'm too old for this sh*t Murray!" She mumbled to herself.

The roar of more motorcycles could be heard through the open door. It was a Mexican Stand-Off, literally. Manny with his shotgun and two large filthy goons just inside the shop's door with their pistols. Betty stepped up on the base of the store fixture to poke the carbine across the top.

"You better back off wet back! This here b*tch is our property and we're takin her back!" The closer animal bel-lowed.

"Better put it down Muther F*cker or we'll rip out your F*cken Heart!" The second one yelled.

Manny stood his ground waving the double barrel back and forth between the two.

"You geet out of my store and leave the senorita alone! YOU GO!" He yelled. Betty could see the two bikers make eye contact, without thinking she knew this standoff was going to end in a few seconds and not well. Then suddenly she heard Patton's deep bark and someone's blood curdling scream echoing from the ally. The two thugs snapped their heads towards the back door and then one saw Betty. As the two made eye contact Betty's trigger finger instinctively squeezed. The one-hundred and ten grain soft point bullet crossed the distance between them before the bikers iris could fully expand to focus on the image of the silver gray head just barely above the display rack's top. Entering just above his eyebrow the force of the expanding lead round snapped his head back like a doll's head in a wind tunnel. The second biker looked at his partner as blood sprayed out the back of his head against the door jamb and never saw the twin flashes from Manny's twelve gauge. The twin loads of double-ought buckshot caught him square in the center of his chest and propelled the biker out through the storefront window in a hail of flying glass.

Betty squeezed off three more rounds through the now empty doorway and dropped off the display base and dashed as quickly as someone her age could up to the front of the store.

"Manny its me!" She yelled over and over. All she could hear was his rapid Spanish, either praying or swearing both were equally effective and appropriate at the moment. From the front of the isle she could see the gang bangers gathering outside trying now to put their bikes and two trucks between them and the store.

"In for a penny, in for a pound." Betty mumbled to herself as she took up a firing position behind the stack of fifty pound flour bags staked on the end cap of the aisle. The bikers-thugs were just starting to look up when she

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

opened up again. Two dirty skum bags went down rapidly as she traversed the carbine across the front of the store. One more tried to make for the protection of the pickup truck across the street before she clipped him in the leg and he spilled face first onto the hard blacktop. Two more rounds plowed into his side before he stopped moving. The magazine was empty.

She pulled out the empty mag and plucked one from her pocket and snapped it into place. She was amazed at just how calm she was, how focused her vision was, how quiet it was in the midst of all the carnage. She quickly jacked the slide and popped the carbine over the top of the flour bags and sighted in on one of the gas tanks of the three bikes parked out front of the store. Pop - Pop - Pop Thwack . . . WHUMP! The first bike's tank ripped open and went up spewing burning gasoline across the other bikes.

KABLAM! - KABLAM! Manny was back in the fight and shoveling hot buckshot across the counter into the street as quickly as he could. Several rounds struck the flour bags in front of Betty sending up puffs of white powder. The shots were coming from behind the pickup truck across the street that the dead biker had tried to reach. More rounds were coming in quicker and several more tacked the bags in front of Betty . . . "Not good!" She thought. She could hear sirens off in the distance. "I hope that's the Calvary." She mumbled to herself as she took aim under the truck across the street and let fly a half a dozen rounds.

Her rounds ricocheted up off the black top and rained jagged shards of lead under the truck and into the exposed lower legs of several bikers behind the truck. She could hear the screams and the fire coming from that source stopped. Betty then concentrated her fire on the side of the truck where the gas tank was located. Her slide locked back and she reached into her pocket for the next full magazine and came up empty handed. "Sh*t!" Retreating behind the cover of the flour bags she searched for another magazine. Without realizing it she had gone through her all three large mags, ninety rounds and now had only the two fifteen rounders on the stock left!

She couldn't leave Manny here alone to hold them off while she went to get more ammo. The double barrel was just too slow to hold off a rush of any kind. She pulled out the empty mag and popped in the smaller fifteen rounder. She could hear the siren getting louder and louder and realized suddenly that it was quiet save for the increasing warble approaching. Slowly she peeked up over the top. It looked like hell out front. The bikes were down and burning as was the truck across the street. One truck was missing. "I wonder when that one left?" She thought to herself. There was only the crackle and pop of burning paint, tires and gasoline to be heard.

"Manny . . . are you ok?"

"Si, Seniora . . . and you?"

"Si Manuel, Si."

Samantha could feel soft clean sheets against her skin. The smell of lavender and wisteria lightly scented the air. It had only been a dream she thought to herself . . . a very, very bad dream. There was something else in the air. She took a deep sniff, it was the unmistakable aroma of chocolate chip cookies fresh from the oven.

"Mmmmmmm." Her mouth began to water. Then she moved and a wave of pain shocked her awake! She tried to open her eyes and could only see out of one, her right eye. There were bandages covering her head and

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

wrapped around her many different wounds. Her first sight was of a man in a uniform, a young man with his arm around a small frail looking woman in the old photograph beside the bed. She slowly, painfully moved her head and looked around the room. It was light and cheery . . . and clean. She could hear humming from the other room, a soft and friendly voice in the distance.

When next she woke there was someone in the room. A soft hand felt the side of her face.

“Hello, my dear. Don’t worry you’re safe now. Just relax and get well. If you’re hungry I have some fresh treats just out of the oven.” The sweet grandmotherly looking lady said to her. She smelled of Lavender and fresh chocolate chip cookies.

Samantha relaxed and drifted off to sleep with a smile on her broken lips. She was safe now, finally safe.

Desert Doc

Chapter 16 - The Law and Order

Max rolled into Mercy’s parking lot a few minutes after the breaking up the fight. The lot was more full than he’d ever seen. There were cars partially blocking the street, as well as parked haphazard in the lot. Several ambulances sat idle in the ambulance bays, as people milled around near them.

“This is all wrong.” Thought Max, as he wheeled the cruiser up closer to the ER doors. Not only was the situation wrong, but the fact that Max knew nothing of it until this very moment was wrong. The chief should have mentioned a disturbance at the hospital in the morning briefing. There wasn’t exactly any kind of violence or mayhem, but there was a lot of people and confusion. As he drove closer he could see some people laying prone on the sidewalk, with others attending to them. He saw few uniforms, and that made him jittery. Paramedic uniforms, cop uniforms, the scrubs of docs or nurses . . . They all meant that somebody was doing something about this mess. No uniforms meant that the crowd was on it’s own. It had been said that an individual person was smart, but a group of people are dumb and panicky and he firmly believed that. Max got as close as he could, then braked, and slid the gear selector to “Park.”

“Christ,” he thought. “We better get somebody up here to start clearing this place out.”

He reached down and picked up the mic on the radio “36, Dispatch.”

Dispatch replied quickly. “Go ahead, 36.”

“There’s a disturbance here at Mercy. We’re going to need a couple officers, and whole bunch of tow trucks.” Max spoke, as he pressed the bloody pack of 4”X4” gauze squares to the back of his head. Man, that throbbed.

There was an inordinately long pause on the radio. Max was about to pick up the mic and repeat his request when dispatch came over the radio. “36, that situation is being taken care of.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Max heard voices in the background behind the dispatcher's words. Strident voices. Worried voices. Screw it. He was in no mood or shape to argue. "10-04." He swung the squad door open slowly, and made to get out. A man dashed across the distance between the ER doors and Max's squad, did a double take and skidded to a halt ten feet from the car. It was one of the ER docs that Max had occasion to become acquainted with while bringing drunks into the ER. "Max, get back in your car and get the hell out of here." The doc said, as he looked around almost wildly.

"What?" Asked Max, with slight confusion, gripping the car door. His headache was growing by the moment, and so far, this conversation wasn't helping it a bit. "Doc, I need stitches, and I think I have a concussion."

"Damn it Max, listen to me!" Words tumbled from the docs' mouth in a panicked stream. "You can't go in there! It's the disease, Max. It's getting worse by the minute. The bodies are stacked like cordwood in there, and if you go in there, you'll end up like them. You maybe will already. Ahh, damn it. Look, all I know is that this thing is spreading. I don't know how, or how to tell if you have it or not. It came on like a freight train. Started to get a couple cases in yesterday afternoon. Couple of folks who were on a shopping trip to Chicago. Since then, the numbers have increased exponentially. The staff that hasn't run off or come down with it have their hands full. You aren't going to get any help with your concussion or cuts in there."

The doc paused, looked around again took a deep breath, then began in a more steady voice. "Nothing we tried touched it. The CDC knows it's here Max. They're sending in troops. What do you think they are going to do to stop it from spreading, Max? Huh? They can't risk any more infected people running around than there already are. The nicest thing they'll do is lock us all up. The worst . . . Well, I don't want to think about it. And listen to this:" The doc pulled a portable radio out of his pocket, and rapidly tuned it to a local radio station. The tinny voice came over the speaker at once.

"S . . . is a repeat announcement: Anyone with the some or all of the following symptoms should report immediately to Mercy Hospital. Fever, chills, cough with blood, bleeding from rectum, mouth, and nose. Muscle twitching and or weakness. Twitching eyes. Blurred or darkened vision . . . " The doc clicked off the radio.

"Look back there, Max. Do you see any help? Why are they telling them to show up here? I'll tell you why. The military is going to roll up here any second. There's a Blackhawk on the roof landing pad, landed about 15 minutes ago. There is a colonel and his some of his boys in MOPP gear. They said help was on the way, and would be here within the hour. Max, I don't need the kind of help they are bringing, and I don't think you do either. You gotta go, Max. I would sew you up, but I am probably infected. I have to get home to . . . "

Just then they heard diesel engines in the distance. The doc resumed his running. Max looked around. Could it be true? Was doc into his own meds? He squinted up to the roof. There was indeed a black tail rotor visible from where he was. He looked around at the parking lot. More and more people were pulling up and exiting their cars, walking toward the hospital proper. Some were being carried by friends or family. It was decision time. The lot was filling up, and the engines could be the military. Max got back into the squad, and drove through the maze of cars toward the exit. His path was blocked as he attempted to turn onto the street by a darkly camouflaged HMMWV. The passenger got out, and Max could instantly see he was in CBW garb. He walked calmly to Max's squad window. Max fought the cop urge to get out and meet the soldier halfway. "Hello, officer. Looks like you've been in a scrape. The docs fix you up in there?" Came the slightly muffled voice of the soldier.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Max smiled nervously and licked his lips. “No, actually, I haven’t even gotten out of the car. I can’t find a damn parking spot. Say, what’s all this about?” He noticed several more HMMVs entering through other entrances to the parking lot, followed by several large military trucks. More soldiers in CBW outfits began disembarking from the trucks.

The soldier looked at the bloodied gauze on the front seat of the car. Max watched his eyes through the small windows, and thought “ Oh Sh*t. He thinks I went inside.”

“Why don’t you come along with us, then, and we’ll get you looked at?” The muffled voice came again.

It was decision time for Max. Most of his life, he had been a good citizen. He followed rules, and although it wasn’t perfect, he believed the government meant more good than evil. But here he was: this soldier wasn’t going to let him go. The soldier thought he was infected from the others in the hospital. Max thought of all the things that needed to be done for his wife. This thing wasn’t going to be resolved easily. Dead people didn’t work. People scared of becoming dead people didn’t work either. With no one working, there would be no food deliveries, no fuel deliveries, no police protection - he snorted to himself at that - no fire protection, no health care, no electricity, and no water service. In short, a sudden return to a harder life. She would need him. They could get through this. They had planned for an emergency. Not like this, exactly, but there were some provisions for this sort of contingency. But he couldn’t help if he was trapped in the hospital. Or dead.

All these thoughts passed through Max’s mind in the blink of an eye. “Still,” he thought, “I’ll give it one more shot.”

“Thanks anyway . . . Sergeant. I’ll live. I’ll just go home and wash up.” He said. He didn’t think it would work. He glanced out of the corner of his eye at the HMMWV. It would be close.

“Well, officer, I have to insist that . . . ” Said the soldier as he slowly moved to take his M16A2 from his shoulder.

Max didn’t wait for him to finish his sentence. He floored the accelerator pedal, and the big Ford Crown Victoria spun its rear tires and leaped forward, careening against the side of the HMMWV as it bounced by. The guardsman sped his unlimbering of the M16, while the surprised M-60 gunner in the ring turret swore as he bounced around from the impact and tried to bring the ’60 about while cocking the weapon. By the time the soldiers had brought their respective weapons to bear on Max’ squad, he was 50 yards away and receding quickly from view. The individual sharp "cracks" of the M16 were accompanied by the lower “thud . . . thud . . . thud” of the M-60. The squad car wove erratically from one lane to the other, but kept its steady acceleration. Seconds later, Max threw the Crown Vic into a controlled four wheel skid as it rounded a corner and sped out of sight. The rear window was shattered in a million pieces, most of which were inside the passenger compartment.

Max was shaking nearly uncontrollably as he kept up his speed and reached for the radio. He spoke excitedly into the mic: “ 36, dispatch! I’ve been fired upon. I repeat, I have been fired upon! Soldiers at Mercy have opened fire upon me. Dispatch, do you copy?”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

There were several agonizing seconds of radio silence, permeated only by the throaty roar of the Crown Vic's V-8 and squealing Michelins as he put distance between Mercy and himself.

"36, report to base immediately." Came back a voice that Max didn't recognize. "Oh F*ck." Said Max as he threw the microphone down into the passenger foot well. They'd be waiting for him there, too. Max tried to think and drive, and ignore the pain in his head. He reached for his cell phone, and dialed his home phone. He prayed that the cell phone system was still up. His wife answered on the second ring.

"Baby, signal 5, and I'm not kidding." He hung up before she could answer.

He slowed the cruiser somewhat. Without thinking, he had driven close to Andy's place. It was only a couple blocks away. He had to ditch the squad, just in case. He remembered that the Wilson's had requested extra police patrols, as they had left for vacation in Vegas. They were only a block away.

He pulled the door shut on the Wilson's garage, plunging the shot-up squad into darkness. This wasn't a good day.

AGreyMan

Chapter 17—The Home Guard

It was just a few minutes before dawn. That special time of pristine silence and serenity that unveils the new day in shades of blue-gray, just that moment before the brilliance of the first rays of sunshine slice through the remaining night. This was a time for David that always held a special magic. No matter what was going on in the world or in his life, these last still moments before the day started had a way of refreshing and revitalizing the energies of mind and spirit. It had become a ritual for him to greet the new day, with a hot cup of fresh ground coffee steaming into the cool still morning air. David leaned against one of the front posts that supported the veranda as he took in the first golden rays of morning. The air was cool and clear with just a hint of morning mist floating in it. Today was going to be a good day.

He was thinking about the conversation last night with his wife as they ate dinner. He was pleasantly surprised by Denise's response to the Torquemada incident. In a way she said that she was surprised that he had not left sooner when his boss's attitude first came to light.

"You're not angry?" He questioned.

"Not angry, or surprised." She answered matter of factly.

David let out a breath. "Well that was easy."

"I never liked the b*tch from the first moment I met her."

David was a little taken back by her direct response. Denise had been prior service, that's where they met, but she was always very much the lady. A tough lady, but a lady none-the-less! When she did on very rare occasions

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

swear like a bos'n it meant that she really, really didn't like someone or something. This was one of those occasions.

David began the morning rounds of the McMillan compound, or their Hacienda as Denise liked to refer to it. It was their new little piece of heaven. There had been another piece of land he had scouted out and purchased about midway through his military career with an eye towards building on it after he retired. But that had been well before he had met Denise, and well before what had once been a small community had suddenly sprouted up to become a moderately sized city with all the rules, regulations, noise and hassles that goes with sudden growth that one could imagine. That small piece of country property had been consumed by suburban sprawl and David wanted nothing at all to do with it any more. They made a fair amount from the sale, but taxes, fees and the like had chewed up an equally fair amount of the profit they expected. Still it was enough for them to pay off the twenty acres they now lived on and had provided a small nest egg, enough to cover the initial costs of building their dream home.

Rather than one of the current Nuevo middle class custom designed stick-framed ranch houses found popping up in suburbs over most of the West, David and Denise opted for the older style design that mimicked a Spanish courtyard adobe home. The compound appeared as nothing more than a large old world enclosure of rock and adobe architecture. To the average person it looked like an Old Spanish mission style building; to the trained eye looking for means of ingress it was a formidable fortress! With the additional assistance from neighbors and friends, and using simple slip-form construction methods for the walls with timber frame support the structure was easy to erect and secure, strong, and cozy.

The slip-form method of construction was made popular by Helen and Scott Nearing, who were often thought of as the grandparents of the back-to-the-land movement of the '70s. Using this simple method they built two homesteads pretty much by themselves. David followed the guidelines of more recent builders such as Karl and Sue Schwenke's in their book "Build Your Own Stone House" and Charles Mc Raven's Building with Stone. Most of the rock used in the walls and house David had gathered after work each day. He stopped for an hour along the riverbed and filled the bed of his pick up with river rock and then spent another half hour or so of sorting the rock out when he got home. After a year of this he had more than enough material to begin building.

He spent the first summer off building the main house. Weather permitting through the next winter he spent most weekends working on the courtyard walls. By the end of his third summer he had completed his main shop, the garage, a small barn, the greenhouse and walled kitchen garden, all in stone. The main structures were complete and the entire homestead mortgage free after just five years of hard sweat equity.

Instead of the politically incorrect barbed or concertina wire around the perimeter of the property they had planted a mixture of Thorny Pyracantha (also known as Fire Thorn Bush), Catclaw Acacia, Jumping Chollas and Prickly Pears along an old barbed wire fence that outlined the original twenty-acre site. Hedgerows of these plants were enticed to grow thick and interlaced and had over a short time created an all but impassable barrier that kept their few livestock critters in and any four legged and two legged would be intruders out.

Their kitchen garden was surrounded by a six-foot stonewall that was more than adequate protection against the wild creatures and cold winter winds of the region. The lean-to greenhouse was situated against the southern wall of the enclosure and protected as it was, insured healthy green veggies through out the winter. The small solid barn provided safe and comfortable housing for their livestock that consisted of a pair of milk goats, and a

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

hand full of chickens. David had begun construction of a raised concrete deck hog pen that would provide a home to several feeder pigs and was working on improving the small pastures on their limited acreage in the hopes that some day in the future they will be able to keep a head or two of beef cattle.

He could hear her behind him as she readied for work. David gave his wife a hug and walked her out to the pickup. She would be out on rounds for the better part of the day. Denise had completed her nursing degree shortly after they had been married. Here in the sticks she worked for the country health office providing an extended care health program to the rural folks of this rough region. Trained as an EMT while in the service she also doubled as a Paramedic for the local volunteer fire department. Their involvement with the local emergency services and the high school where he had briefly taught, had helped them become an integral part of the community in the very short time that they had lived there.

“How’s your day looking?” David asked, as he handed her the medical bag.

“Oh, not too bad I suppose.” She answered as she stepped up into the cab. “I’ve got to swing out over by the old man Johnson’s place and check his blood pressure again. Plus a couple of wound checks, giving school shots out near Cedars Crossing, and then I need to drop by Mrs. Appletree’s and make sure she’s watching her blood sugar like the doctor wanted. Plus a few other side trips and then I’ll be in the clinic for the rest of the day.”

“Sounds like that IS your day, out just running around the back hills.”

“Oh, and then there’s the new paperwork the state wants completed to justify our clinic’s existence . . . I hate bureaucrats!”

“Well hon, don’t have too much fun today.”

She scowled at him. “An just what is my unemployed husband up to today?”

“I wish! I’m hardly unemployed, I’ve just been demoted in pay.” He leaned through the window and gave her a peck on her cheek. “Got classes today out at the community school. Have to muck out the barn first. Then it’s off to educate young minds.”

When word got around about his leaving the high school and in a small town such things get around rather quickly, David sudden found many doors opening up for him. In this rural region at the extreme Northern end of the Republik of Kalifornia a good many people had pulled their children from the ever-increasing liberal school system. There were now more students being home schooled and community schooled (home-schoolers that had banded together) than were in the public school system. As much as the state education administrators and political bureaucrats had tried to stop this trend from spreading and regardless of the new public school attendance requirements passed at the state level, they were just too far out in the sticks to force the issue. It also helped to have the sheriff’s own kids being home schooled; such was the growing hatred for the P.C. brigades requirements in the school system.

David had another hour yet to finish up his morning chores and get ready to teach his new students. He chuckled as he worked his rounds, feeding the chickens, gathering up the morning eggs, and checking on the other creatures that now inhabited their growing homestead. Here he was living in the twenty first century mucking

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

out the stalls of barn animals before breakfast and teaching in a one-room schoolhouse almost like Little House on the Prairie.

Shortly after leaving the public school system David had been invited to teach the History and Government classes at a little known rural private school. Several parents had banded together to form the small school and took turns covering the various topics their children needed. David didn't mind the fact that he didn't receive a salary for his work. The assistance he and Denise had received in building their own home and out buildings, along with the starter pigs he would be housing soon, the small flock of Rhode Island Reds, and the pair of milch goats that now supplied them with fresh milk and cheese were all in lieu of regular pay and considerably more valuable in his eye. For the first time in as long as David could remember they were actually part of a community, a real community in every sense of the word.

The final straw for most of the locals came when the high school's Senior Educational Director Ms. Torgelson announced, the formation of the student Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Club starting on campus. David had missed the brewha-ha directly as he was no longer staff at the school, but still received calls from many parents concerned over the insanity of this new development and sought his opinion as to how they should handle this situation. While he hadn't directly instructed the worried parents to boycott the school, he had pointed out that generally money talked and bull-sh*t walked. David did inform the parents that schools received a large portion of their operating expenses based on the "DAILY" attendance records. No students, no pay. It didn't take long for the school attendance personnel to notice a significant epidemic in the making.

Every time Torgelson heard a reference to David the veins in her neck grew bigger and redder. When she had discovered that David was teaching in a now illegal and unauthorized school she had managed to have his teaching credential invalidated. She had even gone to the trouble of having him served with a cease and desist order. Of course David and the other families totally ignored the order and continued on with what they viewed as their personal business alone. As the issue heated up more students dropped out of the local public school system thus increasing the conflict between the parents and the state educational system. Funding of public schools began to seriously dry up as a result of the boycott. With fewer and fewer students using the public system some local schools were facing closure due to lack of operating funds. It was only a matter of time until events reached a confrontational level and it was the state that blinked first.

David had just started his lecture on the Middle Ages describing the fall of the Imperial Roman system and the gradual growth of the feudal system of government when he noticed the several official looking vehicles driving up the dirt road. His attention was drawn to the school bus that followed the two sedans in the lead. This looked like trouble he thought to himself.

"Lisa, be a good girl and run up to the house and have your mother call up the neighbors will you?"

Little Lisa Bordan, a bright freckle faced eighth grader in the front row, glanced up from her book and looked out the window.

"Is there trouble coming Mr. McMillan?" She asked.

"Could be, run along and let your mother know . . . quickly now."

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Lisa put her work away and slipped out the back door and headed on a run towards the house a hundred or so yards up on the nearest hill. David knew for sure that it was trouble brewing when he recognized Senior Educational Director Ms. Torgelson getting out of the first sedan and leading several men in suits towards the front door of the schoolhouse.

“Students, “David said to them “its time for our evacuation drill . . . ready . . . set . . . GO!” There was a moments hesitation then complete pandemonium as the twenty-five students suddenly made for the back door and headed out into the field used for the playground. As one of the older students came past him, David caught his arm and whispered quickly to him.

“Tell Miss Thornton next door to get her students out of here. Take them into the woods and up to your dad’s place . . . quickly now, I’ll stall them as long as I can.”

Jacob nodded and disappeared out the door. Meanwhile David headed towards the front door. As he emerged from the schoolhouse Ms. Torgelson was leading the official looking men towards him.

“Detective Larson that,” She said pointing at David. “is David McMillan. He is in direct violation of a previous court order and this is an illegal school. All the children in there are to be removed and held by the Child Protective Services pending a court hearing as per the order issued this morning!”

“Whoa, just what is going on here.” David replied.

The one of two lead suits now standing just ten feet away from him said. “I’m sorry Mr. McMillan but I have a court order for your arrest in violation of the State Educational Code for teaching without a license, sedition, and for Child Endangerment.” The agent stepped forward. “Now if you’ll just come quietly we don’t want to upset the children.”

“What children are you referring to detective?”

“Did you hear me Detective Larson? “ Her strained voice rising as she repeated her orders again. ”I want him arrested and the children in that classroom placed in protective custody . . . NOW!”

“I heard you Miss, er, Ms. Torgelson . . . now if you’ll let me do my job please.” The Detective said as he started towards David.

“Mr. McMillan, you are under arrest, please turn around and place your hands on the wall.”

“No.” David answered.

“What?” The Detective hesitated, not expecting that sort of answer from the teacher.

“I believe the response was quite clear . . . NO, I will not turn around. NO, I will not place my hands on the wall, and NO, I will not submit to your invasion of my privacy.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

David knew it would only take a few minutes for Jacob and Miss Thornton to reach the tree line less than fifty yards away behind the school. If he could only keep them busy out in front of the building, by the time they did enter the classrooms the children would be long gone. Once in the woods Jacob and Miss Thornton would get them all away safely before the goons that Torgelson had brought with her could do anything about it. He just needed to keep them focused on him for a few minutes more.

“Mr. McMillan it would be in your best interest to cooperate with us.” The Detective said as he slowly moved forward.

“No.” David answered as he started to move to the side away from the detective. “I don’t think so.”

“Are you going to go quietly or are we going to have to do this the hard way?” The other detective asked in a tense voice as he moved to cut off his retreat.

David faked right and suddenly stepped back inside the door to the school. Slamming the door quickly he flipped the latch and set the heavy bolt, securely locking it against any intruders.

“Well that should hold them for a few minutes.” He thought. He could hear Torgelson pounding on the door and screaming at the officers. David crossed the room quickly and looked out the back door.

“Good, no sign of the kids, thank you Jacob!” He said to himself as he closed the door, not locking it. There was no need to now. David went over to his desk and began to square things away. It took them several more minutes to circle the building and figure out that there were indeed back doors to the two rooms that made up the school. Several very irritated detectives and one absolutely irate Senior Educational Director finally found the door and confronted David seated at his desk.

“Good morning gentlemen, how may I help you.” David said smugly.

David sat quietly in the back seat of the first sedan handcuffed and seat-belted in. Torgelson had nearly blown a gasket when he locked the door in her face and after the detectives had him hand cuffed and were leading him out of the school house she severely slapped him across the mouth. David just smiled at her defiantly as a small trickle of blood dribbled from the corner of his mouth.

“That will be enough of that Ms. Torgleson!”

The detective growled at her. They were just about to reach the main road when their path was suddenly blocked by a large farm truck. Coming around the blind corner the driver had to slam on the brakes to avoid broadsiding the truck and almost started a pile up from the following vehicles.

“What the hell!” The senior detective riding shotgun yelled out. He had just emerged from the car when he was suddenly confronted.

“That’s quite far enough there buddy.” Shouted a deep voice from the side of the road.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

The detective looked around startled. Suddenly a well-camouflaged form stepped out of the bushes at the side of the road. But what caught the immediate attention of the detective was the black AR leveled at his belly less than ten feet away. He could now make out at least a half a dozen camouflaged shapes just back of the tree line and each had a weapon pointed straight at him . . . "this was not good." He quickly thought to himself.

"Just keep your hands where I can see them detective and do exactly as I say and everyone will go home to supper tonight . . . understood?"

The detective froze and slowly nodded his head. The driver, his hand on his revolver, suddenly felt cold steel nudge against the back of his neck and a soft voice whispering through the open window.

"Best to keep both hands on the steering wheel . . . don't you think?"

David's door quickly opened and several more camouflaged shadows released him from his restraints and helped him out of the car. He could see Ms. Torgleson in the second car just furious with rage.

"Where had these saviors suddenly come from?" David wondered as the blocking truck suddenly fired up and began to pull out of the way.

"Officer's you had best be on your way now and don't bother Mr. McMillan again. This issue is over, drop it! And just for added consideration on this matter. I would like to emphasize that we know where your families are" He paused for effect. "all the time."

David stood numbly at the side of the road and watched the sedans and school bus disappear around the corner.

"I don't know who you gents are, but I really appreciate you getting me out of that mess." David walked over with his hand out to the first forest shadow that had stepped out to confront the detectives hauling him off to jail.

He pulled off the camo hood and David suddenly recognized his face!

"Sheriff Eckhart!" He paused in shock. "We'll I'll be damned!"

Eckhart took David's offered hand. "How did you think we pulled this together so quickly?" He motioned at the other figures emerging from the foliage. David was stunned!

"But aren't those your detectives that arrested me?"

"Nope, they're outsiders brought in by Torgelson, after we refused to get involved. After all, two of my kids go to your 'illegal' school, remember."

"Yeah, well . . . I'm still in shock over this whole thing."

"Well stand by for another shock there Chief . . . you've been drafted!"

“What?”

“Welcome to the Home Guard.”

Desert Doc

Chapter 18 - A Time To Sow

Eli Yoder climbed into the boxy black wagon, taking the reins into his callused hands and seating himself on the hard wooden seat. The meeting with the elders had not gone well. His farm was not the only one showing signs of this horrible . . . Eli hesitated. He hated to think it: Plague. That was what the elders thought it might be. A Plague. Mary’s inventory had not been that good of news. They had enough for the five of them for another few months, but it would be difficult times. The garden was supposed to supply much of their food, as well as provide enough to see them through the winter. The garden had looked worse with every hour that seemed to pass. The rate of deterioration had slowed, it seemed, lately. There were a few plants that looked untouched. The potatoes for instance, had briefly turned a yellowish-green, but seemed to be getting better. The tomatoes were also looking quite good, as was the apple tree. Much of what was left, well, Eli was not optimistic. The cattle or chickens showed no signs of distress. The grass was yellowing much like the rest of the plants, but it didn’t seem to be harming them to eat it.

As the wagon clattered down the back road, Eli thought of what he could do. The elders, while concerned with the spiritual implications had not been helpful in the here and now. It was no use having Jacob squirrel hunt to put up meat: Already he could see that there would not be enough hay to feed the cattle through the winter.

“Perhaps,” Eli thought, “I should put one or two down now. It would be a great amount for Mary to put up, but it would be better than wasting it.”

The trip home was not a long one, and mostly Eli thought about how to feed his family. It was true that his people did without electricity, automobiles and tractors, but they weren’t completely removed from society in the United States. He himself had been to Wal-Mart several times, the horse and black buggy looking anachronistic tied to a light pole in the parking lot. Some things were just more inexpensive to purchase than to make. As long as the elders approved it, there was no prohibition from buying food, hardware, or the like. The most significant problem was money. Farmer’s - especially Amish farmers - didn’t make that much money. Somewhere along the way, Eli decided a trip into the town was necessary. He would have to have Jacob do his best alone with chores, and he’d have to hurry to be able to make it back for prayer meeting. He would spend some of his meager savings to buy some food for wintering over. His bad feeling about the crops continued to grow as he drove past the fields, much of which belonged to the English farmers. It was mostly brown as well. Often the English did better with crops because they could afford to irrigate and fertilize and spray pesticides. Eli just planted what he could extra to make up for what the bugs ate, and what didn’t grow so well.

As he rounded the final corner closest to home, he noticed many cars at the home of his neighbor, Mr. Thompson. Mr. Thompson was an English farmer, but got out of the dairy end of things to cash crop. He grew hay and soybeans, neither of which looked very good. The Browns had gotten Mr. Thompson’s crops just like everyone else. Their house was a large farmhouse, with a tumbledown barn and a large pole shed housing a large combine

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

and tractor. Mr. Thompson had driven Eli and Mary into town when Jacob's delivery was not going well. He had also relayed emergency telephone messages twice in the past 20 years. Eli reckoned that he knew Mr. Thompson better than any of the other English. His children had all grown and moved away, and now it was just Mr. Thompson and his wife, Trudi.

As he drew closer to the Thompson farm, he saw the white haired form of Mr. Thompson come out the front porch, screen door creaking and banging shut behind him. He made for the road where Eli was going to pass, and waved Eli to stop.

"Whoa, girl." Said Eli as he brought the wagon to a stop and waited for the elderly man to cover the 50 yards or so to where Eli waited. Soon the he walked up to Eli's wagon and greeted him.

"Hello Mr. Yoder. Thank you for stopping to talk to me." He said

"Hello Mr. Thompson. You are looking well today, although I fear our crops are not." Responded Eli as he looked once again at the Brown that had infested the surrounding fields.

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about, Eli. I don't know how much news you get, but this isn't just a bad year. The whole country is seeing this. There is also a disease, mostly in the cities, that is killing hundreds of thousands of people. Millions more are sick." Mr. Thompson broke eye contact with Eli and looked at the ground. "They say . . ." He cleared his throat. "They say it's some kind of germ attack."

"We want none of your wars." Said Eli reflexively. It was habit. Their religion taught strict pacifism. They were immune from the draft.

Mr. Thompson looked him in the eyes again. "I can understand that, Eli. I'm not real happy 'bout wars myself. But people who didn't care what we wanted did this. The governments got people trying to figure all this out, but I reckon they've got their hands full, with the crops mostly dying. And all them people dying . . . The point is, Eli, that me and Trudi's cupboard is a bit bare. Especially since this whole thing has scared the Hel . . . everybody near to death and my kids come home and brung the grandkids. I got nine more mouths to feed all of a sudden. Trudi's got some preserves, and some green beans and such left from last year, but it's not gonna last eleven people very long.

"I seen the government in action plenty from farming, and I don't 'spect much help from them. So I figure we can do a little horse tradin', so to speak."

Eli felt uncomfortable. It was difficult to grasp that people would want to harm him. He had harmed no one. Why did they want him to starve to death? What had he done? His mind continued to reel. It wasn't just there. It was the whole country. Everyone would be scared and hungry soon, and they were well on their way to both already. He didn't know how the English lived exactly, but he suspected that most of them didn't put up nearly the food that his people did. Right now, that didn't even seem like much. And the dead. A disease, a plague. The work of Satan and evil men. Could this be the start of the end times? The bible said that . . .

"Eli?"

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Startled from his thoughts, Eli looked again at Mr. Thompson. “Yes?”

“About the horse trading?” Mr. Thompson looked a little distracted himself.

“What’s your bargain?” Asked Eli.

“Well, I know you have about 18 head of dairy cattle. I haven’t been up to your place, but I’m betting you don’t have much hay left. From last year.” He looked around at his fields. “Doesn’t look like either of us will get much put up this year. I have a few of the large round bales left from last year. They were sealed in the plastic, so they should still be purt-near fresh. I can give you three or four for two cows.”

Eli thought hard. Normally this would be preposterous. Hay was cheap. A 1,500 pound bale like Mr. Thompson’s ran close to \$15. On the other hand, He was right: Eli didn’t have much hay in the loft. Figure about 100 pounds of feed per cow per day . . . Unless something changed, they would be eating a great amount of beef.

“Mr. Thompson, how many bales do you have?”

“ I just counted: I have six bales in the plastic, and another four that were just covered with a tarp. Some of the outer inch or two is rotten, but I got maybe 95% of it’s good.” Mr. Thompson replied

“Mr. Thompson, I’ll give you four cows for four of your plastic wrapped bales, plus two of the rotten ones.” Said Eli. It was a good bargain for neither of them, but this was about the best for both of them. Mr. Thompson couldn’t eat his hay, and his own cows desperately needed it.

“Well, in better times, that would be robbing you, but I ‘spect these aren’t regular times. In fact, I’m askin you if you have any of Mary’s preserves that you could throw in to sweeten the deal, so to speak?”

“We don’t have much left, but I will see what I can find. Will a quart be enough?”

“That’d be just fine. I’ll have Roger bring the bales over with the tractor. Do you want them in the hay loft?” The Yoder’s barn had an earthen ramp leading up into the upper story of the barn.

Eli thought hard for a moment. “Yes, put all of the bales in plastic - you will leave them in plastic, won’t you - and the others in the loft, please.”

He picked up the reins and glanced up the road. “Have Roger bring some rope. He can lead the cows back to your barn with the tractor. Jacob will help. I have to go into town to buy some groceries.”

Mr. Thompson laughed out loud, his voice with a near-hysterical edge to it. “Eli, there are no groceries in town! Everybody went in and went crazy. There’s nothing left. The police had to come, and they shot some people. My son in law said someone shot at their car on the highway. It’s like everybody has gone crazy.” He looked around at the fields then back at the farmhouse, and swallowed several times and blinked rapidly. “I mean, you just sold me \$3600 worth of cow for \$90. It’s just lunacy.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGreyMan*

“Trust God, Mr. Thompson. He will guide you, if you let him. I suggest you pray. I will be.” Eli flicked the reins and the horse clop-clop-clopped down the road. Mr. Thompson turned to walk back to the house when Eli had a sudden thought. He stopped the buggy raised his voice.

“Mr. Thompson, please have Roger block our driveway with two of the rotten bales. Between those and the stands of trees, we may discourage visitors.” He seated himself once again and started the horse walking.

Mr. Thompson slowly nodded and walked toward the house.

Upon Eli’s return, He found Jacob in the barn, playing with the kittens.

“There are some things I need you to do, Jacob. I don’t have time to explain. I want you to put a quarter of Mama’s food in a few plastic bags. Take a shovel and go into the woods and bury it a foot deep. Hide it well, but don’t forget where you hid it. Then I want you to walk to the pond and dig up as many cattail roots as you can. Hang half in the barn to dry, and give half to Mama to can.” Eli said.

“ I have to go talk to Mama,” Eli smiled at his son. “Come, let us pray, then get started.”

AGreyMan

Chapter 19 - A Friend in need . . .

Andy didn’t hear the knock the first time, as he was intent on the voices and static emanating from the radio. An Icom IC-706MKII ham radio, it was a radio capable of receiving a broad portion of the electromagnetic spectrum: From the local AM/FM radio stations to the “short-wave” broadcasts from overseas, as well as it’s primary function as a ham radio transceiver. He had a wire antenna strung through the tall pine trees on his property, which was “trapped”, meaning it would work fairly well on several frequency bands. The wire and the traps in the antenna were painted a pale green, gray and black. When he initially put it up, he had even hung a couple of plastic leaves from a dime store plastic plant from it. If you noticed it and really looked at it, it wasn’t really much of a camouflage job, but it was easy not to see with just a glance.

He was listening to a conversation between two hams in Elgin, Illinois and Key Biscayne, Florida. Andy had come in on the middle, but what he heard was enough. The Navy was preventing ships and boats from entering or leaving US territorial waters off Florida. The ham in Florida was a MARS/CAP radio operator, meaning he could and would relay messages for the military to civilian family members. He said he hadn’t received any traffic in that capacity. None. “Like them ships was holes in the water,” the guy had said. The ham in Elgin said the power was out there. Scanner traffic the ham had monitored said that the power station didn’t have enough staff to run the place because of the people who had died. He painted a horrific picture: In many places the dead were left on the streets and sidewalks, placed there by people trying to get the diseased people out of the area of the living. There had been no one to pick up the dead. Andy wondered how long it would be before the power went out for him.

The second knock was louder, more insistent. Andy jumped up from the seat and took the stairs up two at a time to the ground floor. He felt his CZ-75 pistol through his shirt for comfort. As he reached the top of the stairs, the

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

knock sounded again, and he could tell that it came from the back door, not the front. He placed his hand on the butt of the CZ and moved to the back door, obliquely peeking out the small window in the door. It was Max, and he looked like hell.

Andy quickly worked the locks on the door and flung the door open. “Jeezus, Max! What the hell happened?”

Max walked in, quickly looking around outside before he did so. “I’ll tell you all about it in a minute. Is Lisa here yet?”

“What? No, Lisa’s not here. What’s going on?” Andy looked confused. His best friend showed up at his back door in uniform pants and tee shirt, with his body armor vest hidden -albeit poorly- beneath a white tee shirt. Trails of mostly dried blood ran from a visible swelling on the back of Max’s head. Staining the collar of the shirt. Small scratches abounded on his face, and tiny squares of tempered safety glass were lodged in his hair and clothes. “Were you in an accident?”

“Yeah. A big, big accident.” Max sneered, remembering the voice of dispatch and the other voices on the radio. “Like I said, I’ll tell you all about it. First though, I am not here. Got it? Except for Lisa, no one is to know I am here. Now come on: I have to get out of sight, and I need you to patch me up. You set up downstairs?”

“Ever since this started getting hairy this morning. I have been getting some scary info on the radio.” Andy said as he re-locked the door and followed his friend down the stairs.

“I got some real scary info in person.” Max said as he reached up to pick a piece of glass from his close cropped hair. He stopped at the bottom of the stairs “All right, what’s the best way to go about this?”

“Well,” Andy said, “Turn around and let me look.”

After Max had turned next to one of the overhead lights, Andy remarked “Looks like you need some stitches to close that. Any chance the hospital’s taking non-emergent injuries?”

Max said, “Short answer: No. You’re all I got, buddy.”

“OK. Why don’t you just jump in the shower and clean up with regular soap and water. The big lac on the back of your head will probably open up again a little, but just put some pressure on it as soon as you get out of the shower. I’ll give you some 4X4s to put on there. I’ll go to your emergency box and get you a change of clothes. I’ll leave ‘em on the sink.”

Andy referred to the box of equipment that Max had stored at Andy’s place for contingencies like this. It contained a small amount of food, ammunition, a couple changes of clothing, copies of insurance papers/birth certificates/passports/vehicle titles, two hundred dollars in cash, boots, sleeping bags and two Smith and Wesson Model 66 .357 revolvers. This was not intended to be a long-term survival kit. It was an insurance policy in case of a house fire, a flood, a tornado or any other calamity that could befall a single home. There was a near identical box in Max’s house, belonging to Andy and Darcy. The notable difference being that Darcy had undergone thyroid surgery in her teens to remove a malfunctioning thyroid gland, and thus required synthetic thyroid hormone to function normally. Skipping a day or two, or even a week was not a large problem, but much more than

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

that and she would become more and more lethargic and muzzy-headed. In the event of a disaster, Darcy and Andy wanted to ensure a supply of Synthroid. Thus, there was a 3-month supply in the emergency box, as well as other emergency supplies at her parent's home and in-laws, and anywhere she went with any regularity. It had taken organization and a good calendar to make a rotation schedule for all of the medication. Insurance would only pay for a ongoing dose, so Darcy had explained her wish to have "emergency supplies" at various locations to her doctor, who was more than willing to write out the paper prescription. Darcy and Andy had paid for the extra medication out of pocket initially, but their rotation scheme kept all of the medication relatively fresh.

Andy put Max's clothes and the 4X4s in the bathroom, then went out into the family room to set up his equipment. Since Andy and Darcy didn't yet have a family, the room was used mostly for hobbies. Andy's Icom 706 MKII was on a small desk in a corner, with some other electronic devices, such as an old laptop computer, a 24-hour clock, a small digital ham encoder called a TNC or Terminal Node Controller, and a notebook. A dusty television sat in the corner. There was a sofa sleeper and two comfortable chairs and an apartment-sized refrigerator rounding out the furnishings. There were several shelving units in a small room off the main family room. One of these was filled with Andy's recent purchases of freeze-dried beef, but also contained staples such as 5-gallon pails filled with rice, wheat, potatoes and dehydrated vegetables. Another shelf contained various gravy mixes and other spices and flavorings. Andy went to the shelf containing his medical supplies. Some were items wrapped in intact sterile packaging that nonetheless had expiration dates, causing the ERs or EMS stockers to set them out for disposal. Andy didn't feel too bad about pocketing a couple items such as this. Some other items weighed a little more heavily on his conscience. Some items he was able to order right through the mail. He had ordered IV fluids, IV tubing and IV needles through "Dixie EMS Supply" with no questions asked.

Andy located the supplies that he needed: A 10cc syringe, and 18gauge and a 27 gauge needle, a small bottle of "Shur-Cleanse" surgical soap, a 60cc syringe, a small bottle of "Betadine," and a small disposable skin stapler, and a pair of forceps. Back in the family room, he retrieved a small bottle of 1% Lidocaine from the 'fridge. It really didn't need to be kept cool, but like most medications, if kept cool, it was effective longer before getting "old." From the desk with his radio and laptop, and removed a flashlight with a headband. By this time Max had come out of the shower, holding the pack of 4X4s to the now reopened wound.

"You all set?" queried Andy.

"Yeah, where do you want me?" replied Max

"Just sit here in the chair. I'll pull up a chair behind you." said Andy.

Max sat in the chair and Andy put the supplies on a TV tray covered with a clean pillowcase.

Andy said "Why don't you tell me what the hell is going on while I do this?"

Max complied and began telling the story of how the day had progressed. As he listened, and set to his task. He donned a pair of gloves out of habit, then removed the sterile cap from the 10cc syringe, affixing the large 18gauge needle to it. Holding the syringe between his fingers, he then removed the sterile cap from the Lidocaine bottle, exposing the rubber stopper beneath. He used an alcohol swab to wipe the stopper, then inverted the bottle with one hand and pierced the stopper with the needle and syringe in the other. He pulled back on the

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

plunger, filling the syringe then removing the needle from the bottle. After tapping the air to the top of the needle and expelling it, he removed the 18gauge needle and attached the 27gauge. The 27gauge was referred to by some as a “dental needle” as it was what many dentists used to instill the numbing agent into the mouth. Andy needed the same qualities the dentists did: A thin, long and tough needle to go into the tissues and instill dollops of the numbing agent. He warned Max, then began to inject into the edges of the wound. When he could, he placed the needle nearly parallel to the surface of the skin, and slid the needle all the way in, parallel to the wound edges, then instilled the Lidocaine as he slowly withdrew the needle. In other places, such as in the walls of the wound itself, he merely punctured the wall of the wound every inch or so and instilled a cc. When he was satisfied that the area was quite numb, he probed gently with a gloved finger. No glass that he could feel, and no skull fracture that he could tell, either. He wished he had a sterile glove to go poking around his best friend’s scalp, but he didn’t. Andy then poured the Shur-Cleanse into one of his wife’s Pyrex glass 2 cup measuring cups, along with some water he ran through the drinking water filter attached to his tap. He filled the 60cc syringe with the soap and water solution, held Max’s bath towel wadded up near the wound, and blasted the soapy water into the wound. A doc Andy had worked with always used the mantra: “The solution to pollution is dilution.” After he was certain he had flushed the wound thoroughly, he used the forceps to pull the edges of the wound together and secure them with the stapler. The head was a favorite spot to use the stapler, as the wounds could only be so deep, and most any scarring was concealed by hair. Andy and Max had watched on innumerable occasions when a doc in the ER had quickly stapled up a belligerent drunk on the way to jail. Andy wasn’t that fast, and had to remove a couple staples that he misplaced or didn’t get quite right, but Max was both numb and distracted by telling his story, and didn’t notice. After he had finished, Andy squirted some Neosporin on the wound and spread it around with a Q-tip. He made it his business to know about his friend’s medical history, and knew it had been just last year that he had updated his tetanus immunization. Head wounds generally didn’t require a bandage, so when he was done, he simply pulled his chair around to the front of Max and listened to him finish his story with rising apprehension and worry.

“Jesus, Max! You think they might look for you here?” Asked Andy with an unconscious glance, as if seeing through the wall and soil into the driveway.

“I doubt it, now that I’ve calmed down a little. I bet they can’t afford the manpower to chase down everybody who slipped away. Not yet, at least. Once they secure Mercy and get their ducks in a row, they’ll be able to spare people to go after people. With any luck, they’ll have their hands full with the others first. I plan to be off their radar screen.” Replied Max

“Well, what we really need to do is figure out what to do about the plague. Lisa is already on her way over here, and Darcy should be home any second. Darcy’s and I have been off for a few days, and I don’t think we have been in real close contact with anybody . . . except now you.” His voice trailed off as he looked at his friend.

“I haven’t exactly been isolated.” Max said, with a nagging feeling of guilt. He prayed to God that he hadn’t just killed his friend. “But nobody that I was close to showed any signs of being sick.”

“We’ll just have to see. Too late to do anything new about it now. You took a shower. Maybe that helped. I’ll go spray down the bathroom with a 10:1 water to bleach solution. Maybe that’ll do some good, too. I’ll feel better when the girls get here.” Andy looked thoughtful and worried at the same time. “Listen, why don’t you take a nap and I’ll go upstairs to wait for Lisa and Darcy.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“What if you’re infected, too. What if I gave it to you? What happens when the girls get here? Will I give it to them too?” Max asked what was in both their thoughts.

“Buddy,” Andy said, “Here’s what I think. I think we won’t be able to keep the girls out of this house. IF you are infected, and IF you gave it to me, it’s already in the air. It’s already upstairs, so having them stay upstairs until we are sure we don’t have it won’t even work. With those two options out, there’s not much left. Hell, we don’t even know for sure HOW it’s transmitted. Just before you got here, the scanner was saying something about a mob at the Foodmart. Things will get worse when somebody sees what’s happening at Mercy.”

"The girls can't be out in that alone. They won't go, and I won't make them. So you see, my friend . . ." he said as he rose and walked to the stairs, "We'll all hang together, or we'll surely hang separately. Get some sleep. I'll wake you if anything you can help with happens."

Andy turned and walked up the stairs.

AGrayMan

Chapter 20 - Live by the Sword . . .

Mark was really concerned about the fuel gauge now. It was as low as he had ever seen it. After his nocturnal escape from the grid locked interstate, he had followed the gravel country road for miles, roughly paralleling the interstate. The more he considered this course of action, the less sense it made. If things were indeed getting worse, the closer he was to large populations of displaced people, the worse things could be expected to be. There would be spillover from the interstate, most on foot, but some in vehicles.

Like the locusts of the biblical plagues, they would descend on the small farming, vacation and rural communities and drain them dry. Even without force of arms, the sheer numbers of humans would overwhelm the residents of the communities. The farm families were mostly the “Christian” sorts, and most would do their best to help their unfortunate visitors, not realizing the sheer numbers of hungry, greedy mouths until it was too late to do anything about it. Gasoline would be the first item to go, then diesel and food. Water would probably not be a problem initially as most small communities and homes had wells. That is, until the power went out. Then the efficient 220V well pumps would refuse to lift the water from the depths of the well - about 80 feet in this area - to the surface. There were surface sources of water, such as streams and ponds, but the other edge of the double-edged sword of rural life was that many of these sources contained agricultural runoff. Everything from manure to fertilizer could be found in varying amounts in the ponds and streams. The swarms of the thirsty would care little of the dangers when a source of clean, pure water was not readily available. Some would no doubt not venture far from the water source to relieve themselves, potentially causing further contamination of the surface water.

Mark’s greatest advantage was that he was - as far as he knew - ahead of the pack. He may still be able to purchase some gasoline. Still far from home, he would need at least another tank full before he made it to his Mom’s place. With the winding county highways and back roads that he intended to stick to, it was quite possible he would need more than that. He had considered the problem of fuel early on. He considered caching fuel along his route, but several problems arose. First, the relative instability of gasoline, even with the special

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

chemicals added, it was unlikely it would be much good after a couple years. Second, the problem of where to stash it. Although he looked carefully along his route to his Mom's, he could think of no place that was safe to dig a hole unobserved, drop in two or three 5 gallon cans, and cover them back up. Much less be able to recover them and fuel his vehicle without interruption. Thirdly, his present situation made the possibility of caching fuel a moot point. What if his cache had been another five miles up the interstate? Fat chance he could have gotten to it with the conditions back there on the concrete slab. He had considered having a welding shop mount a spare tire carrier/gas can carrier on the back, just like the "safari SUVs" but it would stick out like a sore thumb, plus be pretty expensive as well. Another option had been to find a fuel tank that was larger to replace the present tank on the Eagle, but it wasn't really a hot aftermarket-type vehicle, and he came up dry. The best he could think to do was to purchase three of the one gallon "Spare Tank" gasoline substitutes. Supposedly derived from gasoline and non-volatile, these one-gallon plastic jugs were marketed to be able to sit in your trunk until you ran out of gasoline, be poured in the fuel tank, and then drive to the nearest gas station. A drawback was that in order to make the stuff safe enough to ride around in the trunk, they had removed a lot of the "light ends" of the fuel, and thus, it had to be quickly poured into the tank after the car had sputtered to a halt. The hot cylinders helped to raise the fuel to a combustible temperature. The label said it wouldn't work in cold engines. Another drawback was the cost: Nearly \$15 a gallon container. Mark decided that this was as good of a time as any to use the stuff. Leaving the Eagle running, he stepped out of the car and opened the trunk.

The morning sun was still low in the sky; it's golden rays peeking over the horizon, holding the promise of a beautiful morning. Mark felt as if this might all be a bad dream: The interstate blockage, his subsequent escape . . . how could this be the end of the American Empire? So it was a little traffic jam. Big deal. What was so bad about that? The reality of the situation began to intrude on his sleep-deprived wishful thinking. The Plague. The Brown. Napalm. Troops. The dead. Oh, God.

He tiredly unscrewed the cap on the "spare tank" jug and began to pour. After the third and final gallon was sent down the filler neck into the tank, Mark put the empty jugs in the trunk. As he turned, he noticed a dust cloud rapidly approaching from behind his car. Mark kept an eye on the approaching vehicle as it roared closer. He stepped around the Eagle to keep it between himself and the oncoming vehicle, now recognized as a truck. The brown, battered Ford F-150 driver slammed on the brakes and fishtailed wildly in the gravel of the road. A cloud of dust rose, obscuring the truck for a few moments. The driver had pulled in front of the Eagle, blocking its path directly forward. Mark's tiredness evaporated as he felt the grip of the Glock under his shirt. His heart hammered in his chest as he heard a loud yell from the truck, with the sound of at least one door creaking open. A young man in a tank-top tee shirt strode out of the dust cloud, holding a large revolver. In brief instant Mark took in numerous tattoos on the man's chest, and a cruel set to his face. As soon as he saw Mark, he raised the revolver quickly and touched off a shot. Mark turned his flinch into a dive to the ground behind the Eagle.

"It's the end of the world motherf*cker, and your gonna miss it!" The man yelled.

Another loud yell erupted from his throat, echoed a second later by another voice. Some small part of Mark guessed that this was the driver, second out of the vehicle because he had to take the time to put the truck into "park." Mark pulled the Glock 17 from his waistband. The man with the revolver had not slowed his advance, and rounded the corner of the Eagle in a moment and loosed another round from a distance of nearly ten feet. Mark lay on the gravel and was slow to bring up the Glock. He was dog-tired, and had just underwent a semi-controlled fall to a gravel road, but within an instant he had lined the Glock's sights up on the still-advancing man's chest, and pulled the trigger. The pistol bucked repeatedly in Mark's hand. He kept pumping rounds into

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

the man until he saw him stumble and turn around to begin to run. He suddenly fell to the ground, and began to scream.

He heard the crunch of the other man's footsteps on the gravel, coming around the other side of the car. Mark spun around to be in a position to face the other man as he rounded the car's back end. From his position semi-laying on the ground alongside the car, he could see a sliver of the man's chest through the side and rear windows of the car. He lined up the sights exactly where he expected the man's chest to appear. It was not actually that hard: Mark saw the barrel of a shotgun first, still pointed at an angle away from him. The man's position beside the car wouldn't allow him to bring the shotgun parallel to the side of the car until he himself was completely exposed. Additionally, he was pointing the shotgun parallel to the ground at waist-high level. He would have to depress the muzzle nearly a foot to be able to aim directly at Mark. Mark didn't give him the chance. Once again, he squeezed the trigger repeatedly while attempting to keep the sights on the man's center of mass. One of the rounds must have struck the shotgun, as it leaped from the man's hands as if by magic, dropping pieces of metal and wood along its path. The man turned and half ran/half staggered to the truck. Mark did not follow; content to be out of harm's way for the moment. He heard the truck's door creak slowly open, then the sound of something soft falling to the ground.

Mark listened to the relative quiet for a moment. The first man he had shot had stopped screaming, and was instead making wet, fast breathing noises. Mark turned to look at him; suddenly remembering the man may still have a revolver in his hand. Listening for the man by the truck, he trained the Glock on the crumpled form several feet away. He got to his knees and began to walk on them in a hunched posture, head below the line of sight from the pickup, keeping the front of his still-idling car as much as possible between him and the truck. The closer he went toward the front of the car, the more difficult this became. He risked taking his eyes from the form in front of him and glanced toward the pickup truck. No further sound issued from the truck. At least as far as he could tell: He was very nearly alongside the idling engine. The man on the ground in front of him hadn't moved. He could see the revolver some 12 inches from the man's hand. He lay down on his belly and looked under the Eagle's engine to where the truck was parked. He could see the other man sprawled on the ground on the far side of the truck. He was moving slightly. That one was alive for sure . . . but did he have another gun?

Mark lay on the ground, gun trained on the man closest to him, roughly eighteen inches from the muzzle of Mark's Glock to the man's shoe. His orange, plastic shoe. Mark looked at the man more closely. He could see a crude tattoo in gothic script on the man's muscular forearm. "AWB" it read. There was a tattoo of a spider web around the point of his elbow.

"Christ," thought Mark. "That explains part of this: That guy looks like a con." He waited fifteen long minutes. Time was on his side. He knew he had got some hits on these guys. He also knew that a bullet kills four ways. One was disruption of the central nervous system. That meant a brain or high neck hit: The second way a bullet killed was blood loss. Quickly as in a heart or aorta hit, or slow as in an arm or leg artery. The third way was to cause a collapse of the lung, or filling of the lung with blood. Suffocation, in effect. Lastly there was infection, like a gut shot. He was willing to wait for the first three bullet effects, but not the last.

After the end of fifteen minutes, the shakes had set in. Fifteen minutes of re-living what had just happened. Fifteen minutes of knowing he had probably killed two people. Fifteen minutes of hoping their buddies wouldn't come along. Fifteen minutes of wishing he hadn't left his spare magazine in the car. Fifteen minutes of wonder-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

ing what the cops would do to him. Fifteen minutes of fearing there were no more cops. Fifteen minutes of wondering what to do next.

Finally, he could stand it no longer. He stretched out with the Glock and struck the man in front of him hard on the ankle with the barrel. There was no response. He glanced again at the form beside the truck that had not moved a great deal in the past fifteen minutes, and then stood, the Glock trained on the man in front of him. He stepped quickly to the revolver and kicked it away. He then kicked the man hard in the ribs. There was still no response. From above, he could tell that he had struck the man several times in the chest and abdomen. Several nine millimeter Winchester Silvertip bullets had penetrated through the man's body and exited the tee shirt's back. He counted four bloodstained holes. With a foot, he rolled the man over. His eyes were open, but nearly opaque: They had not been kept moist by blinking so the corneas were already drying out.

Mark advanced toward the truck, trying to keep the bulk of the engine between him and the last place he saw the form on the ground. He began to "slice the pie." Proceeding around the corner of the truck slowly, keeping the Glock aimed at each new portion of ground behind the truck that came into view as he slowly walked in a sideways manner. He was aware that the figure laying on the ground could see his feet and ankles approach if he was looking in that direction, and shoot at them if he had a gun. He became aware of the man's rapid, shallow breathing at nearly the same time the man finally came into view. He lay on his back staring upward. Mark saw his hands were empty.

"Don't move," Mark screamed at him.

There was no response from the man. He was wearing a brown county jailer's uniform, though it was extremely ill fitting, dirty and bloodstained. Mark moved closer so he could see the man's face. It was white, except for the red froth that coated his lips and drooled down his chin. His eyes were closed, and he seemed to be moving his entire body in the act of drawing in air. Mark could see several bubbling holes in the man's chest. With great effort, the man opened his eyes, and after a few seconds forced his eyes to focus on Mark.

"What . . . you . . . want?" he gurgled.

"Why the f*ck did you shoot at me?" Mark screamed. The pent-up adrenaline, fear and rage burst forth.

"Escaped . . . end. . . world . . . strong . . . survive," he closed his eyes and swallowed slowly. A trace of a smile formed on his bloodstained lips. "We're . . . kings."

Mark could think of nothing to say, but kept his pistol trained on the man. In moments, Mark noticed longer and longer pauses between breaths. Within a minute, he had stopped breathing. Mark shakily walked back to his Eagle and sat heavily on the hood.

The shakes really began. He could barely hold the Glock, and tears began to stream down his face. Great heaving sobs wracked his body. Not for sorrow over the men he killed, but out of the incredible stress that was there and gone in the space of 20 minutes. He was a decent human, and decent humans in American society are not wired to kill. The Army had done it's best to change that programming, while still maintaining control. It did not want an army of sociopaths, after all, but it's a hard thing to erase. Mark began to retch from the adrenaline and other hormones that had been pumped into his body by the life or death struggle that had just ensued.

Another twenty minutes elapsed while Mark was gripped in the after-effects of his encounter. He had gone through this before in Somalia. He had waited until he got back to the barracks before succumbing to the emotional turmoil inside him.

It was easier this time.

AGreyMan

Chapter 21 - Render unto Caesar . . .

A lot had happened since that day Sheriff Eckert had pulled David's ash out of the frying pan and informed him that he had been drafted into the Home Guard - a local Patriot Militia group. Things would probably have heated up greatly over David's rescue if it had not been for everyone's attention suddenly being diverted by the nationwide plague outbreak. There was hardly a region of the country that was not affected in one way or another by either the sudden enormous loss of life, from a disease that no antibiotic could touch, or later by the even greater loss of personal liberty with a coast-to-coast as the blanket of martial law was dropped on the country via Presidential decree.

It had only been a matter of weeks after the shock of the plague had worn off that the food riots began. Transportation, manufacturing, and the retail infrastructure of the entire country slowly but inevitably ground to a halt from the huge vacancies left in the wake of the plague. Supermarkets that were normally stocked to overflowing with food and produce couldn't keep up with the demand when the stores stopped receiving shipments with the previous on-demand, just-in-time regularity. Shelves quickly became bare and finally empty as the surviving consumers raced to stock up on anything they could find. Even pet food quickly disappeared as all available food items became scarce.

The major municipalities hardest hit in the plague had lost, in many cases, over fifty percent of their maintenance staff and were struggling to keep the water running and lights on. Police protection in the cities and suburbs was practically non-existent and finally the President was forced to order up the National Guard and even Federal Military units were called up to maintain law and order. The inevitable clashes between hungry rioters and military finally lead to a suspension of civil rights.

That brought in the numerous alphabet agencies that had previously been restrained by the Constitution and the Bill of Rights not to mention numerous watchdog agencies. They suddenly found their shackles removed and under a plethora of Executive Orders that literally flew across the Presidents desk, they set out on their fervent mission to pacify the citizens of this stricken country, by any and all means necessary, and oh by the way, to find the perpetrators of the this heinous assault on the American people.

But the undertone was ominous as it echoed through the Democratic halls across the nation. Suddenly the Homeland Security Directors for each state began to assume more and more authority via the various Presidential decrees. Governors found their position usurped by these appointed lackeys from Washington and were helpless to reassert their proper elected authority under the new stream of laws. To say that this did not sit well with these professional politicians would be the understatement of the century. The in fighting at the state level only [made] the situation worse and the power of the federal government greater.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

BATF Agent McNeely was on a crusade. They had finally been given the authority to clean up his region once and for all. No newspapers, no ACLU, no media, the cuffs were finally off. He was now operating under direct orders of the President of the United States and the Senior Homeland Security Director. After the last several weeks of violent food riots in the big cities a strict curfew had been imposed across the nation. Movement was severely restricted, Civil Rights were suspended, and best of all . . . all gun owners had seventy-two hours to turn in their arsenals over to police authorities . . . without exceptions.

The seventy-two hours deadline had passed two days ago and now Agent McNeely had carte blanche to insure that the Presidents mandates would be fully complied with.

“And of course,” McNeely smiled to himself, “there was only one way to ensure that.”

SSgt Daniels stood ready with his squad listening to Agent McNeely from the Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms. He couldn't believe the orders they had just received. This was not what his last twelve years of military service had been working towards. It was bad enough when the unit he was assigned to was under the command of the UN during the mess over in the Balkans. But to be under control of a civilian federal agent here at home . . . was intolerable.

“Anyone resisting a search will be arrested, anyone resisting arrest will be shot! This is Martial Law soldiers, you are operating under direct orders from the President of the United States, your Commander in Chief.” He continued. “Our nation is under attack and we will root out ALL TRAITORS! Remember your oath soldiers, ALL ENEMIES FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC!” He paused to let that set in.

Daniels could feel the bile rising in his gut. “This guy is Fricken nuts.” He mumbled to himself.

Twenty minutes later the platoon under Agent McNeely's command had mounted up and was headed out to their first mission, to disarm a small town that was, “A hot bed of domestic terrorism.” As the BATF man had explained.

SSgt Daniels' squad as the others followed their orders as did the rest of the company of rangers as they hit the community like Nazi Storm Troopers. Years of MOUT (Military Operations in Urban Terrain) training paid off, in just minutes they completely surrounded and neutralized the town. Then with loud speakers all the citizens were ordered to stand to on the sidewalks in front of their houses as four-man search teams cleared and searched every home and business. Special assault teams, of which Daniels' squad was one, were assigned specific residences on the Agent's list. These “special cases” were documented individuals that had at some time in the past lawfully purchased firearms. It didn't matter if they said that they had complied with the current directives and turned in all their weapons, they were arrested anyway, their homes searched, and then they were loaded up to be taken away for further processing. This was not part of the orders as issued, but instead the orders given by the agents on the scene. Daniels was now becoming very, very concerned.

Twelve hours later the sweep was completed. In a community of over 15,000 American citizens they had arrested nearly a thousand. Yet had confiscated very few firearms. But the brutality of the agents and the soldiers in handling these scared civilians really bothered the SSgt. This was un-American, and uncalled for. These weren't domestic terrorists, these were just average people that went hunting as their fathers and their fathers-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

fathers before them had. This was a small community like he had grown up in: Hard working, God fearing and honest people. There was no reason for the insanity of the day. Daniels sat in the dark as the last light of the day faded over the far ridge with his squad as they cleaned their weapons.

“You know Staff” Began Corporal Tennyson “There is something just not right about this sh*t today.” He said softly, keeping his voice low.

The rest of the squad nodded in agreement. “Not right at all.” Came mumbled back in nearly a dozen different voices.

“Be careful there soldier.” Daniels cautioned. “Keep that sh*t to yourself, if one of those agents hears you, you’ll find yourself on the back of one of those trucks.”

“Is it true then Staff,” Private Myers asked. “That they arrested some of our own?”

“Yeah I heard . . . ”

“Can the talk and finish cleaning your weapons!” Daniels answered through gritted teeth. His squad knew the conversation was over and they went back to diligently cleaning their rifles.

It was around midnight as SSgt Daniels made the rounds of the LP/OP’s (Listening Posts/Observation Posts) on his perimeter. He didn’t really expect any trouble, but he wasn’t going to take any chances. He knew there had been a lot of people missing from the town today, unaccounted for, especially older boys and young men. He had watched the various Agents in charge of the Ranger Company run roughshod over those that had stayed behind especially the wives whose husband “were out of town on business”. It was all he could do not to cap one of those government stooges right then and there. But he had no desire to end up in Leavenworth for the rest of his life, yet he was not going to take much more of this cr*p and that was for sure.

At the edge of his squads zone of responsibility he saw a shadow approaching. He gave the sign and received the counter sign so he approached the vaporous form.

“Jack . . . how’s it going?” He asked First Squad’s Staff NCO.

“Totally sucks Danny boy . . . who’d have ever thought we’d be pulling this sh*t on our own . . . this totally sucks!”

“How are your boys taking it?”

“Not good . . . not good at all. You heard about Sousa’s squad didn’t you?”

“Not the details, just the scuttlebutt. They got relieved?”

“Relieved hell, they damn near got shot and were arrested.”

“What for?”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Seems they refused to arrest this pregnant women. Her husband was on the list and she wouldn’t cooperate . . . refused to answer questions or say a thing . . . a tough gal. Well that jack*ss Agent McNeely about had a kitty right there on the spot and pistol-whipped her! You know Sousa Man . . . he don’t take to that kind of stuff with women!”

“Whoa . . . the f*cker smacked a pregnant women . . . was he nuts?!”

“Must be . . . cause Sousa warned him not to do it again. When he did, Sousa dropped him with a butt-stroke right from infantry school. Laid the suit flat out!”

“Sh*t! Now he’s fucked!”

“You can say that! The suits ordered Sousa’s own squad to arrest him, they refused. The next thing they know Third Platoon has locked and loaded on them and they are being marched off to the stockade.”

“And the lady . . . was she alright?”

“Oh get this, after Sousa’s squad gets marched off under guard. That b*stard kicks her while she’s still on the ground and then walks off laughing . . . F*CKER WALKS OFF LAUGHING!”

“Jack we’ve got to get out of this operation . . . ”

Silence.

“Jack?”

“Yeah I know Man . . . I know.”

“So?”

“So what!?”

“Danny . . . I’ve got a wife and kid back on post . . . I can’t . . . just. Man you know what I mean! I don’t like this at all, but what will happen to them?” he paused looking around, in a hushed whisper he continued. “You know Danny you’re talking mutiny dude! That’s not a small bust! They hang you for that sh*t man.”

“I know, I know.” The two soldiers stood in the dark, wrapping it around them like a cloak. “I took an oath Jack, same as you. To protect and defend the Constitution . . . that doesn’t include this cr*p today.”

“But you have to follow the orders of the officers Danny, if you don’t they’ll fry you!”

“Jack dammit, do you remember your oath?”

Jack slowly shook his head.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Jeeze man you've forgotten it already!" Daniels leaned closer. **"I DO SOLEMNLY SWEAR (OR AFFIRM) THAT I WILL SUPPORT AND DEFEND THE CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES AGAINST ALL ENEMIES, FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC; THAT I WILL BEAR TRUE FAITH AND ALLEGIANCE TO THE SAME;** and that I will obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officer appointed over me, according to the regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. **SO HELP ME GOD."** they ask for that on every promotion board!"

"It's just words man, just words."

"Jack you are so wrong man, so wrong. It's why we're in this outfit, it's what we do and why. It's all right there in the oath man, our first obligation is to **DEFEND THE CONSTITUTION** and that includes the Bill of RIGHTS. It is not to defend an individual, or a party, or a group, but to defend the Constitution itself and we sure didn't do that today."

"But Neely said they were 'a hot bed of domestic terrorism'."

"Neely don't know d*ck! Did you see one shred of evidence of that today . . . huh? F*ck the only terrorism going on in that f*cking town today was from us!"

"But we've got to follow orders, man. You can't refuse to follow orders!" Jack countered.

"If they are illegal orders you can and it's right in the UCMJ (Uniform Code of Military Justice)! Listen to the oath Jack. **THAT I WILL BEAR TRUE FAITH AND ALLEGIANCE TO THE SAME.** Our allegiance and true faith as soldiers is not directed towards a person or a place but to an ideal, a cause, a higher order, it's to the Constitution, man."

"The second half puts is all into perspective: **"AND** {sort of - by the way - oh . . . as an after thought} I will obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to the regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. So as long as the President and the officers appointed over me operate in accordance with the first part of the oath and within the regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice I will obey them . . . if they don't . . . refer to the first sentence in the paragraph. **EVE- RYTHING** is balanced against our first duty Jack, it's balanced against the Constitution itself."

"To follow and serve a person is risky. They are fallible, they will fail to stay the course, they will f*ck up. It's that absolute power breeding absolute corruption garbage. But a dream, an ideal will and has stood the test of time. I will serve my God and the Constitution of the United States. All others . . . beware!"

There was a long pause as both soldiers thought about what had been said.

"Jack I'm not some fricken barracks lawyer, but I know right from wrong! And this sh*t is wrong . . . it f*cking wrong! Why do you think they replaced all our officers with these wanna be Agent jerk wads? Cause our officers would know this was wrong and we'd back them. Now we're out here f*cking over these people, **OUR PEOPLE** . . . Americans and doing these goons dirty work for them. F*cking government REMF's (Rear Echelon Mother Fuckers)."

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“But our orders come from the President himself, Danny, he’s THE commander in chief.”

“Yeah well, my first duty is to the Constitution, not the President. And if he gives me an illegal order . . . well . . . then I don’t have to obey it. Jack there is no way that what happened here today was legal. You know that and I know that.”

“We’re here to defend it against **ALL ENEMIES**, both those on foreign shores and here at home. Where ever they are! Whether those enemies wear foreign uniforms, towels wrapped around their heads or three piece suits and serve in Congress, or even sit in the White House. No one is allowed to violate the Constitution . . . no one. If you do, well then . . . you become my **ENEMY!** Period . . . it’s very simple.

Agent McNeely woke from a restful sleep just as the dawn was starting to fully light up the morning. He started to sit up but it felt as if his sleeping bag was caught on the military cot he was sleeping on. He pushed harder and heard a loud click and a strange “sprong” sound off to the left side of his cot. He quickly looked and saw something metallic spinning through the air away from him.

“Strange, what broke off the bed?” He thought, just before the reality of the spinning object flashed through his mind . . . **”HAND GRENADE!”**

The explosion echoed through the surrounding valleys reverberating against the heavy mists. The first explosion was quickly followed by several others in rapid succession. SSgt Daniels turned and looked back down the ridge to the bivouac area far off in the distance. Heavily laden combat troops humped past him intermixed with civilians from the town. The Civies knew the surrounding mountains and woods and where to live in them, the Rangers knew how to fight in them. Together they would become a team . . . an American team. SSgt Daniels gently and firmly grabbed a struggling older lady by the arm and helped her up the path as an entire town and nearly a full company of Rangers disappeared into the mountain mists.

*”I DO SOLEMNLY SWEAR THAT I WILL SUPPORT AND DEFEND THE CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES AGAINST ALL ENEMIES, FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC; THAT I WILL BEAR TRUE FAITH AND ALLEGIANCE TO THE SAME . . . **SO HELP ME GOD!**”*

Desert Doc

Chapter 22 - Apostate's Genesis

Eli paused in his work to watch the setting sun. Many days’ work had been done in all to few hours. Mary and Jacob were exhausted, as was he. All that could be done in such a short period had been done. Jacob had worked incredibly hard harvesting the cattails. He was very proud of his son, not just for the past few days, but for the sheer nature of the boy. Smart, hard working, quiet and contemplative, but with a ready smile he was always ready to lend a hand with the chores of others as well as his own. Eli’s heart swelled with pride (which was dis-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

couraged by his religion, but Eli couldn't suppress it all) when he looked across the fields and saw Jacob working. A fine boy, he was. Eli shook his head in sadness. He hoped Jacob would live to grow to be a fine man.

He turned to Jacob standing beside him. "You have done well, my son. Your hard work will help us to make it through these difficult times."

"Thank you, Papa. What is going to happen? When will the crops become green again?"

"I don't know Jacob. We must pray. Trust God and pray."

They were silent for a while, and Eli looked back out over the brown fields. Jacob, however, continued to stare at his father.

"Papa, why did you have that man put the hay in the middle of the road?"

"To help keep bad people away."

"Why would they come here?"

Eli sighed and looked back down at him. "Jacob, if what Mr. Thompson told me is true, there will be many hungry people. Not only our own people, but hungry English as well. Our God teaches us that violence is wrong and the English know this. If they become hungry enough, they will come here and take what we have."

Jacob furrowed his brow in thought. "But Papa, that might be like killing us, to take all our food. Why does God say we must let them do this?"

"God says that we may not harm another person. Our Justice is not in this world, but the next. The wicked will be punished, and the good rewarded. You want to be rewarded when you see God, don't you?" He asked.

"Why doesn't God reward the good people in this life, Papa?"

"Sometimes he does, Jacob. He gave me your good mother. He gave me you for a son. I think that is a fine reward."

"Oh Papa!" Said Jacob, blushing. He was happy that his father saw him as a reward from God, but was now very worried. His father only spoke of his affection this openly very rarely, usually after a funeral.

"Let's go inside and wash up for supper. Tonight we will see what miracles your mother can do with a sample of your cattails." Said Eli as he clapped Jacob on the shoulder and began for the house.

After supper, while preparing for bed, Jacob came to see his father. He had been thinking of the possible problem of intruders on his family's farm. Responsibility seemed to grow upon him, and he began to think of himself as someone who could help his father with these troubles. He had carefully eaten his whole share of the food his mother served, although the cattails weren't really that tasty - At least this recipe wasn't - while pondering the ways he could help keep his family safe.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

"Papa, why don't we use the hunting rifles to scare away the bad men?"

Eli deliberately lowered the Amish newspaper he was reading ("The Budget"), and looked at Jacob. "Come sit beside me, Jacob."

He said. "If you stood out in front of this house with your rifle, you might scare away the English." He allowed. "But what if they weren't scared? What if they guessed you were bluffing? Or what if they were so desperate that they didn't care if you were bluffing or not. Then you would have to stand aside, or you would have to shoot. If you shot, God would be very angry and disappointed. You would be banished to hell after your death, and shunned by all of us until you died. But what if they had rifles of their own? Then you would see God and be cast into hell much more quickly. No, Jacob. Violence is not the way.

"We can make it difficult for the bad men. You yourself have hidden some of our family's food. We have blocked our road with the hay. Tomorrow we will take paper and cardboard to cover the windows in the parlor, so no one can see our light. We will spread nails on the road at the end of the driveway. But we will not use the rifles.

"Go to sleep now, son. There is more work for us to do tomorrow."

"Good night, Papa." Said Jacob, though he was still troubled.

The new dawn brought more bad news. Mr. Thompson had walked from his farm to Eli's, on the pretense of trading for some more preserves. He brought a cardboard box full of quart Mason jars, and a box of unused lids. Eli was appreciative of the gesture, but the truth was, there was not that much additional food of any kind left to trade, save some cows. If Mary's calculations were accurate, they had barely enough to get them through the rest of the year. Hopefully the next spring would be a normal one. Mr. Thompson had told Eli to keep the jars on the condition that he trade him some food . . . any food for them. Eli found four small ornamental jars of Mary's preserves. They had originally been made for sale at the tourist shop near the interstate, but they had been inadvertently pushed back in the cupboard and forgotten. Eli reckoned that given the circumstances, three jars would be a more than generous trade.

"Eli," Mr. Thompson said, "I don't mind telling you that I'm concerned. I am more than concerned. I'm scared. Our power went out two days ago. We have some oil lamps that we have been using diesel in. Smoky and smelly, but it's light. Anyway, I was out on the front porch when I heard gunshots. Mickey Tollefsen came by on a horse and said that the Amberson place had been shot up. Both of 'em shot dead, took everything that wasn't nailed down: Kitchen ripped up somethin' terrible."

Mr. Thompson paused to collect his thoughts. The worry was visible on his face. "Me and Roger and Roger's oldest boy take shifts stayin' awake through the night. Far as I know, they ain't never caught the fellas that killed the Ambersons."

"That is indeed terrible news, Mr. Thompson. We shall pray for their souls."

"Yeah. I reckon you folks will be on the list soon enough."

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“What do you mean?” Asked Eli, trying to keep his voice calm.

“Well, what I mean is, well . . . that most people in these parts know you folks won’t shoot nobody. As soon as these fellers figure out that they ain’t going to get shot at when they go to Amish places, well . . . Seems like common sense that they’d start looking at you folks.”

Thompson had put into a few words what had been haunting Eli since this all began. He believed completely what the elders taught him and what he read in the Bible. But he couldn’t silence a tiny part of himself that cried for overt acts of self-preservation.

Later that evening, Eli awoke to a strange popping noise. As he became more fully awake, he realized that the sounds he was hearing were gunshots. He sat bolt upright in bed, and shook Mary awake.” Mary, quickly! Get the little ones and go into the woods! Take blankets Mary, but hurry!” He whispered to her. “And no lights!” Eli ran to Jacob’s room. He shook Jacob’s shoulder roughly, saying “Jacob, get dressed and meet me down on the porch. Something’s happening at the Thompson’s house, I think!”

When Jacob arrived on the steps of the porch a few minutes later, his father was already there, holding a bag with some bandages and ointments in it. There were still gunshots from the Thompson’s farm. Eli and Jacob began running across the fields, tripping and falling occasionally in the darkness, but continuing the distance. Presently, they could smell smoke and see an orange glow through the trees and coming over a gentle rise. They could also hear the screams. Eli had angled their approach so they would come up from behind the house, in a mostly wooded area. As they got closer, a horrible, devilish sight appeared before them. There were roughly eight men that he could see. Some were directly in front of him, between himself and the rear of the house. Others were around the front of the house. They were all hooting, screaming and laughing and some acted drunk. The terrible scene was lit by the machine shed and the tractor inside that burned with a dull, smoky flames. Occasionally, one of the men outside would fire a shot into a window then the lot of them would erupt with renewed laughter and cursing. But the Thompsons were not going down without a fight. Jacob could see at least one crumpled form on the ground. For a brief, irrational second he grieved for Mr. Thompson’s soul for having killed another person. Just then another shot rang out from the Thompson’s house. A man had foolishly (or drunkenly) silhouetted himself to the Thompsons inside, and had paid the ultimate price.

Two dark figures walked closer in the darkness close to where Eli and Jacob lay on the forest floor.

“This is taking too long.” Said one.

“Sheeit, man! We got all the time in the world. Ain’t no cops gonna come and save these a\$\$holes.” Replied the other.

“That’s not what I mean. We’ve already lost Drippy and Kent, and I think Tunks just went down. We stay here much longer, we gonna loose more men. We loose men we can’t take places. We can’t take places, we can’t eat.”

The second man turned to the other men in general and screamed “That’s ‘cause these motherf*ckers can’t shoot.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Listen, we’re in a no-win. Let’s just fire the place and move on. These farms never have as much as we think anyway.”

The first man sighed heavily. “F*ck it, man. We really needed this place. Nobody’s eaten since we got that couple two days ago.” His dark shape was still for a moment. Then he turned and shouted “Yo, Jamal! Light it up!” Whoops of joy pierced the night, as the order was passed and dark shadows bent to their task. Small, bright flames appeared in the darkness several places around the house, then one by one arced through the air to crash and blossom with a gout of flame against the side of the century-old farmhouse. Screams once again emanated from the structure as it became engulfed in flames. Jacob looked in horror at the tableau unfolding before him. He was fourteen years old. He had never seen a television. He had been raised in a culture where violence was abhorred and forbidden. His mind reeled from the wanton murder and destruction taking place yards in front of him. He felt his father shake beside him. From fear, from sadness, from loathing or disgust, he knew not. Jacob himself felt numb. It seemed all a horrible nightmare, from which he was certain to awake at any moment. Feeling detached, Jacob slowly turned his gaze back to the fiercely raging fire. Eli and Jacob were trapped: The men would surely hear them if they attempted to flee.

The men on the outside had apparently done this before: From cover, they began to fall silent, waiting for the occupants of the house. They did not have long to wait: The choking smoke and blistering heat quickly drove the Thompsons to desperation. The front door erupted and two men ran forth coughing and firing their hunting rifles in the general direction of the marauders, who in turn opened fire. Another man fired slow shots from the window of the house. Several seconds later, the ground-level cellar doors in the rear of the house flew open and several women and children ran directly toward Eli and Jacob. Unfortunately, the men who ordered the Molotov Cocktails thrown were standing in their way. One or two shots were fired at the fleeing forms, but it seemed as if once the marauders saw that those fleeing were not armed men, they ceased their firing, and instead began to chase after them, screaming in their gleeful rapine intent. The marauders quickly cut down the men in front. Even the man in the window had ceased firing. The marauders in the rear of the house quickly closed in on the women and children. One of the older women opened fire with a pistol, apparently hitting nothing, but drawing the fire of several marauders. The woman who fired and three others - including the two children - went down in the shooting. Two women remained, and were quickly set upon by the marauders. They were mere feet away from the horrified eyes of Eli and Jacob, who now had to remain absolutely still lest they be discovered. Rough grunts and coarse laughter mingled with screams of despair and pain that continued throughout the night. Jacob and Eli lay with their face in the forest duff praying for the pain of the others and praying that they were not discovered.

As dawn grew near, the men had mostly tired of their spoils, and the women’s screams had died to the occasional whimper. The men had produced bedrolls and lay down on the ground some distance away, occasionally waking and walking close to assault the women who had been tied to a stump. Eli’s fear grew as the sky lightened. The women were only tied fifteen feet from where they lay. In the dark, the black, plain Amish clothes had hidden them quite well. As it became lighter, the dark black of their clothes would stand out against the browns of the forest floor. Jacob had experienced the same thoughts. What he did about them was not expected. Jacob’s world had been shaken, nay destroyed by what he had witnessed. He silently cried all night, tears streaming down his cheeks beseeching God for answers, asking “Why, why, why?” He could not be certain that God answered, but his panic and fear were suddenly swept away. His mind had a sudden clarity that surprised and disturbed him.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Without a word to his father, Jacob suddenly stood and strode as quickly through the last few feet of the forest and leaves toward the stump where the women were tied. He stooped for only a moment to pick up a thick portion of tree branch from the forest floor.

Eli was slow to respond. “Jacob!” He hissed. Jacob did not respond. “Jacob!”

Jacob stooped briefly at the women, opened his pocketknife, and cut their bonds. They were nearly unconscious, but Jacob did not tarry. He began walking toward the sleeping men. Without trepidation, he walked through them to the man sleeping the farthest away from the women.

Surprisingly, the men had not awakened during Jacob’s walk, though he made no effort at silence. Eli stood in time to see Jacob stop at the farthest man, raise the branch over his head, and bring it down on the sleeping man’s head with all the force that his fourteen-year-old wiry body could muster. A soft, wet thud was all that Eli heard.

He was mortified by Jacob’s actions. Jacob very probably had just delivered a killing blow. His son’s soul may be in jeopardy yet Eli stood in indecision. Jacob had made a choice. He was old enough to know what he was doing. He looked at the two women, who were slowly realizing that they were free. He looked again at Jacob who had moved to the second man, and again swung the branch. His aim was not true this time, and gave a glancing blow that though it cracked the man’s skull; he began to scream without cease. Jacob turned and ran away from the women and Eli. The marauders awakening from their drunken dozing and began to give chase, some firing after him.

Eli suddenly realized what Jacob had done. He had drawn the attention of the attackers so his father and the women could escape. His heart heavy with Jacob’s burden but at the same time light with pride for his son, he moved forward to get the women.

“Quickly!” He whispered to them when he was near. “They will not be distracted by my Jacob for long. We must hurry!”

The women - he presumed they were Mr. Thompson’s granddaughters - struggled to their feet, supporting one another as Eli pulled them staggering into the woods. He led them deeper into the forest. Before he went too deeply into the trees, he looked back. The marauders were still occupied with Jacob, and Jacob was still running in an erratic pattern. He saw Jacob stumble and fall, then get back up and resume running away with a pronounced limp. He couldn’t watch any longer.

He quickly caught up with his charges and led them on through the woods.

AGrayMan

Chapter 23 - Ghosts in the Mist.

The foundation of every state is the education of its youth. - Diogenes

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The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

From the hilltop overlooking the town three teenagers watched the procession of military vehicles that roared into their town taking up commanding positions in all the intersections. Not that there were all that many intersections to command in the first place, just Main St. running east and west and Harding Ave. crossing north and south. Off in the distance beyond the town proper and past the first few remaining farms you could just about make out the interstate overpass. Their little town had only recently become a bedroom community for the metropolis an hour away, off to the north. What with the escalating cost of homes in the metropolitan area and the runaway crime rates the city dwellers began their exodus to greener pastures over the last few years.

At first they just bought up fallow nearby land and built their country estates, however soon small exclusive housing tracts started popping up around their little community like Scottish Thistles. Next, slowly, incrementally they started moving in the city comforts that this shady agriculturally based community lacked. At first the locals didn't seem to mind these transplants from the big city. They added color and were at times quite entertaining to watch as they played at being country folks and genteel weekend farmers. It wasn't until they started showing up at Town Counsel, Planning Boards and PTA meetings and began to restructure the nature of their rural village that friction began to develop.

Soon the adults were behaving worse than children . . . and the children. Well Tobias J. Wellington III, or Toby to his new friends, had taken to rural living like a hog to a mud wallow. For the first time in his life he could actually escape the confines of the privileged life that he had been born into. Not that he didn't mind the privileges that his folks money could buy - but it was the cost of that privilege he rejected. He was a typical teenage boy full of muck and mire and enthusiasm for this new world. The world of his parents was too restraining and ordered. He was not interested in their politics, high finance deals and lavish cocktail parties. The upper crust of politicians, lawyers, doctors and bureaucratic elites held no appeal. Toby liked nothing better than to take to the woods and step back through time. Here he was the explorer or the 'cours de bois' (runner of the woods), an all around Mountain Man trekking across vast unmapped territories. Here he was in command of his life and not commanded over.

Now with his two closest friends, Victor "Vic" Covington and Douglas "Doc" Holliday, the three lads sat on the edge of the tree line hidden by in the tall brown November grass and watched quietly.

"Whatcha ya see Toby?" Vic asked in a whisper.

"Just a bunch of trucks, Hummv's . . . oh and there are a couple of LAV's"

"LA - what?" Doc questioned.

"LAV's, Light Armored Vehicles. Those things with the little turrets on the top and four big wheels on each side." Toby explained. "Those are Marine vehicles . . . but . . ."

"What do you suppose they are doing here?" Vic asked

"Hmmm don't know Vic." Toby handed the binoculars to him. "There ain't no Marine camps any where near here. Maybe it's like your grand-dad said."

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“I don’t know about that Toby . . . he’s like really old and says some pretty strange stuff sometimes. Mom says he should be in a home but he won’t budge from his cabin. Dad says he’s just an old coot and we should just leave him be.” Vic paused as he looked through the Bino’s. “But I sort of like him. He’s got a lot of cool stuff up there to mess around with.”

Doc reached over and to grab the glasses from Vic. “Come on man, don’t totally hog the glasses.”

“Hang on Doc . . . just a second . . . hold on . . . HEY what the hell are they doing?”

The boys continued to watch over the next hour or two before they quietly slipped back from the tree line and swiftly made their way deeper into the woods and safety. It took another hour by deer trails and rabbit runs to cross the two ridges, three streams and avoid all the main trails and logging roads that ran through the forest. Old Man Covington had been very explicit when he sent the trio off to check on the town.

“You’ve got to be like the ancient Indians born in these old mountains and the old Long Hunters that first crossed into these parts. You’ve got to be like ghosts in the mists boys.” The old man looked the three of them straight in the eye. “There’s a heap of evil coming down on the land boys, pure e-v-i-l.” He said drawing out the words. “Now you boys got to be my eyes, I’m too old to run the woods these days. But you got the wild wind in you and you know these woods better than most. So get over to Jackson ridge and stay out of sight. Don’t use the main trails or the roads. Stay together and watch carefully. When you’ve seen enough to give me an idea of what is going on, report back to me. Stay together and make sure there is no one following you!”

The boys made it back to Old man Covington’s cabin just after dark. Tired and wet they waited on the perimeter and checked out the entire area before moving silently down to the back door. Standing on the back porch they waited. The old Man’s voice startled them coming out of the darkness behind them.

“Doors open boys, go on in.”

Corporal Daniel Ortega-Mendez wondered just what the hell they were doing here in the middle of nowhere locking down this town. He had heard of all sorts of off the wall cr@p since the Plague had struck and none of it was good. If they were searching for ragheads he wouldn’t object, but this was the third town in as many weeks that his Company had swept through. The President had ordered all guns to be turned in and now it was up to the military and police to ensure that his orders had been complied with. Though what this had to do with Biological attack on the U.S. Daniel couldn’t figure out. Sure the food riots in the major cities required strong muscle to put down, but there hadn’t been hardly any trouble in the outlying regions. Just more bureaucratic crap was all it amounted to as far as he was concerned.

“We should be bustin a bunch of A-rab skulls over in the sand instead of hassling these folks here . . . just plan stupid.” He thought to himself as he shivered against the cold. “Damn guard duty.”

Inside the warm and well-lit home of the local bigwig, the officers in charge of the Marine Company and their handler’s, several BATF and FBI agents were sitting down to dinner with Congressman Bernard Steffler, two other suits and their host, Mr. Tobias J. Wellington II.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Congressman Steffler lifted his glass to their host. "I must say Tobias you are a most gracious host and have set a very fine table in these poor times."

Several cries of "Here - Here" erupted from the agents at the table while the Marines acknowledged stiffly with curt nods in the direction of the host.

"How fortunate of you to have relocated your family to these pastoral vistas before the problems arose in the more urban climates." Steffler continued.

"Well Congressman, what good would it be, to be in the communications business and not . . . shall I say . . . listen to the wires." Wellington responded.

Laughter broke out across the table, again with the exception of the three Marine officers sitting at the opposite end of the long table.

"You do seem to have thought of everything Tobias, this table is exquisite . . . your own chef?"

"Of course Congressman, one must maintain proper . . . attitude . . . regardless of the times we find ourselves in. I couldn't imagine setting a table for guests such as yourself with . . .," He pondered for a second. "Say ah, Captain . . . what do you call those emergency rations we're providing to the civilians here abouts in lieu of real food?"

"They're called MRE's Sir, and they are real food, Sir."

"Yes of course they are Captain, thank you." He immediately turned to his premier guest. "I overheard some of the troops referring to them as 'Meals Rejected by Ethiopians'." The table erupted again in laughter, again with the exception of the three Marine officers sitting at the far end.

Two hours later after several five star courses that looked more like modern art than actual food and were served along with the appropriate libations for each course the group finally adjourned to Wellington's spacious office for a brace of fine Cuban cigars and a healthy sniffer of equally fine well-aged brandy. The two junior officers excused themselves to attend to 'duties of command' and left their Captain to entertain the civilians and be the butt of their humor.

As they emerged for [from?] the overly lit house the Lieutenants noted the changing of the guard-taking place around the perimeter of the property.

In hushed tones "Could you believe those pompous @sses in there Cliff?"

Cliff shook his head in disbelief. "You know I've thought this whole screaming affair had a strange stink from the very beginning . . . now I don't have a doubt one."

"You know, Melton can be a total @sshole sometimes but I'm sure glad he got us out of there. Too much more of the elitist crap and I'd be popping a couple of frags across the table and diving for cover!"

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“I know what you mean. If I didn’t know any better I’d say those bastards knew this sh*t was going down. Did you catch that bit about ‘listening to the wires’?”

“Yeah I caught that, but just as I opened my mouth, the Captain whacked me in the shin with his combat boots.”

“Me too!”

“Well they sure didn’t cover this kind of cr@p at TBS (The Basic School) in Quantico, that’s for sure.”

The aroma of fine Cuban cigars wafted through the evening air as the group lounged in the plush leather chairs and discussed the affairs of state.

“And how is it you have lights whilst the surrounding community seems to be . . . in the dark?”

“We’re fully self-contained here.” Wellington paused to take a sip of brandy. “Liquid propane, a good three years supply worth, plus a more than ample supply of the other commodities of civilization.”

“Like food?” One of the agents tossed out.

”Well you don’t imply that we should be dinning on MRE’s now do you.” He turned to the Marine Captain off to his side. “How do you feel about the current situation Captain?”

“Hadn’t given it much thought Sir. My Marines and I are here to complete the mission as ordered by the President.”

“But of course Captain, of course and you’re doing an exceptional job . . . so far.” Chimed in the Congressman. “Don’t you think so Brent?”

Brentwood Davis, Under Secretary for Transportation was caught mid sip of his brandy. “Yes, oh yes the Captain has done a, ah, ah, a very professional job. Much better than other units that I’ve visited on my fact finding tour.”

“You see that Captain, Mr. Davis admires your professionalism.” Steffler continued. “As do the rest of the gentleman here, none of the rouge mentality that we’ve heard about with some other organizations.”

Captain Melton nodded his acknowledgement of the left-handed compliment. “Semper Fi Congressman, Semper Fi.”

“Ah yes, and much appreciated I can assure you.” Turning to the evening’s host. “Now Tobias to the business at hand . . . ”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Corporal Ortega-Mendez was returning back from guard duty. His relief had been late and as a result Ortega was walking back to the bivouac site alone. His post on watch had placed him just outside the windows of the dinner party. He wasn't supposed to be paying attention to the conversations inside but it was difficult to ignore what was taking place, and he didn't like the sound of what he had overheard.

Walking back alone in the dark misty cold he scanned quickly about using his peripheral vision to find his way as he muttered under his breath.

"Rich gringo bendejo's. We're out here in the frickin freezing @ss cold guarding their punk @sses and doing their frickin dirty laundry . . ." Suddenly the night cold stabbed against his exposed neck and sent shivers down his spine. He heard the faint sound of a whisper in the distance and the cold hit him again. Ortega went in to combat mode and crouched weapon ready as he scanned the area around him. His ears strained to hear any sound, any movement. The hair on the back of his neck tensed as if trying to leap from his skin.

"Hee-to. . ." The voice came again drifting in on the evening mist.

Ortega froze, his weapon automatically shouldered and ready.

"Hee-to . . ." This time louder.

"Man this is not cool f*ckin wit me." He barely spoke through is teeth.

"Hee-to . . ." The voice was now next to him and Ortega spun around expecting who ever it was to be nearly upon him. The emptiness of the darkness engulfed him. He continued to scan from left to right and back again concentrating on his peripheral vision . . . but nothing . . . nothing.

"Man you better knock this sh*t off panocha or I'm gonna light up the night on your @ss!" Ortega hissed.

"Hee-to, is that any way to talk to your Abuelo?" The voice answered, just feet away from him.

Suddenly Ortega began to focus on a form that seemed to step out of the darkness of the night. The form was a shade shorter and dressed in a strange sort of battle dress. The helmet was old style, like in the movies.

"Halt Mutha F*cker or I'll drop you!" Ortega ordered.

"Hito you are troubled my little one." His accent was heavy and almost foreign.

"Just who the f*ck are you man?" Ortega held his M4A1 steady on the figure before him.

"Such language from one so young." The stranger whispered. "You certainly never learned such talk from me."

Like a lightening bolt it struck Ortega. "Abuelo?" He stuttered. "Grandfather?" He stared in utter disbelief.

"Si my little haba (bean)."

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“That’s impossible, you’ve been dead since I was a . . . a . . . a . . .”

“I know . . . I know, I do not understand myself Hito. But I am here.”

Ortega slowly lowered his weapon. “Abuelo . . . how can this be?” He looked around nervously. “I know I’m not dreaming. This can not be . . .”

The pair stood in the dark silence for what seemed like eons. Ortega felt like he had fallen into a twilight zone movie. He was standing just a few feet away from his grandfather, but his grandfather had died when he was just a small boy. He remembered his hearty laugh and the way he smelled, old and leathery, full of the rich loamy smell of the earth that he worked in his nursery. He also remembered the special way he always felt around his Abuelo. But the vision before him was younger and dressed very strange. Something caught his eye. On the left shoulder was a patch or something with the head of an eagle in white on it.

“What is that uniform you’re wearing Abuelo? I’ve seen that patch somewhere before.”

“This is strange my Hito. I haven’t worn this uniform for a very long time . . . and this IS my M1.” He said hefting the long gun. “Right down to the serial numbers.”

“Why are you here Grandfather? How is it that I can see you? Am I dead?”

The aberration laughed his grandfathers hearty laugh. “No, No, my little one. You are very much alive. I on the other hand . . . well . . . I don’t know.”

The pair squat down in the middle of the road and were engulfed in the darkness.

“Go on in and get out of those wet things.” Grandpa Covington said as he began to appear out of the night.

The three boys quickly mustered through the door and were greeted by the warmth of the fire and safety of the cabin. As they began changing out of their wet cloths Victor’s grandfather questioned them on what they had witnessed. Toby described the vehicles and the way they had cordoned off the town and set up roadblocks. Vic told about the soldiers forcing citizens out of their homes and kept them standing out in the street as small groups of other soldiers went through each house. And Doc described the singling out and marching off of many of the men of the town to a special area on the square that was fenced off with rolls of some type of barbed wire. He had seen guns taken from some of the houses thrown into the backs of one of the big trucks. He also saw them take what looked like food from some of the houses and was given out to the neighbors a few parcels at a time.

“Hmmm well that fits the pattern.” Grandpa Covington muttered to himself.

“What pattern Poppa? Vic asked.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“I’ve been listening to that old short-wave out in the workshop. Seems once the government troops get the cities locked down they start to spread out to the suburbs and small town surrounding them. Disarm and redistribute the food and then leave behind a small garrison to maintain control.”

“But why Mr. Covington?” Doc asked.

“Because they’re scared, scared of what we might do, or not do.”

“Who’s scared?”

“That is the ten-thousand dollar question my lads, that is the question indeed.”

The first problem started just outside of the town. Corporal Ortega-Mendez was in charge of a fire-team in a squad that was pacifying the outlying farms. The morning had begun rather uneventful with only angry stares and verbal undertones of the residents as they searched and confiscated outlawed weapons as ordered. Up 'til now there had only been a few angry mutterings of threats, but at the third farmstead things were not going well from the outset.

“Mr. Sullivan you are required by the orders of the President of the United States and the declaration of martial law to exit your home and cooperate fully with the appropriate authorities.” The agent called to the house over the bullhorn.

“This is your last chance Mr. Sullivan. If you do not immediately cooperate we will be forced to drag you out of there. You are placing yourself and your family at grave risk. Do you hear me Mr. Sullivan?”

Suddenly a shot rang out and hit the fence post to the right of the black cammied agent.

“SH*T!” He yelled as both he and the Marines quickly ducked back behind the vehicles.

“That B*stard tried to kill us!” The agent yelled.

The Staff Sergeant beside him chuckled. “That Mr. Agent man, was a warning. He hit square on that fence post. He’s telling you that if we don’t drop this issue he’s fully capable of tagging any one of us from this distance.”

“I want that b*stard taken out of there Sergeant, and taken out now!”

“Well SIR, considering that he’s got a clear field of fire around his house, he’s on the high ground and he’s made sure that we’re not just driving up to the house due to the ditches and barricades, just how do you propose that we do that?”

“You’re the f*cking Marine, charge the damn place!”

“Lead on.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“What?”

“Don’t get me wrong here SIR, but just because we’re referred to as ‘Jar Heads’ doesn’t mean that we lack any kind of intelligence. I’ve got a squad of Marines to P.O.L.I.C.E. this action . . . not to storm a farmer protecting his property.”

“I gave you an order Sergeant! You will obey it!”

“I heard your order . . . SIR. CORPORAL JAEGER . . . ORTEGA . . . ON ME!”

Grandpa Covington was fixing breakfast when the radio crackled to life.

“Breaker Break . . . Breaker Break. We’ve got a situation at the Sullivan’s, Over.”

The static returned. “Breaker Break . . . breaker break. Any VFW out there with their ears on? Over.”

“Go Breaker . . . you got Airborne. Over.” Grandpa Covington replied. The boys began to sit up in their sleeping bags.

“Roger Airborne, big Sarge is that you? Over.”

“Roger Breaker, big Sarge here, what’s your sit? Over.”

“Red here . . . Hey Sarge they got Sully holed up and they’ve traded shots. As far as we can tell his whole family’s in there. Over.”

“Damn!” Covington muttered. He picked up the mike again. “Light up the recall and muster at . . .” He thought for a second. “Penbroke barn. Over.”

“Penbroke barn . . . Roger that . . . and Sarge . . . SHIT!” The line went dead.

“Red comeback!” “RED . . . COMEBACK!”

“SHIT! Sarge they’ve just started shooting with those cannons on the APC’s. It’s punching holes through the house like Swiss cheese!”

“RED GET THE DAMN RECALL STARTED NOW! OVER!”

“R-R-Roger Sarge, Recall started. Over and OUT!”

Covington laid the mike down and looked up at the three faces staring at him. “Boys we’ve got work to do.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Victor go grab your Realtree cammies upstairs, bring down a set for Doc. Toby I’ve got an extra pair that should fit you. COME ON BOYS . . . SHAKE A LEG! We’ve got neighbors in trouble!”

Pandemonium broke out as the three teenage boys ran around the house getting dressed as quickly as possible. Grandpa Covington disappeared into the basement and emerged after a few minutes with two rifles slung over his shoulder and one in each hand. The laid them against the wall and disappeared back into the basement.

“Vic give me a hand down here.”

In fifteen minutes the fire team under the command of Grandpa Covington was headed out to the barn. They quickly loaded up the pickup and headed out the back of the property on an old abandoned logging road.

“This isn’t the way to Penbroke’s barn Poppa.”

”No it isn’t. We’re headed over to the beaver dam at Nelson Creek crossing. It’s called a code Vic, you never know who might be listening.”

The truck bounced down the old rutted and overgrown trail throwing the occupants about inside the cab.

At the command center in the Mayors office Captain Melton had just received word that there appeared to be a sudden burst of civilian communication across the Citizen Band radio frequencies. That in addition to stand off at the Sullivan farm, the previously quiet situation suddenly began to trouble the Marine Captain.

“Lt. Sievers, I want you to get out to the Sullivan farm and find out just what the hell is going on out there.”

“Roger!”

“Do what ever you have to, to defuse that situation!”

“And if the agent in charge . . . ?”

“F*CK THAT AGENT! You’re a Marine Officer in command of Marine troops. Get that situation under control and get it under control now!”

“Eye-Eye SIR!” The young Lieutenant spun about and hastily left the office. “STAFF SERGEANT ACKERS . . . TO ME!”

The Captain now turned to his remaining Lieutenant. “Lieutenant Brendowski, take a squad and recon that barn . . . where is it Mayor?”

A chubby red-faced man in a bad suit walked over to the map of the township that was spread across the conference table. He pointed to an area on the southeast edge of the map with his stubby fingers.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“That would be about here Captain. It’s an old abandoned barn about ready to fall down near these crossroads. Back up a driveway here and partially hidden in the trees.”

“OK Ed, do you got that?”

“YES SIR!”

“And Ed, don’t let this blow up into a firefight, just Recon the position and report back to me. Don’t be seen and don’t engage . . . understood?”

“Eye-eye skipper! Don’t be seen and don’t engage. I’ll call in as soon as I have something to report.”

“Good, now get going.” The remaining Lieutenant beat feet out of the office and disappeared out the front door.

“Now Mr. Mayor, just who are these people with the VFW?”

“Nothing Captain, I can assure you, just some ol’ drunk coots that tell war stories over beer and pretzels. It’s not a very big post here, maybe twenty or thirty vets at the most. Too old to do much of anything else but tell stories.”

“You better hope so Mr. Mayor, you better hope so.

Lt. Sievers had arrived on the scene and despite the temper tantrums of the BATF Agent had taken charge of the situation. He had backed the armored vehicles off and now held a vigil at a relatively safe distance from the house. Dusk was a few hours away and Sievers did not like the idea of spending the evening exposed watching over this house. Hell he didn’t like the idea of the mission they had been given, but until he could find a way out he was stuck in the situation as it had come down.

The vigil was being maintained on several sides of the Sullivan’s farm along the front road. Up in the woods forming an outer ring to the Marine encirclement there now lay a second group watching the now quiet farm. Back just inside the tree line they watched, men that had waited like this once before in a wooded landscape on another continent from another time. They had formed the thin line of defiance against an overwhelming force. Ill equipped, short of ammo, and small in numbers they had held the line against a sweeping evil that threatened the world of their youth. Now over fifty years later they once again found themselves on the line, outnumbered, and defiant. Except this time they were not quite alone. They had brought with them the legacy of their generation, their sons, and grandsons. They had brought their American heritage to the line in the sand, to fight the good fight one more time. This generation of builders and shapers would not “go quietly in to this good night.”

Dawn broke to the roar of trucks and armored cars streaming into town. Black trucks and vehicles that sweep through and raced out of town towards the embattled homestead. Several command vehicles broke away and headed to the Marine command center in the Mayors office on the main square. A little less than one hundred

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

civilians held in the concertina stockade watched as black cammied soldiers with the letters “BATF” on their coats jumped out of the vehicles and mounted the steps two at a time entered the Mayors office. Shortly there after a Limousine arrived and an entourage of well dressed men entered the office as well.

“Thank you for your efforts Captain, however, you stand relieved and will order your men to stand-down. My people will take over from here.” The lead black suit ordered as he entered the office.

“And just who are you?” The Marine asked.

“Senior Field Agent Smith, Captain. You’ve done a fine job, however we’ll take it from here.”

“Razorback two to Razor one over.” Interrupted the awkward silence. “This is Razorback two to Razor one over.”

“Tell him to standby.” The radio operator nodded and turned back to his radio and relayed the message.

“I have the situation here under control Agent Smith, where are your orders?”

“Orders Captain.” He chuckled. “I am the senior field agent in this sector and am assuming command of this operation.” He paused. “That is unless you’ve resolved the Sullivan issue and rounded up the remaining dissidents in this sector.”

“We are currently negotiating with Mr. Sullivan and as for any dissidents, other than the individuals that we had arrest orders for there have been no further disturbances.”

“Well that may be the case, but negotiations are over. He will surrender as ordered or we will bring his place down around him. Those are my orders Captain. If you will excuse me, I have a sector to run. You will receive new orders sometime this morning. Now if you and your men would mind I believe you have packing to do. Good day.”

The Marine looked at the Federal Agent with more than disgust and quietly stood his ground. Just then the Congressman walked in.

“Oh good that you’re here Smith. I see you two have met. The Captain has done a fine job with the pacification. Well except for that retched farmer, what was his name?”

“Sullivan Sir.” One of his toadies answered.

“Oh yes, Sullivan. Hardly the Captain’s fault, the man is probably deranged or something. His holding his family hostage as well I understand. Took several shots at one of your agents. Dirty business that.”

“Yes Congressman, well I’ve already sent agents and special Home Security troops out to relieve the Marines who will be receiving new orders at any time.” The senior agent turned to the Captain. “Isn’t that right Captain.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

The Marine grabbed his web gear and prepared to leave. “DeNally, get your gear broken down and packed up most skosh.” He said as he exited the office.

“Sarge we’ve got new players on the field.”

Covington edged forward and raised his bino’s. New vehicles seemed to be relieving the Marines and uniformed soldiers he didn’t recognized were taking over the Marine positions. There seemed to be a conference behind one of the LAV’s with what was probably the officers. One of the new players ran up to the group and saluted one of the new officers.

“Idiot! Chester check out that tall one there that just returned the salute . . . see him.”

“Got’em.”

“He’s a zero, keep an eye on him. He seems to be in charge of this new group.”

“Roger Sarge, he’s mine.”

“What do you make of it Covington?” Another old soldier beside him asked. They both shared the same shoulder patch of their unit from a long ago war. The white emblem of a screaming eagle faded and worn but still proud.

“Looks like the Marines are packin up, being relieved . . . and I don’t like the look of this new group. I think . . .” He paused. “The stand off is about to end.”

“Captain just what the F*CK is going on here? First we’re in charge and then all hell breaks loose when those Federal Goons show up! I just about had Mr. Sullivan out of his house peacefully!”

“I don’t know Lieutenant.” The Captain turned to his two junior officers. “This whole thing has stunk from the beginning and now this . . .”

The three professional soldiers compared notes going over the events of the preceding days. None of them liked what had been going down recently and liked even less the round up they had been apart of. But this new situation looked really bad.

“Sievers who’s the best recon team you’ve got?”

The Lieutenant thought for a moment. “Corporal Ortega-Mendez.” Brendowski concurred with him. “Remember that last op up in Pickle Meadows. The kid was like a ghost in the bush.”

“Ski, you got anyone?”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Williams and McCrone are damn good in the bush sir, throw in Staff Sergeant Talford and you’d have about as strong a team as we could put together.”

“Good, I concur, get them up and ready in ten mikes. I need eyes in the field. We’re not tuckin tail just yet gentlemen. I want the entire company ready to roll hot in twenty minutes, full combat loads and I want this done quietly!”

Corporal Ortega was on point. The fire team moved silently through the woods. Every sense alert, like wraiths they slid through the undergrowth leaving no sign of their passing.

Toby, Victor and Doc had crawled to within fifty yards of the Home Security outpost on the right flank of the Sullivan’s farm. Their RealTree camouflage blending perfectly into the background of the forest. They could hear the soldiers as they clinked about getting into position, oblivious to the fact that they were being watched, smoking, joking and sucking down sodas in the process of setting up their position.

Approaching from the northwest Ortega and his team could also hear the noise and clatter of the their Federal replacements. They caught the whiffs of cigarette smoke coming from them over a hundred yards away. Slowly they maneuvered through the bush in absolute silence. They were now approaching within almost visual range when the first shot was fired. Yelling and screaming sudden erupted from the direction of the OP (observation post). The recon team froze and disappeared into the background.

Three teenagers raced through the forest towards the Marines. Shots rang out from behind them and ripped through the trees above the fleeing trio. Ortega and his team became part of the forest.

A whisper suddenly drifted past his ear. “Be ready Heto . . . protect the children!”

The three teenagers broke into the clearing just in front of the Marines. Another series of shots rang out from behind and the sickening “Thwak” of a round meeting flesh preceded the scream of pain as one of the boys dropped to the ground. The other two quickly turned and attempted to pick up him up to continue their escape. But the pause was just long enough for the pursuing Homeland guards to catch up to them. The unarmed trio suddenly found themselves facing seven armed soldiers. They had dropped their rifles when the first shots range out and they took off running, now they were caught empty handed.

Victor lay on the ground trying to stem the bleeding from the twin holes in his thigh. Toby and Doc slowly raised their shaking hands as the armed men approached.

“So you little b*stards thought you’d get away did you?”

Ortega placed the recital of his sight in the center of the soldiers face. They were no more than thirty yards away from his position back in the underbrush. He was now trapped too. To escape would be impossible without detection.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Well we got one of the rats Murphy!” The dark suited soldier menacingly stood over the fallen teenager.

Ortega’s finger touched the trigger and started to tighten.

“Might as well finish the job.” He lowered his weapon and shot the helpless boy point blank in the chest.

Just at that instant three rounds from Ortega’s M4A1 crossed the distance to their target in less than a millisecond. Hitting the facial bones of the burly soldier they tore through the solid shell viciously before slamming out the back of the man’s brain case sending a shower of pink mist into the air. The two standing teenagers stood in shocked terror as the supersonic scream of angry hornets ripped about the air next to them and slashed through the weak flesh of their pursuers. The firefight lasted less than three seconds and seven men met their makers in that instant.

Cpl Ortega sprang forward instantly taking point and placing himself between the three boys and their combined enemy. The rest of the recon team was mere seconds behind him. LCpl McCrone took up his position to the right of Ortega while PFC Williams and SSgt Talford checked over the teenagers and made sure their enemy was dead. Victor was alive, but just barely. The round had gone through and through his right lung. Talford quickly slapped a tourniquet on his leg and started dressing the sucking chest wound when more shots rang out from the direction of the OP.

“We’ve got company Staff!” Ortega called back.

“Give me a second then we didi mow!” Talford worked feverishly to dress the wounds then pulling the wounded teenager into a sitting position scooped him up and across one shoulder.

“Give us cover Corporal!” Talford shouted as he ran heavy with his burden out of the clearing.

Ortega moved forward to meet the enemy. A blur he disappeared into the underbrush trying to put as much distance between his team and himself. He would bring this war to the enemy. His feet pounding like a machine, he cut the distance quickly and exploded into the midst of the approaching squads. Like a pop up target the first figure sprang up before him. No time to shoot he viciously whipped the butt of his rifle across the surprised face and crushed the soldier’s temple dropping him like a rock. His momentum carried him forward and he spun firing in the amazed group. The first three bursts found targets, he hit the ground rolled and came up shooting, picking off first one, then two, three more and he was up and running again. Slamming in to a tree for cover nearly knocking the wind out of himself, he fired first left then right before letting fly with two hand grenades into the now retreating soldiers. He dropped to one knee and lowered the rifle to cut loose a 40mm grenade at head level. The effect was devastating and cut another three soldiers down. Loading in a fresh mag and jacking a new 40mm in he continued to press his advantage.

SSgt Talford gently laid Victor onto the poncho keeping him as much as possible on his injured side.

“Get him out of here McCrone. I’m going back for Danny!”

The four, two Marines and the two teenagers picked up the corners of the poncho and started off through the forest. Talford could hear the fury of battle before him and moved quickly to relieve his fellow grunt.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Heto. . . to your left!” Ortega spun and let loose a burst dropping two more. Now wounded, bleeding, low on ammunition and heavily outnumbered, he continued to rip out sections of Government lackeys who still had no idea of just what the hell they were facing. He was still mad with rage, mad with murder for these b*stards that would shoot an unarmed civilian, a child in cold blood. “Not on my watch!” he gritted his teeth as he tried to tighten the battle dressing on his forearm. It was almost useless, he couldn’t feel his fingers any longer, his hand was like a club but he could still hold his rifle and with that he could still fight. It was just starting to dawn on him that he had better get out of this sh*t here quickly if he was going to get out at all. He started to stand up when he felt a solid “THUD” like he had been hit with a baseball bat in the back. His knees folded up under him in that instant and he dropped like a rock into the soft loamy forest floor.

The earth smelled sweet and inviting as he laid there trying to catch his breath. He tried to wiggle his toes, but couldn’t feel them in his boots. He was tired, so tired.

“Heto . . . they are coming.” The wind called to him.

He struggled to push himself up. Pain screamed from every sinew as he pulled himself into a position to see down the slope at the advancing line of dark soldiers. His breath was now quick and shallow; he could feel the pounding of his pulse in his ears. Training took over and Corporal Ortega-Mendez as if on automatic began preparing his position for a last stand. Three magazines left, two hand grenades, one 40mm. He was in sh*t city that was for sure. He pulled one of the blousing bands off his now useless legs. Pulling some suckers from the forest floor he cammied the end of his rifle.

He sat there no longer afraid and took a long difficult breath. He was back on Edson Range in basic. He let his breath out and slowly squeezed the trigger the rifle bucked. Again . . . and again . . . and again.

In the History of the world many last stands have been recorded. Acts of defiance against enormous odds. Yet act they did and they held their honor to the very end.

The forest was suddenly quiet and peaceful. Daniel Ortega-Mendez, Corporal, United States Marine Corps, stood looking down on a tattered shell of a Marine, worn and bleeding now resting quietly as if asleep. His blood slowly nurturing the earthy loam of the forest floor. The blood of a patriot once more mingling with the clay from which he sprung.

“Did I do good Abuelo?”

“You did very well my Heto, very well indeed.”

His arm slowly rested on his grandson’s shoulders. “You can rest now my little one.” And the pair slowly turned and walked toward the shimmering light that lay just beyond the green shroud of the forest.

Semper Fi Marine.

Desert Doc

Pax Americana - 24 Crossing the Rubicon

“Sarge” Covington watched the dark cammied Government agents and Home Guards troops retreat from the forest across the field on the other side of the Sullivan farmhouse. Whatever they had run into had fought viciously for less than a third of the soldiers that entered the tree line twenty minutes earlier were now retreating from it. He could make out many of the able bodied men helping wounded comrades drag themselves back to the safety of the armored vehicles that they had arrived in earlier this morning.

“What do you make of it Sarge?” One of the Korean War vets beside him asked.

“Don’t rightly know Jeb, looks like they grabbed a p*ssed off badger by the tail and got whumped on pretty good.” The older Covington answered.

“I didn’t know that we had any of our boys over there yet.”

“We don’t.”

Two platoons of Marines advanced through the forest. Spread out and operating in small fire teams they covered the ground quickly using a technique known as bounding overwatch. Lt. Sievers the officer in charge of the advancing ground element had received a quick situation report from LCpl McCrone after he linked up and turned over the seriously wounded civilian teenager to the Company Corpsman. The Lieutenant was now determined to extract his two remaining Marines that were somewhere out in the forest before them and if necessary punish the perpetrators of this heinous act.

SSgt Talford had arrived too late. But the defiant Corporal had not gone down easily. Talford advanced slowly through the wake of enemy dead. Ever cautious and ready he carefully moved through the carnage until he finally found the now peaceful Ortega. His ammunition expended he had held off the last assault with his nine millimeter before he finally succumbed to the multitude of wounds that had pierced his flesh. Talford stood above him and slowly brought his right arm up to a stiff salute.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t get here in time brother.” He whispered. “But you shall not have died in vain. That I promise.”

The Staff Sergeant dropped his pack and trimmed out his kit for serious fighting. Keeping a warriors eye on the forest in front of him he quickly gathered up the Corporal’s empty mags and began loading them up from the reserve ammo in his ruck. He could hear someone moving towards his position off in the distance behind him and he prepared for immediate battle.

He let out his breath when he recognized several of his own men cautiously but quickly advancing towards him.

The quiet of the forest was suddenly broken by the loud call imminently familiar to every Marine.

“Oooooooo-RAH!”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

The advancing Marines froze and instantly fixed on the Staff Sergeant's position and answered with several guttural barks. He quickly gave them the signal to advance on his position and in just a few seconds he was no longer a lone Marine guarding a down comrade. The rest of the platoon formed a hasty defensive perimeter as the SSgt and his Lieutenant quickly surveyed the battlefield.

Across on the other side Covington and his men heard the strange animal like call as it echoed across the valley.

"What the hell was that?"

"There is only one thing that I know of that makes that call . . ." Covington answered.

He strained to look past the tree line on the opposite side of the field. "Marines hold those woods." He said flatly.

"But . . . weren't they with the government goons just this morning?"

"Well I would guess by the looks of what we've just seen leave the forest . . . not any longer."

A young runner, Stan McMurtrey's oldest boy Rick, came peeling through the brush and slid into Covington's fighting hole.

"Mr. Covington . . ." He puffed, nearly out of breath. "You got to come quick!" Puffpuff. "Vic's been hurt bad and there's," Puff-puff. "a Marine officer that wants to talk to . . ." Puff-puff. "who ever is in charge." Puff-puff. "Dad said to get you . . ." The boy blurted out as quickly as he could.

"DAMN!" Covington exclaimed. "DAMN - DAMN - DAMN!"

Meanwhile at the government perimeter command post Senior Field Agent Richardson had his own nightmare to deal with. He had lost over half of his forces and still didn't know what the hell they were dealing with. He only had bits and pieces of information and lap full of wounded.

"I DON'T KNOW WHAT THE HELL JUST HAPPENED!" He yelled into the radio. "I JUST GOT THE LIVING SH*T KICKED OUT MY UNIT AND I NEED IMMEDIATE BACK UP!"

"I DON'T GIVE A DAMN ABOUT THAT F*CKING TOWN. I'VE GOT HOSTILES RIGHT HERE IN FRONT OF ME AND G*D DAMN IT I WANT BACK UP RIGHT F*CKING NOW!"

Suddenly an eerie wail emanated from the forest area his men had just retreated from.

"What the hell was that?" One of the radio operators asked. Everyone looked back in the direction of the sound.

Richardson put his hand over the radio mike. "ADDISON GET A DAMN DEFENSIVE PERIMETER SET UP AND GET IT SET UP NOW!" He shouted in angry panic.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

The old sergeant slung his M1 up on his shoulder and stepped forward towards the Marine officer standing in front of his own men with the two teenagers Toby and Doc beside him.

Captain Melton recognized the old warriors airborne style uniform, it was right out of the movie “The Longest Day”, the Screaming Eagle patch on his shoulder confirmed its origin. The old man had to be over seventy years old, but still carried himself, albeit slower, with the pride of being a member of one of the finest fighting units to have ever existed. The Captain nodded in respect towards the senior soldier.

“Captain Leslie Melton, Sir, United States Marine Corps.”

Covington returned his nod. “Platoon Sergeant Clayton Covington, United States Army Airborne, Retired, Sir. At least you’ve got the good sense not to salute in the field young man. ”

They stood in silence for a few seconds. “What is this I hear about my grandson?” Covington asked looking at the two teenagers.

Melton looked down at the ground for a second and then looked the old soldier straight in the eye. “I regret to inform you Sir that your grandson has died of his wounds.”

The silence was nearly choking.

“My Corpsman tried desperately to save his life, but his wounds were too great. He was murdered by members of the unit that replaced ours. I have four Marines that witnessed the execution of your . . .”

“ENOUGH!” The old man yelled, as tears began to well up in his eyes. He visibly trembled and looked to be unsteady on his feet. Captain Melton reached across to steady the old man, but his hands were brushed away.

Covington now pulled himself together and faced the Marine. “Captain . . . whose side are you on Sir?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I believe the question was quite simple and straight forward . . . whose side are you on?”

An odd silence filled the air. “Sir . . .” Melton paused and sought the right words. He knew his actions here put him precariously on the razors edge. It was not only his fate but the fate of his Marines that hung here in the balance.

“I stand on the side of my oath as an officer and a Marine.”

“And that would be what . . . in this situation Captain?”

“That would depend upon your view of this matter Airborne.” The Marine replied.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

The old warrior unslung his M1 and steadied himself resting both hands on it before him. He slowly looked up at the young officer standing before him.

“Young Captain, I fought in a great war a long time ago to preserve the freedoms and aspirations of this noble country. Somehow over the years we have lost our way and forgotten the debt owed to the many good men we left behind in that war.” He paused briefly. “So here I stand too damn old to be of much good, but here I stand just the same.”

“Sir?”

“Young Captain, I stand here, to support and defend the Constitution. I stand here, to support and defend the Bill of Rights. I stand here, to support and defend the dream of our founding fathers.” He paused again. “Now, just where do you stand . . . sir?”

“Sir . . .” The Captain began as he stepped forward and stuck out his right hand. “I stand with you!”

The old warrior and the young warrior clasped hands as warriors should, in true faith and allegiance to the common cause. Perhaps this was how it all began over two hundred years ago when tyranny rained across the land perpetuated by a faraway king. Today that tyranny came from the same side of the ocean, but it was tyranny just the same. It had cost the old soldier his only grandson and it would cost a lot more before it was over, that was for sure. But the fight had to start somewhere.

‘Now young man, how do you propose we get ourselves out of this, if you will pardon an old Platoon Sergeant, this f*cking mess?’

Brentwood Davis was exceedingly nervous. He was an upper-level bureaucrat who lived among filing cabinets and sheaves of paperwork. His idea of excitement was attending dinner parties up on capital hill, rubbing elbows with the rich and powerful and while he would not admit it openly he would sometimes escape into his world of “Walter Middy daydreams”. But the current situation had jerked him into the cruel world of utter reality and he did not like it. His assigned mission was to investigate the current status of the transportation system and find ways to ensure goods got to market and the US economy continued to roll on the vast network of highways. The most recent Presidential orders federalized the transportation industry. Caught between the federal governments need to keep the country running despite terrorist attacks and the resistance of the powerful AFL-CIO unions to what amounted to a hostile take over by the Feds, Davis was supposed to come up with answers that would satisfy both sides. On top of that he got sucked into the runaway events during the most recent pacification and disarmament actions in this little out of the way town. He had seen far more than he ever wanted to know and could not see anyway out of the present situation that was getting worse by the minute.

Another horde of Federal Bureau vehicles streamed into town as well as Home Guard troops. Well if you could call them troops, he had his doubts about their professionalism and they certainly didn’t act like well disciplined soldiers. There was something here . . . that he couldn’t quite put his finger on.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

He didn't realize how serious the situation was until several heavily armed black helicopters landed in the High School's football field. He was accompanying Congressman Steffler and Senior Field Agent Smith when they entered the Gymnasium that had been converted to a hasty field hospital. The image was right out of an old "B" movie with wounded, dead and dying men strewn about. There was only a small medical clinic in this out of the way town. Serious medical cases were usually run by ambulance to the next town over where a small twenty-five-bed hospital was located. This was a mess.

"Smith I want this resistance to be crushed and crushed TODAY! Do you understand me?" Steffler bellowed.

"Yes Sir, I have reinforcements on the way and two attack helo's have just arrived." The group picked up the pace of their walk.

"I don't care what you have to do! Burn that b*stard out of that damn house and I want the perpetrators of this butchery's head on a pike . . . DO I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR!"

"Yes Sir, perfectly clear!"

"WELL? WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR . . . GET TO IT MAN!"

The field agent quickly departed and shortly there after Davis heard the increasing whine and thumping beat of the helo's blades as they passed overhead and headed west out of town towards the Sullivan farm.

"I will not tolerate this blatant defiance to the law." He turned now to Davis. "Can you believe the audacity of these people?"

Davis nodded his head in affirmation then quickly realized his mistake and switched to shaking his head with a negative response and added his own words. "It's just unimaginable Congressman where they get the idea that we're not here to help them. Simply unimaginable."

The Congressman looked at the bespectacled paper pusher and grunted in agreement. He turned sharply and headed for the nearest exit. He had seen enough of the carnage and needed a good strong drink to calm his irritated nerves. Davis followed right on his coat tails like an obedient puppy.

Melton followed Covington back to his OP position as they tried to work out a tactical solution to the growing problem. The Black cammied troops were growing in number and had added several armored personnel carriers to their perimeter. So far the heaviest weapon they had we're fifty caliber machine guns, that was until the two black birds raced overhead.

"Damn!" Uttered Covington.

"It was only a matter of time." The Marine focused his attention on the increased action down below. "It looks like they gathered up a least a company strength of troops down there, with more coming in."

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“How long can we hold them off do you think Captain?”

“Not long I’m afraid . . . and time is in their favor. Right now they don’t know you’re here, or what exactly is up in those woods.” He shifted position to get a better look. “Our greatest challenge is going to be getting out of here. You can bet that all transportation routes out of this region are being sealed off as we speak.”

“That would stand to reason. But we can’t leave Sullivan and his family trapped down there.”

“I know . . . I know.”

“You said that you’ve got shooters stationed behind them?”

“Yes, spread out in two’s and threes all across that back tree line over there. Wrapping around to our position and just about to there near your side of the ridge, he pointed.

“Hmmm and I’ve got two platoons in the woods across the way. I can hold one in reserve to plug any gaps and that leaves me with one platoon to increase your fire power over here . . . pretty thin - pretty thin.”

“Don’t worry about us over here Captain, you keep your boys and use them to cut off any reinforcements moving up along that road there. We’ve got a few surprises of our own over here.”

“Like what . . . don’t tell me you’ve got armor and artillery support?”

“OK, if you don’t want me to tell you . . . I won’t.”

The Captain looked at the old timer suspiciously.

The old warrior pointed down the line. “See that big pine tree . . . well look just this side of it and back in a bit.”

“What the hell is that?”

“Ever hear of a M8?”

“M8?”

“You probably know it better as a 75mm Pack Howitzer.”

“Damn it old man if you don’t have artillery. Now where in the hell did you come up with that!” The amazed Marine asked.

“It’s been sitting right out in front of our VFW Hall for better than forty years. Couple of the boys slapped on some new rubber and there it is.”

“Will it work?”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“For a short while. We’ve only got a little over a dozen shells, and we’re not exactly sure they are fully functional. But my gunner down there tells me they can still stir up some dust . . . just hope he’s right.”

“Well I’ll be . . . ! From there he’ll be able to just about march right up the line of their vehicles.”

“That’s the plan.”

The pair continued to work out the details until they were sure that they had a chance to extract the Sullivan’s and hopefully extract themselves as well.

The afternoon was cooling off with a sharpness that hinted of pending snow in the air. The plan was for Captain Melton would initiate the action and try to draw the Federal Goons back into the forest. That would negate the effectiveness of the helo’s for a little while and in the seesaw battle that would follow they would try to extract Sullivan and his family and cover their retreat with the pack howitzer. But as with all plans it became a game of fifty-two-card pick up the second the first round with off, and it went off on the wrong side of the farm. A large squad had attempted to circle through Covington’s side of the perimeter to come up on the back of the Marine position. They ran smack into the field piece and the group of about a dozen locals defending it. Although M16’s can deliver a tremendous amount of firepower in a short period of time the Federal troops suddenly found themselves up against in-trenched seasoned hunters with high powered scoped rifles. The 30.06’s, 300 Winchester magnums and 7mm magnums ripped through the sparse cover the Federal troops tried to hide behind and most of them were caught flat footed out in the open. The firefight was brief, fierce and decisively in favor of Covington’s men, but it was a shallow victory as they had now lost the element of surprise and given away their position.

The men at the howitzer realizing that they were now exposed decided to use rather than lose the gun and began shelling the line of vehicles in the distance. The first round exploded harmlessly to the right of the road, the second was a dud that spit up blacktop with its impact, but the third round found its mark and sent one of the troop trucks up in flames. Quickly adjusting the range the gunnery crew laid it on heavy. In rapid succession the line of vehicles was filled with sheer pandemonium, smoke and flame, but all too quickly the gun fell silent as they ran out of ammunition.

Now it was the militia’s turn to take a pounding and the two black birds began pounding the howitzer’s position with mini-gun and rockets. There was nothing for the patriots there to do but hug the bottom of their fighting holes and take the punishment being dished out by the attack helo’s. The view of the guns position was obscured by smoke, flame and flying debris as the birds made pass after pass across the front of the tree line.

“CHESTER CAN YOU KNOCK ONE OF THOSE BASTARDS DOWN?” Covington yelled over the explosions echoing across the valley.

The burly bearded Vietnam Vet trudged past Covington’s fighting hole and setup his shooting position forty yards to the south. He snapped open the bipods, locked in the magazine and squared himself away. The four hundred yard shot was practically point blank for his BFG-50A rifle. It took him a few seconds to fix on the moving helo, now all he needed was for it to sit still for just a few seconds . . . just a few seconds.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

The big gun rocked him back as he sent the first round down range; it was quickly followed by a second and a third. The third round was a tracer and Patriots on the ridge watched as it bee lined to the second attack bird and slammed into the exhaust housing of the starboard engine. The round began to yaw slightly after it punched through the outer housing and struck the hot spinning turbine blades like a meteor sending supersonic shards exploding out of the engine housing. The starboard engine began to disintegrate as the transmission locked up, seizing so suddenly that it snapped off the main rotor blades sending them in every direction. Its wings clipped the dark bird dropped like a smoking rock and slammed into the ground.

The lead bird quickly jinked and spun wildly in its attempt to escape the fate of its wingmate. Chester emptied the first mag and quickly locked in a fresh one and continued to pound away at the lead bird.

“It’s a little bit different when someone is shooting back at you - ain’t it you sonof- a-b*tch!” Chester growled as the big gun rocked him back with each discharge.

Corporal Roy Truitt burst from the tree line and snapped open the sight assembly and the IFF (Identification Friend or Foe) antenna on his Stinger. He spun up the missile as he quickly sighted in on the jinking helo on the opposite side of the valley. Two other Marines quickly spread out in front of him ready to lay down covering fire. Truitt could hear the whine of the system and launched the missile as soon as he had tone lock. Immediately after the launch the ground around him was filled with the supersonic zip of rounds coming up the valley at him as the Federal troops targeted the back blast area of his missile.

The Stinger arched down the valley in a headlong sprint towards the gyrating black bird, but at the last second the missile locked onto the viciously burning wreck of the first helo and blasted into the downed hulk further spreading flame and burning fuel across the field and into the wood line. Gaining a second reprieve the black bird spun around and let loose a burst of mini-gun fire in Truitt’s direction. One of his protective gunners was caught by the burst and jerked past the Corporal like a doll on a bungee cord. Continuing in its spin the gunner of the helo let loose his entire battery of 2.75-inch rockets into Covington’s tree line before rolling up and heading towards the retreating Stinger gunner.

The trees above the Militia forces exploded in wicked splinters and shrapnel that rained death and agony down upon them. Covington was suddenly back in Bastogne under the fire of German Eighty-eights during the battle of the bulge. The screams of wounded men and boys filled his ears and ripped open the mental wounds of that long ago battle. He pushed his M1 over the top edge of his fighting hole and caught a glimpse of the black bird ripping across the fields towards the Stinger team.

The pilot could see the retreating Marines near the top of the field running like panicked insects for the tree line and bore down on them for the kill, tapping the firing trigger he sent a stream of deadly metal down range kicking up ribbons of dirt and dust. One down! He swing the bird’s tail to rake fire across the other two when suddenly the metallic “THWACK” of rounds hammered against the skin of the bird sounded like a hail storm had cut loose on him. His side windscreen cracked then shattered. Sending Plexiglas pellets raining about the cockpit. He started to spin his guns towards the new threat when he felt a vicious mule kick to his left thigh and his goggles were suddenly covered with blood. . .his. The aircraft flipped over as the pilot in panic pushed off his goggles and looked down at his lap to realize that something horrific had just about ripped off his leg. The tail rotor kicked the bird around drove into the field curling the dying helo around itself before exploding in a fire-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

ball of destruction. The blast slammed the Corporal into the ground and he felt the hot licks of its dying breath, but he was still alive!

Covington's militia began to cheer at their success as secondary explosions and small arms rounds cooked off in the inferno bellowing out in the middle of the field, until they realized that a new threat was advancing up the valley towards them. The surviving Federal APC's and troops had reorganized and we now making a frontal assault toward their position.

Captain Melton watched the Federal line as they closed the open ground towards the Militia's position. He had no idea what condition Covington's people remained in after the pounding they had just received but he hoped that they could hold on long enough for him to flip the rescue over to his side and close the trap door on their enemy. He quickly snatched up his two Lieutenants and improvised an Op Order.

"Lt. Sievers you take Forth Platoon and get down this ridgeline behind us and seal off that road. Make sure whatever you ambush stays ambushed . . . you're covering our backdoor. Ski you're on Third Platoon, get to the Sullivan house and get those people out of there, use one squad to escort them out of harms way back towards Sievers and with the other three squads to anchor valley floor. If they have a CP down there . . . take it out."

"ROGER SKIPPER!"

"First and Second platoons are on me and we're going to hit them from this flank."

He looked sternly into the eyes of his young officer. "SEMPER FI!"

"SEMPER FI!" They returned in unison.

Covington didn't know how many of his people were still alive. He didn't know if the Marines were still across the way, but by this time it didn't really matter. He was too old to change, too old to run, too old and too damn p*ssed off to care anymore. He opened up the ammo cans at his feet and pushed them up to the side of the firing position. The muzzle of the old battle hardened M1 pushed out onto the other side of his reinforced firing position. At three hundred yards he opened fire and saw the first troop drop. Suddenly the woods around him were filled with the comforting and familiar bark of the famous M1 30.06 round and the equally famous metallic ping of M1 clips being ejected.

On the other side of the valley Captain Melton spread his men out just inside the tree line. The Federal troops were closing on the Militia line even through the wickedly accurate hail of gunfire. Their numbers were simply too much and it was now time to join the battle. He looked left and right and received the ready signals from his Staff NCO's and fire team leaders.

"FIX!" Melton paused and received the reply from his troops "FIX!" "BAY—O—NETS!"
"BAYONETS!" echoed through the woods.

The Militia fire was dwindling in intensity as the Federal troops continued to press forward. They were less than fifty yards away when the Marines hit the back side of their lines and ripped through their backsides like, well,

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

like sh*t though a goose. The fighting was evil, wicked, mean and nasty. Hardly a man walked out of the valley that day without having left some of his blood on the field of battle.

The old warrior and the young warrior stood on the burnt ground and shared in the fleeting moment of victory.

“What will you do now Captain?” Covington asked.

“Airborne . . . I haven’t a flaming @ss clue.”

They looked out over the battleground littered with the detritus of war.

“You know, that no one will ever really know what took place here today, Sergeant.”

“No Captain, that is not entirely too. We know, and others will learn.”

They sat there in silence until one of Melton’s Gunnery Sergeant’s called out to him.

“CAPTAIN! I THINK YOU BETTER HAVE A LOOK AT THIS!”

The pair walked back into the carnage of the battle. Gunny Ross was kneeling over one of the dead Federal troops and had partially pulled his blouse off.

“Skipper what do you make of this?” The Gunny had his hand hooked into the dog tag around the dead soldiers neck. It wasn’t American. It wasn’t even in English.

“What the hell does this man Captain?” Covington asked in amazement.

“Are there any more like this Gunny?”

“We’ve just started checking now Sir, but it looks like a good number of these men are not American.”

Desert Doc

Chapter 25 - We who are about to die . . .

Max, Andy, and Darcy sat around the kitchen table. Lisa occasionally looked out small slits in the cardboard that covered the windows, and an AK-47 was slung from her shoulder. A small rechargeable florescent light sat on top of the now silent refrigerator, dimly illuminating the room.

“The patrols are becoming more frequent.” Said Max, “They are also starting to go house-to-house. It’s only a matter of time before they get to us. We have to go.”

“Damn it. Damn it, Damn it Damn it. I was hoping it wouldn’t come to this. We had so much invested in this place. The solar panels, the well . . .” Andy trailed off.

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The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“It’s not worth our lives, Honey.” Said Darcy pragmatically.

“I know. It’s just . . . a waste.” Said Andy with a sigh.

“So how are we going to get out of here? The CB said they have got roadblocks set up on every road out of town. For all we know, those helos have FLIR. They’d spot us before we got far through the woods.” Asked Max. “Any ideas?”

“What we need is a diversion,” said Lisa. “A big one.”

“Maybe we can do that,” said Andy. “I think I have an idea. How far does their perimeter extend?”

“Well,” said Max. “From the scanner and the CB reports, it looks like they are patrolling pretty heavy around Highway B to the north, County H to the West, and crossways on 21. They don’t seem to bother too much with people inside that triangle. Some deliveries still get made, a little traffic. If they catch them, they search them of course, but mostly let them go. Aside from the 'troublemakers' of course. They seem to be content to confiscate guns, radios and most of the food.

"That, and not letting people out of the triangle.

"We’re closest to the north and west point of the triangle. If we can get through there, and get a ways away, then we should be out of the out of the woods, so to speak.”

“That’s the beginning of the problems, though. The cabin is seventy miles away. Are we going to walk all that way?” Asked Lisa, “Those packs are gonna be damned heavy by the end of seventy miles!”

“It beats the hell out of this refugee camp.” Said Max.

“Darcy, will you and Lisa keep watch for a while? I need to go downstairs and get to work on our diversions.” asked Andy

“Sure. We’ll holler if we need anything. Get the light, will you?” She replied.

Max followed Andy down the stairs. There was more light in the basement, as there were only two windows, and those were heavily masked. Max and Andy blinked several times in the harsh glare of the several small fluorescent lights. They were wired into Andy’s battery bank, as well as some other 12V devices, like the radios and the blower to the propane furnace. Andy led Max to a small back room that contained several industrial type-shelving units containing Rubbermaid totes. He selected one and pulled it from the shelf, then indicated another with his foot.

“Grab that one too, will you?” Andy asked.

“Sure.” Max replied and hefted the second tote.

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They carried the totes to a table in the corner of the room. Andy set his on top of the table, then indicated to Max to set his on the floor. Andy sat in a chair and looked at Max for a moment.

“Max . . .” He spoke, “There are some preparations I have made that I haven’t told you about. They aren’t exactly legal, and I didn’t want to put you in a moral quandary. I know you’re a good cop, and . . . I just didn’t want to make you have to choose.”

“Well buddy, we’re beyond that now.” Replied Max “What have you got?”

“As far as the diversion, I have these.” Said Andy as he pulled several two-inch pipe nipples from the tote. Next he removed several inexpensive grocery store kitchen timers, a bag containing model rocket engine igniters, and some cans of “FFFF” black powder.

“Hmmm.” said Max “Playing the mad bomber, are we? These will surely attract their attention.”

“Wait!” said Andy with a grin “There’s more!” He pulled a Rube Goldberg-looking contraption consisting of hose clamps, wires, a solenoid and a few other items out of the box.

“What in the Hell is that?” Exclaimed Max.

“That my friend, is an attacking Militiaman.”

“What?”

“This is so great, I surprise myself. Look, this doohickey gets hose clamped onto a spare AK I have. We put a 100 round drum in it, and a bipod. The solenoid can be triggered by a timer, or by remote control. The solenoid can activate the trigger one shot at a time, or in bursts. The bastards will go nuts looking for the attackers using their fancy thermal imaging gear, because there isn’t anybody! This thing works great, I tested it”

Max stood silently for a moment, looking at his friend’s grinning visage, then at the wire and metal contraption he held aloft triumphantly. With a sudden grin, he said, “Andy, you are without a doubt, one of the most clever people I have ever known.”

“Yeah, I know. Tell your friends. Listen, the hard part is going to be getting all of this stuff to the other side of town.”

“That will be the bitch. We’ll work on that later. What do we do here?” Max asked sitting down on the folding chair.

“Ok,” replied Andy, warming to the task at hand “What we’re gonna do is make a couple of old-fashioned pipe bombs. Now, if we really needed explosive power, we could make some of Uncle Ragnar’s ‘Homemade C-4’ or use ‘Bullseye’ powder.”

“Who’s ‘Uncle Ragnar?’” questioned Max.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Uncle Ragnar is Ragnar Benson. He’s a guy who writes books about all sorts of things self-reliant people should know about. He wrote a couple of explosives books, about how to make some pretty decent improvised stuff. I am a big fan of his ‘Improved Homemade C-4’ and ‘Detonators: How to make ‘em.’”

“What was that about the Bullseye powder?” Said Max.

“Bullseye is a double-base powder. If you put a blasting cap in it, it gives great detonation velocity. It is an explosive, rather than just a propellant.”

“What does that mean?”

“When you were a kid, did you ever pull the bullets out of a .22 shell and touch a match to it?”

“Yeah. It just burned like a match head.”

“Right. All gunpowder does that. Explosives are a different story. They really, well, explode, but they need a detonator: A small initial charge to get the detonation going. For instance, with military C-4, we are talking about detonation velocities of about 22,500 meters per second. Dynamite is slower than that. The speed with which an explosive detonates is its ‘brisance’ or its shattering ability. Dynamite has low brisance. It’s good at ‘pushing.’ C-4 has high brisance, so it’s good at cutting steel, etc. C-4 is also used in grenade filler. Really flings those shards out. Remember that dopey kid who planted those mailbox bombs in the shape of a smiley face? Well, on many levels the kid was a low-wattage bulb, but he was really dumb when it came to pipe bombs. Nobody got killed because he was a crappy bomb-maker. Black powder like we’re using, and gunpowder have really low brisance. They just plain burn too slow to send fragments of metal at really fast velocities. We are going to be using black powder, because we don’t care about good shrapnel. It would be a waste of time, material and a risk to brew up some detonators, just so we could have a really great series of explosions. They won’t be able to tell the difference, and it doesn’t matter if they could. They’re just distractions.”

“Well, all right buddy. Let’s get to it!”

Andy directed Max to drill holes in the end caps, feed a few inches of wire through, then seal the holes around the wires with silicone sealant. Meanwhile, Andy carefully unscrewed the backs of the kitchen timers. He carefully snipped the wires going to the tiny speakers, and spliced in a length of wire, that he then wired to a relay. He connected the wires from the battery to the other poles of the relay, then to a model rocket engine igniter. He set the timer for 10 seconds, then started it. The timer counted down to zero, then the relay clicked, and a moment later a small flash and puff of smoke marked the ignition of the rocket igniter. He glanced through the acrid wisp of smoke at Max and grinned. “That’ll do.” He said.

“All right. We’ll put the powder in at the last minute to minimize the risk of while we’re handling it. We still need . . .”

A thump came from above them. Max and Andy both unslung their AKs, and ran for the stairs. As soon as they reached the steps, they turned off the lights and ascended as quietly as possible. Switching off the safeties with a quiet metallic click, they rose on cat’s feet to the top of the stairs. The door swung silently open, and they

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

crossed to the kitchen. Darcy met them in the middle of the room, and pulled both men close. Her AK was slung over her shoulder, pistol grip in her right hand, finger outside the trigger guard.

She whispered, “A humvee just pulled into the driveway. It’s still there, with its lights off. I can’t tell what they are doing.”

Both men nodded and walked to the windows, bending down to look out the small, quarter-sized hole near the bottom of the lowest pane. The humvee remained still, then the doors opened and four soldiers got out. They stood and stretched glancing around with mild curiosity. One of them jumped up on the hood of the jeep, then doffed his MOPP mask and hood.

“Ah, geez man! It’s good to be out of that crap. Hey, gimme one of them beers we got from that house.”

Another soldier, also out of his MOPP gear reached through the rear window of the humvee and emerged with four beers, and proceeded to hand them out. Four soft “Pssst” noises could faintly be heard as the tops were popped.

“Jesus, man. What are we doing here?” said one of the men, who were only faintly visible in the dark.

“Havin’ a beer, Man!” Came the all-too-predictable response.

“You’re such a goddamn punk, Simmons.”

“F*ck you, man.”

“ I mean what are we doin’ here, to these people? These poor bastards don’t need us fuckin’ with ‘em. Hell, they’re lucky to be alive at all.”

“Top says were here to stop ‘em from spreading the Plague.”

“Then why we gotta take their radios, man?”

Silence followed.

“We shouldn’t be goin’ into peoples houses, neither. Even if they’re prob’ly dead.”

“Don’t say that with your mouth fulla beer, man.”

“F*ck you, Simmons.”

“We oughta check this place out. Don’t look burned. Might be some smokes or more beer.”

“Goddamn it Simmons, what did I just get through sayin’?”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Listen, man. The Guard don’t pay too well. My kid’s got to eat. The script and rations they give us is shit. This is just a little retirement fund I got goin’. Looky here at this watch. This’s a Rolex man. Where did I get it? Same place I got that beer: Some guy’s house who was way too dead to give a shit.”

“It still ain’t right. That’s all.”

“Come on. We’re due back any minute. Gear up and let’s get rolling.”

The four dark shapes tipped their beers back tossed the empties at Andy’s garage, donned their gas masks and climbed back in their humvee. The engine rattled to life in the still night, and the large vehicle backed out the driveway and rolled off.

A collective sigh of relief washed across the kitchen as the four watchers slumped onto the floor. They all sat quietly in the darkness for a few moments. The conversation echoed in their minds. The soldiers didn’t seem that bad. They seemed like they weren’t too crazy about enforcing the orders they had been given.

“I sure wish those guys would just go home.” Said Lisa.

“I bet they do too.” Said Max

“It’d be a shame to have to get in a firefight with ‘em.” replied Lisa.

“Well, let’s be careful and see that it doesn’t happen. I hope I never have to aim this thing at somebody and pull the trigger.” Andy said, hefting the AK. “Darcy, you still have that patch collection?”

“You mean the insignia? Yes, I think I can find it.” She said.

“Good. I’m gonna grab my BDUs. I want you to make me a lieutenant. With a little luck and all MOPPED up, I can plant the diversions and the ‘attacking militiaman’, and get the hell out of here without getting into a fire-fight.”

Andy stood, then retreated down the stairs to finish the pipe bombs. Max followed while Lisa resumed her watch out the masked windows. A long night was ahead.

Everyone had been able to sleep five hours or so, with finishing the work and rotating through watch. Darcy had finished the BDUs by morning. With the M17 gas mask and hood on, Andy was nearly unrecognizable as Andy.

“So what’s the plan?” asked Max, when they were alone in the basement. “Are you just going to carry them things in a duffel bag and leave them under humvees or what?”

“I thought about that, but Darcy couldn’t find my Santa suit.” Andy grinned “Actually, the CB said they are doing a sweep down at the strip mall. You know, ‘commandeering’ goods and food. Also, they’ll be looking through Jerry’s files down at the sporting goods store. I hope to God he had the sense to burn all those forms. The name of every person who bought a firearm, and what they bought is on those files. Anyway, I suspect there’ll be a lot of confusion. The mall’s about a half-mile from here. I am hoping that if anybody spots me,

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

they'll think I am just a lone lieutenant out looking for the next target. With the pack I may have some explaining to do. With any luck I can slip into a CUCV or a humvee, get to the other side of town, plant the goodies, then come back here.

"I'll be on comms the whole time, so you'll know how it's going. It'll work one of two ways. I'll either do this thing according to plan, or they'll start shooting at me, and I'll start shooting back. Either way, you'll have your diversion. When I say 'go', light out of here in the Toyota. Head for Johnson's stables. If I make it, I'll meet up with you there. If everything goes well, I'll drive the humvee here, we'll load up and head for the stables."

"Are you nuts? Does Darcy know about this plan?" Max hissed. "You weren't even in the service! Christ, let me do this part!"

"I thought about that. I really did. But if I fail, the girls will need you to get them out of here. You are stronger and faster than I am, and quite frankly, you're better with a gun. They'll need that. My part has nothing to do with strength or speed. Just bluffing and sneakiness. And don't you dare let on to Darcy that this ridiculous plan is as half-assed as it is."

"This is stupid, Andy. Plain, old stupid. There's got to be a better way."

"Fine. What? What's your plan? Huh? Let's hear it. You don't have one, do you?"

"Don't be an ass, you ass."

"Listen, I'm not happy about this plan either. But what's the alternative? We can't blast our way out. You can't dig a tunnel fast enough. I don't have a helicopter hiding up my ass. This is it. This is all I can think of. And we gotta get out of here."

Max sat heavily on the couch, mind racing through options. He couldn't think of any. This was his best friend, and he didn't like him putting himself at risk. But the fact was, someone had to take the risk. As a cop, Max was used to a certain amount of risk. It was part of the job: Every traffic stop or domestic dispute was another chance to die. Andy was a paramedic. Some risk, yes. But not with the frequency that Max was used to. It seemed to Max like sending a lamb to the slaughter to allow Andy to do this. But his logic was coherent.

He looked at Andy. "You'd better make it out of there. I will be one pissed off unit if you go and get killed. I'm not kidding."

"Hey, I was in Drama club, remember?" Said Andy with a gulp and nervous smile. "Let's get stuff ready to go. We'll go tonight."

Together they ascended the stairs.

Late afternoon arrived. Sober silence reigned as Andy donned the lieutenant's outfit. Darcy helped him with the uniform, adjusting the collar with needless precision.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

She looked up suddenly into Andy's eyes, her own eyes brimming. "You be careful. I don't know if it'll be worth going on if you don't make it."

"Aw Hon," Andy whispered with a forced smile "It'll be a cakewalk. You'll see."

"I see that this is a dumb-assed plan, and you're about an idiot or more desperate than you let on for doing it." She replied, her face deadly serious.

Andy held his tongue for a moment and gazed into his wife's eyes. "I'm glad I married you. You're smarter than I give you credit for. Way smarter than me."

"Just come back, OK?"

"I will." He said, hefting the packs containing the distractions. He turned to Max and Lisa. "I'm gonna keep pretty quiet on the comms. Listen close, cause I might be in a hurry when I come back. Take off in the Toyota if you hear a lot of shooting and I don't call. If there's no shooting and no call . . . well, use your discretion."

"Just get out of here, will you?" Said Max with the rictus of a smile.

Andy pulled the M17 gas mask on, secured the hood, gave a thumbs-up and walked into the waning sunlight.

AGreyMan

Chapter 26 - Molon Labe'

"So how long until I can expect a knock at the door?" David McMillan asked.

Sheriff Eric Eckhart leaned his chair back and took another sip of coffee. "Well with everything else going on in the country right now . . . I would guess it will be quite some time." He paused. "But I wouldn't go about making it easy for them to nab your @ss. You've sure p*ssed off that Torgelson gal and I don't think she's gonna let the matter drop any time soon."

"So what do we do now?" Denise looked at the two of them questioningly; she was very concerned about the current turn of events.

Eckhart blew out his breath and leaned forward. "First off we need to get you two into the system here."

"System?" David looked at him.

"Actually . . . the Home Guard." Eckhart replied matter of factly. "The Militia."

"Militia!" They both replied in unison.

"But aren't they illegal?" David asked.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“David it’s a little too late for you to be worrying about legalities don’t you think.” The burly Sheriff replied.
“But as a matter of fact . . . No.”

Eckhart gave the pair a brief outline of militia history, its roots, rights and responsibilities. David and Denise listened intently. When the sheriff finally came up for air almost an hour later they had only about a hundred questions between the two of them to ask.

“Erick, all we’ve ever heard about militia’s was that they are full of war mongering, bigoted rednecks just looking for a fight with someone, what makes you’re group so different?” Denise asked seriously.

“She doesn’t beat around the bush does she?” Eckhart said matter of factly to David.

“Not in all the years I’ve known her.”

“Denise, the vast vast majority of that is pure propaganda. Government spin and media hype. True the few bad eggs out there get all the press and there are a tremendous number of ‘wanna be’s’ just looking to strut their stuff and play ‘weekend Rambo’, but we won’t have anything to do with those.”

He took another sip of coffee and continued. “Many of the large ‘official’ state militias across the country are full of those types of people. Now that is not to say that they don’t also have some very dedicated and serious members also, but the one negates the other. That’s what happens when you go out and openly recruit without being able to truly screen your applicants. The FBI and BATF and now the Homeland Security folks have heavily infiltrated most of these militia groups over the years. Hell, some of their top people are working for or with the Feds. It’s a sad thing to say but they are loaded with termites in the woodwork That’s why we don’t and never have openly recruited for members. Just like you two here, we’ve been watching you since you first came in here. When you were seriously looking for property and a job here we checked [you] out.”

“You checked us out?!”

“That is ONE OF THE ADVANTAGES of being the sheriff.” He chuckled. “Why do you think you got such a great deal on this property of yours?”

They both looked at each other in utter disbelief.

“And both of your jobs.”

“All this to get us into the militia?”

“No not really, not at first anyways.” He looked out through the window. “We’re always on the look out for good solid citizens to join our little community here. You both looked like first-class prospects, a pair of solid hardworking citizens. We like that around here. Then . . . when you turned out to be heavily leaning toward the patriot side of the fence . . . well . . . we were very encouraged to say the least.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“So you’re saying . . . that we’ve been under the microscope for these past . . .” David stammered at Sheriff Eckhart in shocked disbelief.

“Five years.” Eckhart interrupted. “Yep, that’s about right.”

Field Agent Henry H. Hinton Jr. couldn’t believe the report that his boss had just dropped in the middle of his desk. He flipped the pages back and forth several times to make sure that he grasped what he was reading. According to this report two detectives and a state educational director had been stopped at gunpoint and their detainee abducted by several camouflaged and heavily armed men . . . in his district! A one David McMillan, whose teaching credential had been recently revoked, had been placed under arrest by the detectives for operating an unlicensed school and secondarily charged with resisting arrest and child endangerment.

“Child endangerment . . . oh yes . . . because the unlicensed school had kids in it . . . figures ” He thought to himself shaking his head. **“It’s getting more stupid every day!”** Such arrests were on the increase since the state had outlawed private home schooling in an effort to increase enrollments in the failing public schools and regain control of educational system. Such heavy-handed tactics were becoming commonplace and many districts had begun to actually employ active Truant Officers that went out looking for non-enrolled children. It was the part about the five to seven heavily armed men in camouflage that really grabbed the agent’s attention. The arresting detectives stated in their report that the ambushers carried AR15’s with high capacity magazines and appeared to be wearing full battle dress: ammo pouches, canteens, shoulder harnesses, pistols, the WHOLE NINE YARDS!”

“These people were loaded for bear!”

They were entirely too professional in their actions and appearance as well as disciplined in their conduct. Only two of them spoke and then only minimally, just enough to get the job done and secure Mr. McMillan from the arresting detectives. An overwhelming display of firepower to be sure: mostly AR’s and maybe several heavier weapons, possibly FN’s or something along those lines and all recently outlawed in this state!

“Hmmm.” Agent Hinten spun about in his chair and banged on the keyboard of his computer. He scanned down the screen. Nothing added up. The militia elements in California had been pretty much run to ground a long time ago. Those that weren’t entirely eliminated were heavily infiltrated and kept on a short leash. Even open training by militia members was forbidden here. This new element was totally unexpected and worried the field agent.

“We’ve never had even a hint of trouble from that area before, never. Hmmm Sheriff Eric K. Eckhart is the law around there.” A few more key strokes. “He’s got a solid record, been on the job for a while, good arrest record. Runs a clean shop . . . hmmm and now this? Doesn’t make any sense.”

He quickly dialed up the number and was put through to the sheriff in short order.

“Hello Sheriff Eckhart. This is Henry Hinten with the FBI. I’m calling in regards to this McMillan incident.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Meanwhile a copy of that same report was making the rounds through another federal agency, but there it was causing a considerable stir. In San Francisco at the Field Division office of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the Division Director/Special Agent in Charge Mike Hernandez stood stoically before his management staff. Hernandez was known for his long fuse and rarely did anything ever upset his apple cart. He was proud of the great strides achieved in this state towards eventually removing all guns from the general population. His state was known for having some of the strictest gun regulations in the nation. He knew that at the present rate he could very well see a gun free California before he retired from the Bureau and where California went so did the nation. Progress was slow but sure and he knew it was just a matter of time, especially since the Executive Order to disarm the population had come out due to the current situation. But this most recent event did not bode well, not well at all.

“Dickerson.” He began, addressing his Public Information Officer. “What do we know about this region of the state? Any known militia elements in that area?”

Dickerson shook his head. “Most of the citizen militias have either been eliminated here or the few remaining groups are totally compromised by either our agents or the FBI’s boys. Usually both. This is the first we’ve heard of anything up in that part of the state.”

“That has me worried as well. I talked to Ben over at the FBI and they’re just as in the dark as we are.” Hernandez shook his head as well. “Ben’s sent over the file on this McMillan character and there is essentially nothing there. He was a medic in the military, a Gulf War vet, retired from the service, sparkling record, a few medals, nothing exceptional to speak of. This guys record is too clean . . . not even a moving violation to his credit. He completed his degree after he retired and took up teaching, that is until he ran into this . . .” He looked at the file questioning. “Senior Educational Director Torgelson . . . is that name right? What kind of a name is Torgelson?”

“Anyways, Torgelson had him arrested for operating an unlicensed school or something along those lines. As they were driving off they got stopped and this McMillan guy is rescued by what appears to be a heavily armed band of militiamen. There is no question in the two arresting officers minds that they were facing a professional force armed with AR’s and heavier assault weapons, all of which are absolutely forbidden! Besides the fact that the weapons were pointed at officers in the line of duty!” He paused to let that sink in. “Ladies and Gentlemen . . . we’ve got a real problem here and we’re going to need a lot more firepower on this operation if we plan to get to the bottom of this issue!”

The Division Director turned his back to the agents and looked out the window of their office fifteen floors above the street below. “If this McMillan is important enough for a militia unit to rescue him, then he is important for us to get a hold of and see just what we can squeeze out of him and find out what he knows about this . . . this . . . threat!”

“Ok David, you’re wired in now.” The tall gangly telephone repairman began. “This here is your panic button, there’s one in the bedroom and out in your shop as well. The lines are buried out to the sender and totally safe from tampering. This phone in here is isolated from your other phone lines and will link you to the rest of your cell and HQ. Everything is scrambled and encrypted so you should be pretty safe from eavesdropping. Still the

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

best thing to do is keep it brief, to the point and vague.” Paul Beck the Home Guard’s communications wizard gave him a wink and then continued to brief David and Denise on their new communication and security setups he had rigged throughout their house.

These precautions were especially necessary after Sheriff Eckhart had received calls from both the FBI and the BATF offices. He wanted to make sure that his latest recruits would not suddenly turn up missing and in custody of any one of several alphabet agencies. Eckhart was somewhat surprised that things were starting to develop so soon in light of the current plague epidemic and the unrest that seemed centered around the much larger population centers across the country. Things were pretty hairy just about everywhere and it appeared that he might have underestimated the impact of his rescue attempt. Still David and Denise were valuable additions to the Guard and he was going to insure that it stayed that way.

The instigator of this current situation, Madam Torgelson, had been persuaded to take a vacation out of the immediate area until things cooled down. Especially after the tires on both of her cars were slashed, their windows knocked out and threats were spray painted on the sides of the vehicles. While Eckhart had not worked any overtime to apprehend the culprits of the automobile vandalism, when someone set fire to her home after she left and it had almost spread to the rest of the neighborhood he came down hard. Enough was enough and such vigilante actions were not going to be tolerated, at least not while he was in charge.

Over the course of the next few months several odd chaps had cruised into town and were cautiously asking questions about recent events. The locals were more than happy to direct them to the best stretches along trout streams in the region, which lure or fly worked best and when, but when questions began to point too close to home.

“ . . . well nothing really much ever happens around here?” or “Oh those fires a few weeks back . . . well we’ve got some pretty old gas lines around, or could have been lightening, bad wiring, you know those squirrels are always building nests around water heaters and such and every so often . . . ”

Beside Torgelson’s place, recently Purdy’s Gun Shop, the only fulltime dedicated gunsmith and shop in town had experienced a sudden fire that almost got away from the local volunteer fire department. As it was the fire consumed most of his store. While they did manage to save some of the stock in the front of the store, his Gunsmithing equipment, the recent shipment of surplus cammies and hunting clothing he had stored in the back stockroom for Christmas and all of his records were now either ashes or lumps of melted metal. The fire department blamed it on faulty wiring that should have been replaced several decades past but never was and the stacks of old cammies piled up against a faulty outlet.

As it happened, old man Purdy had been planning for years to retire and take up fishing full time, and this seemed as good a time as any to start off on his new career. It was too bad about all those records going up in flames as well and his sizable inventory in firearms, ammunition and hunting equipment.

During this lull in the storm the McMillan’s felt like they had been dropped into the middle of the storm. They suddenly found themselves part of an organization that they didn’t even know existed just a few months before. And the Sheriff had been right about the seriousness of the business they fallen into. Outside of Eckhart and their immediate Fire Team and Section they didn’t even know who the other members of the Home Guard were. This was a ‘cell’ configuration as Eckhart described it. This was to minimize any damage done should a cell’s

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

security be blown. This way they couldn't possibly expose anyone else in the organization. Something that had time and time again spelled the death knell for other much larger and far better known organizations that the 'powers that be' had corrupted or taken apart piece by piece over the years.

David and Denise made up a Battle Team of two riflemen, together with another Battle Team they formed a Fire Team. Normally husbands and wives were not assigned to the same Fire Team, but as their kids were all up and out they did not need to worry about tending any little ones. As light riflemen they carried the standard arm agreed upon by the members of the Home Guard, which was the AR15A2. It provided a high rate of fire, reliability (if properly maintained), moderate weight and low recoil. When a Fire Team was operating together one of the members would often carry a heavy rifle that was designated to provide hard-hitting suppressive fire for the Team. This niche was filled by the STG-58 or a similar variant of the famous battle proven FN FAL. While many members also maintained an impressive array of M1A's, Garands, G-1's, and a fair mixing of AK variants as well as a multitude of bolt and lever-action rifles, these two weapons, the AR and the FN were the bread and butter of the Guard.

The next level of organization, the Section, was made up of two Fire Teams, a Section Leader and a Sniper, this 10 'man' team made up the primary mission unit of the Guard. In dire situations two sections could be combined to form a Platoon or Two Platoons could be combined to field a Company. In all the Home Guard could field three Companies of dedicated and trained militiamen and Big Brother never even had a passing thought that they existed at all. As Sheriff Eckhart had explained to the McMillans, "The key to success in these questionable times is invisibility."

Jed Stewart was headed out to his favorite fishing hole to pick off a few breakfast-sized trout. As was his habit he picked up a thermos full of fresh coffee and a box of small sugar coated donuts at the Circle K on the edge of town. He was mentally already on the stream flipping flies out across the moving water in the still crisp pre-dawn light. Then just as he was just about to pull out on the highway the convoy hit town. A handful of government Suburbans with blacked out windows was followed by an equal number of large military trucks, bigger than the deuce and a half's he remembered from days in the military during the Korean War, rumbled into town. Jed turned the aging '64 Ford pickup away from his fishing hole and began to follow at a distance the convoy of trucks as they rolled menacingly through the sleeping village.

David awoke to the sound of someone frantically pounding on his front door and his dogs barking defensively.

"What the hell?" He looked at the alarm clock and his eyes finally focused on the numbers. "Who the hell is busting down my door at ten minutes to five in the morning?"

Then the reality of the situation hit him! He shook his wife awake. "Denise get up we've got problems . . . NOW DENISE!" David sprang to life and quickly threw on his jeans and a sweatshirt, grabbed his shotgun and headed for the front door. As he exited the bedroom he could see that the front perimeter alarms had been activated and he almost tripped over one of their Shepherds trying to run down the hallway. The beating on the door continued and he could just make out voices on the other side of the heavy oak door. The voices sounded familiar and when he looked out the peephole he quickly recognized his closest neighbors and the two other members

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

of his Fire Team. It took David a few seconds to slide back the blocking beams and release the reinforced dead bolts. The heavy door slowly swung open and both militiamen quickly dove inside.

“DAVY THE FEDS ARE ON THEIR WAY HERE AND THEY’RE PACKING HEAVY!” Larry O’Connor belted out as he dumped his war gear inside against the wall and dashed back to his truck just outside.

“WHAT?!” David looked at the pair in utter disbelief.

Joseph Stanowski the second man threw his gear beside Larry’s and quickly followed his partner back out to the truck. “Ol’ Jed spotted them rolling into town and hit the panic button. We’re just minutes ahead of them right now! QUICK HELP US UNLOAD THE TRUCK!”

The trio raced to move the gear into the safety of the McMillan home and finished just in time to hear the big five-ton diesel military trucks in the convoy decelerate less than a mile away as they dropped into the valley. By the time the first Suburban hit the McMillan driveway, a quarter mile from the house, the four militia members were locking down the last defensive window shutters and starting to dig through and reposition the gear Larry and Joseph had brought.

David and Denise had been members of the Home Guard Militia for less than two months and now they suddenly found themselves barricaded in their own home with two other militiamen as they were quickly being surrounded by black and cammie clad, heavily armed federal agents and Home Security troops. Things did not look good for the home team.

Special Agent Jordan Kenner halted the convoy at the entrance of the McMillan driveway. He quickly spread out the group into the special assault teams that they had brought for this mission. They planned a total envelopment before they hit the front door and went in heavy. The Division Director had demanded a quick and effective job without any loose strings. He felt that this McMillan character was the key to gaining valuable information on the heretofore-unknown militia element in this area. Kenner’s job was to get his hands on McMillan and get him back in one piece. They would worry about justification of their actions later as well as filling in the blank spaces on the search warrant. Who knows, they could actually find something that they could use against this McMillan guy, if not . . . well headquarters would take care of such little details.

So far as he could tell their arrival had gone undetected and Agent Kenner felt that they would be in and out before anyone in this backwater mountain community had any clue as to what had just happened. He smiled to himself as his driver accelerated up the driveway, he would have the paperwork finished and be home well before dinner. He of course couldn’t have been more wrong. The first indication of trouble came as they rounded the bend in the driveway and encountered the cattle guard grating, or rather, where the cattle guard grating should have been. Larry and Joseph had thrown a logging chain around the heavy gratings and dragged them off and down the gravel road leaving a five foot wide three foot deep ditch that had to be crossed to continue up the driveway.

“WHAT THE HELL!” The driver slammed on the brakes and the big dark Suburban skid to a stop on the gravel just shy of dropping the front wheels into the hole. “SHIT!”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

From the McMillan house the Fire Team peeked through the fighting slots of the second story windows. Larry and Joseph started to giggle. They could see that the big Suburban had suddenly slid to a stop just before the first gate's stone pillars.

"I knew that would slow them up a bit!" Larry chuckled to himself.

"What?" Denise asked.

"Larry got the bright idea of pulling out the cattle guards and dragging them up to the house." Joseph replied. "Figured that anyone rushing the house in a vehicle would drop off their front axle in that ditch of yours and slow down the whole parade!" He continued to chuckle.

"We've got movement off to the east." Denise whispered.

"Off to the west as well." Larry added.

They could see faint movement in the advancing light of that gray dawn beyond the perimeter of their property as troops in black and camouflaged uniforms began to maneuver into their positions. As they neared the property lines the intruders ran into the second major obstacle of the morning, an encircling wall of biological concertina wire that David had first planted over four years ago. This natural fence was made up of a nasty mixture of Thorny Pyracantha (aka Fire Thorn Bush), Catclaw Acacia, Jumping Chollas and Prickly Pears, presenting a wicked hedgerow of spikes and thorns that made regular military razor wire look like harmless baling twine. The invaders were stopped cold in their tracks!

Kenner was fit to be tied. They had abandoned their vehicle and began to approach the house on foot when the radio reports began coming in about the impassable wall of razor sharp plants that completely surrounded the McMillan property. None of his special agents and Home Security troops could get into their planned positions without making an incredible amount of noise necessary to cut their way through the thick hedges and even then they were not sure how long it would take to break through the entangled mess. Kenner and his front door force was on their own for now.

Just under a hundred yards out the frontal force got their first good look at the McMillan "Cabin".

"Holy Keeerist!" One of the lead agents exclaimed under his breath. "It's a fricken fortress boss!"

The ten men team spread out and surveyed the situation. There was still no alarm from the house, so they still had the element of surprise on their side. They hadn't heard any dogs barking, though they had a strong reason to believe that the McMillan's did in fact have at least one German Shepherd, probably two. The perimeter containment teams were stuck outside the property lines, but if they couldn't get in, then anyone inside couldn't get out. They could still perform their function where they were. Kenner continued to advance his team towards the front gate.

The McMillan compound began to look more daunting the closer they got. Special Agent Kenner was reminded of a Spanish Hacienda or old Spanish Mission by the blocky massive walls that surrounded the home and the heavy arch that the main gate was set into. It wasn't until they were almost upon the compound just fifty yards

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

out that he realized that all the window shutters were closed. Something wasn't right. It was at that moment realization that all hell started to break loose. A tree full of Guinea hens that roosted in the old scrub oak just off the gravel driveway were spooked by the early morning approach of strangers and went ballistic. Caught by the unexpected ruckus of a dozen birds launching from the tree screaming suddenly into their faces, one of the black clad agents panicked and let rip an burst of automatic fire from his MP5 shredding several of the birds and shattering the bark off the old gnarled oak.

Figuring that the element of surprise was now blown the Special Agent took off toward the main gate in an effort to get reach and bash in through the front door before any one in the house could respond. It went from bad to worst as Kenner hit the front gate and found that it was solidly locked against intrusion. The heavy Spanish styled wrought iron gate had been reinforced in the last few weeks with three-quarter inch steel plate that David had acquired at a metal salvage yard. It was the type used in road construction to cover excavations so that cars could pass over the ditches until they could complete the job. There was simply no way to get at the lock, the hinges were not exposed and nothing short of a tank was going to budge that iron wall. Kenner was blocked and effectively dead in the water. Suddenly a gaggle of geese started up, hissing, spitting and honking wildly!

"Holy Sh*t!" Kenner shook his head in frustration. "What next?" Just then the dogs started to bark.

Larry hefted his FN, adjusted his combat vest and turned to leave the group observing from the second floor windows. "Guess I'll go see who is at the door."

Static erupted from the speaker mounted in the wall at the corner the front gate. Kenner turned towards the noise.

"Milford, stop harassing the critters you'll wake everyone in the whole damn valley. I told you yesterday we weren't going fishing with you this morning!"

Kenner looked dumbfounded at the speaker.

"Milford." Larry continued, suppressing his giggles. "I told you we're not going fishing today."

"Milford?" The speaker questioned.

Special Agent Kenner stepped in front of the speaker. "Ah . . . umm . . . ah, this is Special Agent Kenner here to see David McMillan."

"Special?" Larry paused "Special what?"

"What?"

"No I asked you first, WHAT?"

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“No, I said this is Special Agent Jordan Kenner of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. I want to speak with David McMillan . . . now!”

“Oh so now you’re getting pushy . . .” Larry covered his mouth with both hands to contain his laughter, it took him a few seconds to compose himself. “I don’t care if you’re Special Agent Edgar J. Fricken Hoover today - - MILFORD, WE AIN’T GOING FISHING THIS MORNING AND THAT’S FINAL!” Larry shouted into the intercom in his best mimic of a hillbilly accent.

By this time Joseph, David and Denise were standing in the hallway staring at Larry who seemed about to wet his pants over the intercom conversation. Meanwhile outside the gate Special Agent Kenner was at a total loss of what to do next.

Seven hours later, noon was approaching and the stalemate was firmly entrenched. Other than a few machine gunned Guinea hens there had been no injuries sustained on either side beyond wounded pride and of course a multitude of pricks and scratches inflicted on anyone attempting to work their way through the biological concertina hedge rows surrounding the McMillan property. Finally with chainsaws and bush axes the federal forces had managed to knock a couple of access holes through the intimidating wall of thorns and “gotchas” only to find that the inner pastures between the hedgerows were designed in such a way that anyone entering there was totally exposed to direct fire from the house. The situation was considerably unnerving at best to the men that would have to cross those open fields during the final assault.

Federal Jack Boots left with nothing else to do began to firm up the immediate perimeter around the hacienda and then started in by expanding their influence though out the valley. Kenner sent armed agents to question McMillan’s immediate neighbors to try to gather more information on just what he was dealing with. This too met with failure.

“We’ve got problems boss.” Special Agent Erin Gabriel began as he entered the command center set up at the side of the road next to the McMillan driveway.

“What now?” Kenner asked.

“No one, and I do mean no one is talking to us.”

“How’s that?” Kenner turned to face the field agent.

“Almost no one is answering the door or if they do the first thing out of their mouths is ‘get a warrant’.” He shook his head. “We’re getting no cooperation at all and then to top that off I’ve had two agents shot at when they attempted to climb over locked gates!”

“I thought I heard shots, SH*T! Anybody hurt?”

“No they seemed to be warning shots but we weren’t going to push it at this time.” Agent Gabriel moved forward to the map table. “Let’s see,” He looked over the map. “The two houses that fired on us are up at this end of the valley and hmmm, there and there.” He pointed.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Agent Kenner turned to the local law enforcement officer. “Sheriff you better get your people under control or we’ll be forced to sweep this entire area!”

“Just hold your horses Hoss!” Sheriff Eckhart rose up to his full height of six feet three and one-half inches. “I had THIS SITUATION under control until you busted in here trying to start World War THREE!”

“You better check your attitude there Sheriff!”

“You haven’t seen attitude MISTER!” His color was rising and his “back forty voice” was starting to take over. “These are Proud God fearing people out here and they don’t take to kindly to your heavy handed lame @ss tactics. You come busting in here like you own the place and are about to capture Osama bin Laden himself. Flashing machine guns all over the place, shooting up livestock and all. Hell McMillan’s A SCHOOL TEACHER FOR CHRIST’S SAKE! And the people around here happen to like him very much.”

“So why doesn’t he come out and clear his name?” Kenner said snidely.

“So why in the hell did you shoot up his place at five o’clock in the morning? Why are you surrounding him with machine guns and assault troops! And what the hell are you doing here in the first place? All this man is accused of is running a private school!”

“HE WAS TAKEN AWAY FROM LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS SERVING A LAWFUL WARRANT BY MEMBERS OF THE LOCAL MILITIA ARMED WITH ILLEGAL ASSAULT WEAPONS! THAT’S WHY WE’RE HERE SHERIFF!”

“Kenner, you’re an idiot! He was rescued by local parents with bolt action hunting rifles who were protecting their children’s teacher from that Bull Dike Bitch that was sent here by those @ssholes in Sacramento to force their ultra liberal crap on the people of my county. Those store bought detectives had to cover their @sses with that made up story because they got caught with their pants down!”

“Your actions in this incident are already under question my good Sheriff.”

“You better shut this operation down Mr. Agent Man or you are just likely to find out how these people around here feel about your heavy handed tactics.”

“Are you threatening me Sheriff?” Kenner tried in vain to stretch his five-eleven frame to look Eckhart in the eye . . . it didn’t work.

“I never threaten anyone Special Agent, I don’t need to.” He let that sink in. “I’m just giving you a friendly warning that you’ve bit off far more than you can chew.”

“Agent Kenner, you better come and look at this.”

The agents emerged from the command tent and looked in the direction of the McMillan house. There flying overhead was the Stars and Stripes upside down and beneath it the Gadsden, Don’t Tread On Me flag, with a coiled rattlesnake on a field of bright yellow.

“He’s got the flag up upside down, that idiot!” One of the agents said.

“Damn! No that’s exactly what that idiot wants,” Kenner replied

The agents around the Senior Field Agent gave him a puzzled look.

“That, my uninformed colleagues, is the international signal for distress. It means that he’s in trouble and is requesting assistance.” Sheriff Eckhart stated calmly as he turned and walked out of the compound.

On the borders of the Gadsden flag Kenner could just make out the words written with a black marker. “RUBY RIDGE” on the leading edge and “WACO” on the trailing edge.

“SH*T!” Kenner muttered under his breath as he looked through the binoculars.

Eckhart quickly marched out of the compound and grabbed the arm of one of his Deputies standing next to his patrol car. “Send out the call Jeffery!”

Desert Doc

Chapter 27 - Bobcat by the tail

God is not on the side of the big battalions, but on the side of those who shoot best. - Voltaire

Once we have a war there is only one thing to do. It must be won. For defeat brings worse things than any that can ever happen in war. - Ernest Hemmingway

Sheriff Eckhart surveyed the scene of the government standoff of the McMillan homestead from his vantage point on the eastern ridgeline above the valley.

“I can’t believe that idiot Kenner has left the entire section up against this side of the ridge uncovered!” Eckert remarked as he handed the glasses to the large lump of grass and brush to his right. A gloved hand grasped the binoculars and they disappeared under the ghillie suit foliage.

“Hell Erick you can’t expect a rank amateurs to understand combat tactics! They’re used to busting into suburban homes, stomping on cats, kicking pregnant women and running down back streets and alleys . . . after people that play by THEIR RULES!”

Eckhart nodded in agreement. “So . . . do you think you can get in there without being detected?” He asked.

“How long do we have?” Squad Team Leader Jeffery Dennison asked.

“Kenner’s given them twenty-four hours to come out or they’re coming in.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Well that’s nice of him.” Jeffery commented sarcastically.

“Yeah ain’t it though. Our problem is that Kenner’s called in for some serious back up so we’ve got less than twelve hours to pull this off.”

The Squad Leader scrutinized the possible paths leading into the McMillan compound. Most of the routes down from the ridge required them to cross a large portion of exposed rock surface or sandstone bluff. The smallest point of exposure would require he and his team to rappel down over fifty feet of exposed surface before they would once again be under cover from the foliage.

“Hmmm . . . Ray what do you think? See that small drop over there to the right?”

The second foliage covered lump over from the Sheriff rustled. “Australian rappel down the face and into the brush below?”

“Yep.”

“Roger, looks like the best place. What about a diversion?”

“That would be nice. Erick can you draw their eyes away for say . . . ten to fifteen seconds?”

The Sheriff looked at his Squad Leader in amazement. “Are you sure that will be enough time?”

“To cross that open area with my team . . . yeah, that’s enough time. The rest of the stalk will take a couple of hours.” He paused at he reglased the objective below. “About five and a half or six hours . . . if you don’t want us to be detected that is.”

“How long until you need the diversion?”

“What do you think Ray? Hour, hour and a half after dark?”

“Yeah boss, I can have everything rigged up by then, sure thing.”

“Sounds good boys, I’ll get Davy working on the diversion.”

“Not Dangerous Dave?” Ray asked, sounding somewhat skeptical.

“Is that a problem?”

“Just tell him that we need a SMALL DIVERSION! I don’t want to be blown off the rope by the concussion of one of his over enthusiastic efforts!”

“Oh yeah, that’s right.” Eckhart mumbled. “I’d almost forgot about his last demonstration. I’ll be sure to remind him.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Hope so Erick, my eyebrows have finally grown back in.” The Squad Leader mentioned sourly.

The three men chuckled.

The interior of the normally bright McMillan home was now enveloped in a perpetual twilight with all the battle shutters locked down. Scattered around the house small twelve volt DC lights cast dim cones of brightness against the floor like those found in darkened movie theaters. The afternoon sun penetrated the firing slots in the shutters and illuminated dust motes that swirled lazily in the breeze when someone passed near the slash of light. For now the air was quite and undisturbed as three shadows sat at the table in what just yesterday had been a bright and cheery dinning room.

“I just don’t see any other way out of this Hon.” David began.

“No, that is simply not an option.” Denise replied.

“But if I go out, maybe they will leave you alone and our place intact. We can negotiate for that.” He leaned forward and put his hands in hers. There was an obvious deep concern in his voice.

“They will never agree to that and you know it. And I won’t see you go to jail for doing what was right in the first place. That BITCH!” There was serious vinegar in Denise’s voice at the mere thought of the person responsible for this entire situation.

“But if they rush the house . . .” His voice trailed off.

“I married you for better or worse David C. McMillan. I never figured that this would be the definition of worse, but here we are and now we have to deal with it.”

“Maybe I can get you out of this Dee. Get that Kenner fellow to let you out before the fireworks start. You can claim . . .”

“NO WAY MISTER, I’m not walking out of here and leaving you behind. We’ve come through too much sh*t together in our lives to start running now!”

“Denise, David’s right, it’s going to get a whole lot of nasty in here if they decide to bust down the door after us.” Joseph began. “And one less . . .”

“LIKE HELL!” She exclaimed as she jumped up from the table. “I will not abandon my husband AND my friends just because I’m a women . . .” She stormed away from the table and then suddenly turned back. “Have either of you ever seen a ‘Cat Fight’?” She asked with a menacing look in her eyes.

The two men looked had her with a sense of sudden realization and nodded their heads. They knew that she was not referring to the feline variety.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Well Agent Kenner and all his Jack Booted @sshholes are just about to step into the biggest cat fight they’ve ever seen.” She turned and stomped off into the darkness.

Joseph looked at David with a confused look. “Does she get this way very often?”

“No . . . ” David muttered as he watched his wife disappear into the shadows. “But when she does . . . it’s best not to get near her for a while until she cools down.” He turned to Joseph. “I think Special Agent Kenner just screwed up.”

“How so.”

“He pissed off my wife and that is never a smart thing to do!”

They both looked back in the direction she had gone.

“Think we should warn him.” Joseph asked.

They paused for a few seconds and then both replied at the same time. “Naaaaw!”

“Dangerous” Davy Allison, the militia’s premier pyro-technician’s eyes lit up at Sheriff Eckhart’s request for a ‘small diversion’. Eckhart could see and smell the gears spinning as Davy started rattling off formulas and ideas.

“SURE THING!” He began enthusiastically. “A couple of pounds of RDX or . . . hmmm PETN.” He mumbled to himself as he turned to the shelves in his ‘Fun Gallery’ as he called it, also known as his workshop and supply room.

“Let’s see . . . need some jellied gasoline and then some plastique, I could whip that up in a few hours, need some Nitric Acid . . . ummmm . . . Acetone, yeah there it is. Now where is that bottle of Pentaerythritol.”

“Davy . . . Davy . . . DAVY!” Eckhart’s voice was raising.

“Oh . . . and I’ll need . . . yeah, what?”

“Davy . . . a small diversion.” Eckhart as he held up his hand up indicating a very small object between his index finger and thumb. “A . . . V-E-R-Y . . . S-M-A-L-L . . . D-I-V-E-R-S-I-O-N.” He said slowly to emphasize his point.

“But if you really want to get their attention . . . ” Davy began.

“Ray and Jeff don’t want to get knocked off their rope Davy. And Jeff wanted me to especially mention that his eyebrows have finally grown back.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Davy looked at his Militia Commander dumbfounded. “Now that wasn’t entirely my fault Sheriff and . . .”

“Yes I know, I know, but all we need is a s-m-a-l-l . . . d-i-v-e-r-s-i-o-n here, just enough to take their eyes away from our people. You can blast the sh*t out of the south highway bridge for me later Davy, but first thing tonight I need a small diversion.” Eckhart again indicating with his fingers.

Davy looked disappointed, turned around and resumed rummaging through his shelves. In just a few seconds he turned back and opened up a metal container the size of a cigar box, extracted a small metal thirty-five millimeter film canister from the foam lined box and handed it to the Sheriff.

Eckhart looked at the small film can in the palm of his hand.

Davy placed the larger container back on the shelf and began to explain to the Sheriff the device in his hand.

“You twist the lid clockwise hard one quarter of a turn. You’ll feel something pop inside. When you feel that you’ve got about thirty seconds to set it on one of those five ton truck gas tanks and get the hell away from it.”

“What happens then?”

“Well what you have in your hand there is a miniature Thermite Grenade.”

The Sheriff looked at Davy in amazement.

“Takes about thirty seconds to get going and active the Thermite action. After that it will burn through just about anything for a short while. There’s enough there to easily drop through a gas tank. Then you’ll have a very nice L-I-T-T-L-E diversion for yourself.”

Eckhart had little doubt that they would have a diversion, how little was another question all together. He had to chuckle to himself as he walked away from the alchemist shop of his units most talented demolitions expert.

“And to think that the Army was responsible for creating this wizard of explosive destruction.” Eckhart couldn’t help but shake his head.

“I’m just glad he’s on our side.” The Militia Commander thought to himself, he knew beyond a shadow of doubt that the main highway bridge leading into town would be nothing but rubble by tomorrow morning. Even if all Davy had was baling wire and bubble gum. Somehow Davy would pull something out of his “bag of devious deeds and dastardly devices” slap it together with duct tape, fire it up with a delayed clock created from a Bic lighter and an egg timer and thus produce a mind boggling explosion out of nothing. He couldn’t help himself, he just had the knack.

Special Agent Jordan Kenner, BATF, was pacing the command tent. His quick snatch and grab of a high school teacher with possible Militia connections had flopped into a standoff. The simple country cottage had turned out to be a formidable bunker of rock and concrete. The neighbors were not only noncooperative several had actually taken shots at his agents. The local Sheriff refused to get involved and basically ignored any requests for

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

information or support. His superiors were seriously hot under the collar at what was turning into a media event and to top it off, it would be over twelve hours before his back up would be released from other duties to road march to this forgotten little valley to reinforce his position.

Kenner had tried to talk McMillan into walking out unarmed and into custody. However instead of capitulating and accepting the inevitability of the situation, that damn History teacher started to quote Winston Churchill at him:

Never give in--never, never, never, never, in nothing great or small, large or petty, never give in except to convictions of honor and good sense. Never yield to force; never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy.

Kenner was stalemated and he knew it. He wasn't equipped to breach the rock and concrete walls of McMillan's house. A frontal assault would be suicide without overwhelming firepower and while he had over a company of Homeland Security troops with him, he had a very uneasy feeling using them in this way, in this situation.

"Special Agent Kenner we've got more than enough men here to storm that house and you know it!" Captain Bill Cochran, Homeland Security Force and Officer in Charge of the company Kenner had drafted to support this mission, argued strongly.

"There can't be more than a handful of people in that house. Our snipers can keep those windows covered and if we hit them from all four sides at once there's no way they can stop us!" He exclaimed as he drove his right fist into the palm of his left hand.

Kenner ran the Cochran's plan through his mind one more time and still didn't like the idea.

"You're men would be out in the open Captain, no cover on the final leg of the assault."

"Their soldiers Sir, that's their job! They might get one or two on the final rush to the house, but no more. That would be acceptable losses."

Kenner looked at the Captain in disbelief. "Acceptable losses? Are you out of your mind?"

"The longer we stand around here with our thumbs up our butts, the worse we look. We need to bring this to a head and then clean out the rest of this nest of vipers." He was referring to the other residents in the valley that had refused to cooperate in the current situation and especially those that had fired warning shots at the agents and troopers.

Suddenly there was shouting and some sort of a commotion going on outside and the pair rushed to the opening of the tent to see flames erupting on one of the troop transport trucks.

"It's going to get worse Agent Kenner. The time to act is now! PUT OUT THAT FIRE YOU IDIOTS!" The Captain stormed off towards the burning truck. "GET THOSE OTHER VEHICLES AWAY FROM THAT FIRE . . . YOU - YOU THERE, GET THAT DAMN EXTINGUISHER NOW!! WHERE'S MY SERGEANT OF THE GUARD!!"

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Four shapeless shadows slinked down the cliff face, melted into the gray-green brush at its base and started their painstakingly slow journey towards the McMillan house. The four had trained in another part of their lives as Marine Snipers. Their objective was similar to that of their final examination during Sniper Training. To cross an open field while under direct observation without being detected. Only this time if they were detected it would mean a bullet instead of just failing the test. This time was for real.

Four hours later just a little past midnight all hell broke loose as the Home Security Forces began their assault on the McMillan home. Hundreds of rounds of automatic fire slammed into the outside walls and sent shattered shards of rock and concrete raining everywhere. The militia team inside ran to their designated fighting positions and tried to catch a glimpse of the assaulting troops through the barrage of small arms fire. The heavy steel shutters were holding out the rain of 5.56 rounds slapping into them but the clang of bullets disintegrating into the steel plate was unnerving.

Larry O'Connor could see the lead assault team pouring through the gap they had created in the thick hedgerow wall a hundred yards away. He popped the barrel of the big FN through the firing slot in the shutters and rested the bipods on the deep window sill. The running troops were directly in his line of sight and he quickly took his aim on the lead soldiers. The big .308 boomed its defiant voice, its resonant report immediately overshadowing the higher pitched bark of the assaulting troopers M16's.

The FN boomed twenty times in rapid succession as O'Connor lay a wall of hot brass into the lead troopers. With practiced precision he dropped the empty mag and slammed a fresh one into the well, cycled the bolt and took up his aim without missing a beat.

Private Donald Gaudé knew his was in deep sh*t as soon as he heard the first report of the terrorist rifle from the stone building. He was right behind Corporal "Big Dutch" Vanderlinde when something stopped the ex-All State Guard dead in his tracks. Donald ran smack into the back of the big Corporal and heard the sickening wet sound of the "THWACK" of the second round that dropped the Corporal like a sack of rocks. In the mad rush forward Private Gaudé became entangled with Vanderlinde and half tripped half fell with the dying corporal as he landed face first into the freshly plowed earth. That accident is probably what saved the panicked young Private from a similar fate of his big friend. Gaudé lay frozen to the dirt somewhere between shock and sheer terror as troopers all around him were cut down by the deadly conflagration emanating from the stone house.

O'Connor pulled the FN out of the firing slot its barrel beginning to smoke and raced to the next window in the room as he fed another fresh mag in and took up the second firing position. The rush of invading troopers had slowed down but there was still movement there in the dark field. He concentrated on the moving shadows and pealed through two more magazines.

The other members of the militia fire team in the house were doing their own dance with death as they fired through one window, dashed to the next and let rip another magazine. They each had one side of the building to protect and though there had to be some troopers getting through their sector of fire the majority suddenly found

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

the prospect of serving their country not so inviting as it had been just a few hours earlier. This was real and the Militiamen were making it clearly evident that they were not going to go down quietly.

Squad Leader Dennison and his three other ghillie suited militiamen suddenly found themselves somewhere between a rock and a hard place just under two hundred yards out from their goal. Rounds from the defenders were screaming out in their direction as Home Security Forces attempted to storm their side of the homestead. If they opened fire on the troopers they might be mistaken for more of the Security Forces by those inside. If they stayed put they could quickly become casualties from stray friendly fire. Dennison had to do something and do something soon. He quickly caught onto the shifting fire coming from the various windows on his side of the building. Knowing that only four defenders were in the building he realized that only one militiaman was returning fire per side and was trying to expand the perception of greater numbers by moving swiftly from one firing position to the next.

“Ryan take down the right flank! Bryon you and Harv clear the middle! I’ve got the left! ON MY COMMAND . . .,” He waited for the right moment. “FIRE!”

Four precision super match grade M21, M1A’s barked in rapid succession. Designed to drive tacks at sub-Minute of Angle accuracy at ranges out to over 600 yards, the four man fire team dropped the reinforced squad of Home Security Force Troopers with devastating quickness before a single one of them even realized they were caught in a deadly crossfire.

Denise poked her AR15A2 through the firing slot ready to continue the rapid fire resistance and suddenly realized that she had no targets where there had been a horde of on rushing trooper’s just seconds before. She could just make out the bodies lying strewn about the field below her in the distance, but the hail of gunfire rattling against the her side of the house had suddenly stopped just seconds before she reached her new firing position.

She had no idea where the fire support had come from, but she more than welcomed the help. Heavy fire was still pounding on the north end of the house. She looked one more time at the now still field, silently thanked whoever was watching over her, gathered up her extra bandoleers and ran out of the room to add her fire power to the battle waging hard on the north side of her home.

O’Connor was feeling extremely lonely and very hard pressed. The Federal troops seemed to be pouring into his zone faster than he could drop them. The pounding of Security Force rounds on the heavy steel window shutters sounded like a high intensity drum roll. He had abandoned dancing from one window to the next and concentrated all his effort at keeping the rapidly advancing hordes at bay. His FN cast aside after digesting and spitting out over twenty-five magazines of 7.62mm Ball ammo, he had no time to reload and was now maintaining the pressure with his AR15A2. The gas tube was nearly white hot on the AR as streams of defiant lead screamed out of its barrel. He suddenly felt the presence of some else in the room, turning his head quickly he felt Denise slip two bandoleers of loaded thirty round magazines over his head. Nodding his head in acknowledgement he yelled at her.

“COME TO JOIN THE FUN?!”

Denise hopped over to the other window on the far side of the room to add her firepower to his. This move is probably what saved her.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“OH SH*T!!” Larry screamed at the top of his lungs. Denise turned just in time to see Larry’s side of the room become enveloped in a blast of flame and debris. The concussion pounded her like a rag doll and she was suddenly slammed into unconsciousness.

David and Joseph felt the house rock under the impact of the SMAW bunker buster rocket. The pair immediately abandoned their positions and raced to the north end of the house. David ran through the advancing cloud of choking dust and smoke. A second smaller explosion shook the house just before he reached the doorway. He popped his head inside the door frame just enough to see two shadowy figures stepping in through a gapping hole in the wall. The room was lit by the eerie dancing light from a handful of small fires burning in a room filled with swirling smoke and a jumbled landscape of smashed furniture.

Less than ten feet away from the door David emptied his magazine at point blank range into the intruders and the two figures slumped to the ground. Snapping in a fresh mag he sprayed and prayed through the gaping wound in the side of his house to dissuade any immediate further penetration attempts and began to quickly look for his teammates buried in the rubble.

He found Larry, or what was left of Larry. He must have been at the point of impact of whatever missile they had ripped his home open with. His end had been thankfully swift and relatively painless. “As painless as dying can be.” He thought to himself. At that moment Joseph slid to a stop just inside the door.

“Larry’s gone Joseph.” David informed him in a flat monotonic voice devoid of emotion.

It was just then that he heard her moan. Lightening couldn’t have struck David harder than that simple moan from across the room. He nearly leaped over the burning and smoldering debris that had once been their home and landed on the other side of the room. Denise was hurt. Denise was seriously hurt. He couldn’t tell the full nature of her wounds as there was blood everywhere. Her hair was matted with blood, dust and straw. He couldn’t see the right side of her face from the soot and blood. Her right arm hung unnaturally from her shoulder and he knew the meaning of that sort of tone of moaning. His wife, his life, the mother of their children was really seriously hurt and he was suddenly very alone in the middle of a hopeless battle with no time.

Suddenly something slapped his right shoulder and the back of his upper right arm. Burning and sharp it woke him up and jerked him back into the battle. His right hand instinctively pulled his Colt .45 Combat Commander, the one he had carried for over twenty years including through The Storm into Kuwait. The powerful hot loads leapt out of the short barrel at close to twelve hundred feet a second crossing the distance between David and the breach in the wall with impunity. The two hundred and thirty grains of brass jacketed hollow point met human flesh and nearly detonated living tissue and bone with their impact. His magazine emptied in just seconds, the intruders neutralized, he dropped and replaced the mag in one fluid movement and returned his full attention to his wounded wife.

More bursts of fire erupted from outside the house though this sounded different from the recent attackers. Suddenly he heard his name called from outside the hole in his wall.

“David - David don’t shoot! The MAQUIS IS HERE TO HELP!”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

David recognized the key phrase he had only learned just two months ago. “The Maquis is here to help” Members of the militia were just out side his house. Joseph called to the voice.

“Who goes there?”

“Jeffery Dennison, Ray, Bryon and Harvey! Is that you Joseph?”

“GET YOUR @SSES IN HERE BOYS! We’re a little hurtin’ right now!”

Four amorphous shadows piled in through the gaping wound in the wall and took up defensive positions. Squad Leader Dennison could see the mess he had just leapt into.

“What’s the situation?” He asked Joseph.

“Larry’s gone, Denise was in here too . . . ” His voice trailed off.

Dennison turned to his Fire Team. “I’LL COVER THIS POSITION. BRYON TAKE THE EAST SIDE! RAY YOU’VE GOT THE SOUTH! HARVEY COVER THE WEST END! ALRIGHT GET GOING!!”

The room suddenly emptied as the fresh defenders hurried to their assigned positions.

“Joseph, give David a hand and I’ll watch things here for a while . . . NOW GO!”

Joseph softly placed his hand on David’s shoulder. “Let’s get her down stairs where its safe.”

David had already applied battle dressings to her head and face wounds. Using several American Rifleman magazines he devised splints securing them with cravats to protect and stiffen her damaged arm. He was applying the swath around her chest to secure the sling when Joseph arrived. Together they carefully carried her through the house and down the stairs using a heavy quilt as a stretcher. In the basement safe room Joseph watched with amazement at the swift and professional nature that David operated. He reinforced the battle dressings that were bleeding through, added a wire splint to the hasty splints he had originally applied, started two IV’s and made a thorough secondary assessment of her condition. Joseph felt that Denise was in the best of possible care at the moment and knew that if she was going to survive David had provided her with the optimum care possible under the current conditions. It was then that Joseph noticed that David himself was wounded.

Desert Doc

Chapter 28 - Siege & Betrayal

When the need arises -- and it does -- you must be able to shoot your own dog. Don't farm it out -- that doesn't make it nicer, it makes it worse. - **Robert Heinlein**, *The Notebooks of Lazarus Long*

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Hard pressed on my right. My center is yielding. Impossible to maneuver. Situation excellent. I am attacking. - **Ferdinand Foch**, at the Battle of the Marne

The first gray fingers of morning were reaching into the eastern skies above the ridgeline. In the valley below the battle had begun shortly after midnight and burned viciously white hot for several hours, the evil embers of a desperate struggle shredding the darkness with tracers of pain and death. The searing flames of war were finally smothered under the predawn fog that rolled in and now clung to the valley floor. The last retched moans of the dying that pierced the roar of silence following the ferocious fighting had finally withered away to leave an eerie hush in its wake. As the dawn approached and the faint gray light of the new day began to slowly illuminate the battlefield surrounding the besieged fortress, the ghostly outlines of the fallen lay scattered like rag dolls discarded by a malevolent child. While the walls of the stronghold had been breeched, but they had not been penetrated, the Militia still held their ground as the second day of the war arrived.

Agent Jordan Kenner could not believe the nightmare that he had experienced in the preceding hours. He had never been a soldier, never worn a uniform, and never fired a shot in anger or self-defense. This was his first baptism under fire and it had shaken him to his very core. He was a cauldron of emotions and feelings. He felt elated to have survived the ordeal and at the same time thoroughly disgusted with the butchery of the entire affair, and for what?

He looked about in the predawn gray and could see the exhaustion on the faces of the soldiers and agents around him, fewer in number than when this mess had begun just twenty-four hours earlier. Kenner felt trapped, trapped by his sworn duty and trapped by his responsibility as the Senior Field Agent. He could see no way out of this chaos. Three times they had assaulted the McMillan stronghold. Three times they had been driven back by their deadly accurate fire, each time paying a higher price in lives, yet in spite of all this blatant failure Captain William “Wild Bill” Cochran had insisted on compounding their mistakes with repeated assaults against the stone fortress until Kenner had finally called a halt to the insanity. Even a “bunker buster” square into the side of the building had only intensified the resistance and cost the Home Security Forces another squad in that failed assault.

A strange sound was rising with the sun and carried across the still cool morning air. Kenner looked towards the source of the keening and wailing that increased with the light. It was coming from up on the rim of the ridgeline. Haunting and yet . . . powerful. ‘What the hell was that sound.’ He wondered.

It was getting louder and now carried its message clear across the valley. To some it assaulted the ears, grating on nerves and raising a vile distaste from deep within. To others it was the call to the center of their soul and a reminder of a time long lost in the mists that fell across the highland moors of a distant land in a distant time. Piper Ian O’Connor played as he never had before on that high mountain ridge. He played to his older brother besieged in the McMillan stronghold below. His Highland Pipes howled a defiant call to arms that has been understood by all freedom loving people for over a thousand years. It cried out for them to gather up their arms and to stand ready for the coming battle. That also screamed a warning to all invaders that to stay would be to call down their own deaths. These highlanders and all who were moved by the eerie call would not yield, now . . . or ever.

Ian had no way of knowing that his brother had fallen in the course of the battle.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

His fingers danced across the chanter as the great drones filled the air with the howling call to war. His pipes filled the valley with his message loud and clear for all to hear. The war had begun.

Captain “Wild Bill” Cochran emerged from his tent in a sour mood. “What the Sam Hell is that screeching!” He demanded to know.

“Scotland the Brave.” A voice from the ranks answered.

“Scotland the WHAT?”

“Scotland the BRAVE, SIR!”

“So what the HELL does that mean. GOOD GOD WHAT AN AWFUL NOISE!” Cochran looked around to ascertain the source of the offending racket.

“Those are bagpipes Captain . . . highland pipes . . . I believe.”

Suddenly the morning was pierced with a banshee wail the likes of which the Home Guard Soldiers had never heard before. It didn’t even sound like it was something that could have come from human throat. The earsplitting scream was echoing back and forth in the crisp morning air of the valley and was coming from all around them.

On the other side of the country in a region filled with the ghosts of another conflict advancing troops were being introduced to a very similar banshee wail. Major Gunter Neumann, Bundeswehr (Federal Republic of Germany) serving with the Homeland Security Forces as a foreign military observer had never heard such an unholy noise in all his life. A veteran of peacekeeping efforts during the Balkans conflict he had an uneasy feeling about his present assignment. He remembered reading about a foreign military attaché that had witnessed the last American internal struggle almost one hundred and fifty years earlier. He couldn’t remember the author’s name or country, but his message was loud and clear.

The author was a member of a group of foreign officers that had witnessed the bloody fighting at Gettysburg. Upon writing home one officer warned his government:

“We must never fight these American’s for they fight without any regard to pain or death. Honor and victory are their only battle cries. I have seen whole regiments laid to waste only to see men from both sides readily step up to the battle line. An outside invader could never stand against such madmen.”

Today Gunter more than believed his counterpart from that long ago struggle. What had begun this morning as a disarmament patrol had quickly escalated into a running gun battle. More than a dozen rural homes had been burned to the ground, most with their occupants fighting until the bitter end even as the flames consumed them. For those few that had attempted to surrender they were quickly gunned down by the American security forces for the slightest provocation. That is when things began to get exceedingly more difficult.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

For the last several hours the troops Major Neumann had been assigned to had raced headlong into the pursuit of the fleeing rebels. They were racing across the very land that Sherman had decimated on his march to the sea during the American Civil War. Once again Federal troops were running amok in the South. Once again outnumbered, outgunned and outequipped Southerners were fighting for their lives in a hopeless struggle. But the struggle had not been all that one sided.

Gunter noted that while the federal troops did hold the better equipment, heavier firepower and larger number of troops, the rebels were taking a good account of themselves with what they had. While the federals seemed bent on spray and pray tactics and recon by fire, the individual rebel militiamen presented extremely effective and accurate individual fire. The German Major learned very quickly to keep a very low profile.

Somehow through out the entire ordeal Gunter felt as if they were reliving an early segment of American history, that of the battle of Lexington/Concord. He was unfortunately presently assigned to the forces acting in the guise of the British troops under Lieutenant Colonel Francis Smith moving along the road toward Concord after their initial engagement on Lexington Commons. And the Homeland Security Forces he was with were racing headlong towards that history bridge that had been located at Concord over two hundred years ago. Only this bridge was located well south of the Mason-Dixon line.

Since 1775, Americans have proven their willingness to fight and die when necessary to defend their way of life. They have endured the steaming jungles of the South Pacific, the freezing hills of Korea, the blazing deserts of Kuwait, and the muddy fields of France to liberate peoples oppressed by tyrannical regimes. The American people have astonished friend and foe alike by their courage and capacity for sacrifice.

Americans persevered through seven years of war to win their independence from Britain -- then the world's greatest military power. American troops were poorly armed and equipped and often hungry. Many fought barefoot in winter snow. Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, a German professional officer serving with the American forces, remarked that "no European army could have held together" under the conditions they endured.

Foreign observers of the American Civil War were amazed at the willingness of Americans fighting both for and against the Union to sacrifice their lives in the most desperate fighting. Almost a million were killed or wounded. The war was fought to ensure, as President Abraham Lincoln put it, "that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

British leader Winston Churchill recalled his first reaction at America's entry into the Second World War following the Imperial Japanese surprise attack. "Silly people," Churchill wrote, "and there were many, not only in enemy countries -- might discount the force of the United States. Some said they were soft, others said that they would never be united. They would fool around at a distance. They would never come to grips. They would never stand blood-letting . . . But I had studied the American Civil War, fought out to the last desperate inch." Confident that the American spirit would not fail in freedom's darkest hour, Churchill wrote, "I went to bed and slept the sleep of the saved and thankful."

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“What the hell where you thinking of Simpson?” Senator Brandson began as soon as the pair were well out of ear shot.

“What? We can’t go on NOT TELLING the President what the hell is going on!”

The senators quickly exited the White House and ducked into their waiting limousine. As soon as the door shut and the car began to pull out Senator Eli Simpson of Georgia turned on his colleague.

“Nelson just what the F*CK ARE WE SUPPOSED TO DO!”

“Hell Eli, couldn’t you have waited.”

“HOW MUCH LONGER DO YOU WANT TO WAIT NELSON!” He angrily turned away and began to straighten his tie. “How many more “disappearances” will it take until you realize that we are on the verge of a full scale rebellion here. CHRIST NELSON! We’ve lost three Special Forces Teams that simply geared up and drove out off the post. What about that Ranger Company out there in Pennsylvania. AN ENTIRE RANGER COMPANY! GONE - POOF! INTO THIN AIR!?! We’ve got Seals that we can’t account for and now . . . AND NOW . . . we’ve got not one, BUT TWO MARINE BATTALIONS THAT HAVE SIMPLY MELTED INTO THE LANDSCAPE!”

Senator Brandson shook his head in frustration.

“OH and by the way MR. PRESIDENT, your Homeland Security Forces are GOOSE STEPPING across the rights of every free American citizen they run into. Oh and don’t run off there James, your Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, A TAX AGENCY OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT - FOR CRYING OUT LOUD - TAX AGENTS! Have just started World War Three in about every damn place you’ve got field agents out trying to disarm the population!”

Simpson was on a roll. His already elevated blood pressure was probably pegging out the meter as the color rose up his neck and into his cheeks.

“Are you aware Sir that there has been an on going battle in Northern California for over twenty-four hours that began yesterday morning and has already cost the lives of at least fifty Homeland Security troops as well as field agents of both the FBI and the BATF.” He took a breath. "THAT BEGAN OVER A TEACHER BEING ARRESTED FOR TEACHING!"

“Oh and a little side note here Sir . . . the plague is still spreading.” He looked sternly at his fellow senator. “JUST WHAT THE HELL WAS I SUPPOSED TO SAY NELSON!”

”We interrupt your regularly scheduled program for this emergency message. The following bulletin has been issued by the President of the United States. As of 1200 o’clock Noon Eastern Standard Time today, a state of emergency has been declared across the United States of America and the entire country is now under Martial Law. The Federal Emergency Management Agency has been fully activated and is empowered by Executive Or-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

ders to manage all communication, transportation, energy, food and all other vital needs to ensure the survival of this country and our way of life. Congress has been adjourned and habeas corpus has been suspended. The Armed Forces of the United States will be responsible for external and border security while internal security of our nation will be provided for by the Homeland Security Forces. The right to free travel beyond your immediate domicile is here by suspended. Travel permits will be issued for emergency vehicles and after special consideration by local law authorities. You are directed to remain in your homes and remain calm. Further announcements will follow. Keep tuned to this channel for updates as they become available. We will now return you to your regularly scheduled programming.”

“HOLLY SHIT! WHAT THE HELL IS THAT!” Cochran grabbed his pistol and spun around looking for a target. The wailing and keening got even louder. The soldiers grabbed their rifles and scrambled quickly about looking for something solid to hide behind. The noise rose in intensity and seemed to be coming from everywhere and those damn bag pipes kept pace with the onslaught of sound!

As suddenly as it had started it stopped. Silence . . . that seemed to last forever.

“Agent Kenner, Captain Cochran!” A deep hard voice came from just beyond the edge of the ground fog.

“WHAT!?” Cochran spun around again, looking wildly about for something to shoot at.

“Lay down your weapons NOW, and you and your men will live!” It came more as an order than a request.

“LIKE HELL YOU TRAITOUS BASTARDS!” Cochran answered and began firing wildly in to the ground mist. The soldiers around him hit the ground to avoid his random shots. He emptied his pistol, quickly dropped the spent magazine on the ground and was fumbling to insert a fresh mag.

“Surrender now and you will be spared, fight and you all will die.”

Cochran finally locked the mag into place and released the slide. “COME ON YOU BASTARDS,” He fired off two rounds. “I’LL EAT YOUR F*UCKING LIVERS, YOU F*CKING BAST----”

A single muffled pop was heard that stopped the Home Security Force Captain’s voice in mid sentence. He hung there in the air for a few seconds, then like a marionette whose strings have been suddenly cut he collapsed into a pile of spent human flesh. A small red spot in the middle of his forehead slowly oozed blood across his face.

“Agent Kenner.”

“AGENT KENNER!”

A feeble voice answered the specter from the fog. “I’m here.”

“Will you surrender?”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“What are the terms?”

“No terms Agent Kenner. You surrender now or you and your men WILL DIE.”

“But I can’t just surrender . . . I’ve got . . . I’ve got to . . . contact . . .”

“Agent Kenner you are cutoff and completely surrounded. You must decide now, there is no time for negotiation. Do you understand that?”

“Agent Kenner?”

“I understand.”

“Your answer sir?”

“I’ve had enough.” There was a long pause. “We surrender.”

“What the hell am I doing here?” Kenner mumbled to himself. “All I ever wanted was to be a ‘G-Man’.” He reminded himself.

During the decades of Affirmative Action, he had been too well educated, too blond, too upwardly mobile, too everything. In other words, he was disqualified for a position in the governments highest ranking elite investigative organization, by virtue of the fact that only people of specific disadvantage were considered eligible by sole benefit of their ‘Political Correctness’ at the time. So he ended up as a glorified tax agent for the federal government. The last ten years had been spent chasing people attempting to skirt the system of government bribes required to produce or transport alcohol, tobacco, and now firearms. He had always obeyed the rules and followed the party line . . . but this action was now so far out of hand and out of reality that he felt himself wondering about the sanity of it all for the first time.

He had been separated from the others in his command, from the Homeland Security Guards and from his own agents. He was exhausted, confused, and ashamed of his actions. He had surrendered, surrendered out of fear, surrendered out of desperation and now sat numbly before the victor. He hardly recognized Sheriff Eric Eckhart. Or was it Commander Eckhart or Colonel, maybe General Eckhart? It didn’t matter now. Kenner knew his career was over, through, kaput. At least no more people would die under his command.

Eckhart handed Kenner a fresh cup of hot coffee, the Agent numbly took the cup and breathed in its fresh aroma before putting it to his lips. Eckhart sat directly across from him in full battle dress. Decked out in ‘RealTree’ camouflage that blended so well with the natural terrain of the region that he and his militiamen were virtually invisible from just a short distance away, unlike the black of the BATF agents and the woodland cammies of the Homeland Security troops. When Kenner had ordered his men to lay down their arms he had been shocked by the sight of Eckhart’s ghillie suited militia rising up through ground fog like wraiths in a bad dream. Many had penetrated so close to the Homeland/BATF perimeter that had Kenner defied the order to surrender he had no doubt that he and this men would have been ground up seconds later in the whirlwind of the militia firestorm. They would have had no chance of survival . . . and the reality of that moment struck deep into his inner core. He had been soundly defeated, with out question.

"You did the right thing Kenner." Eckhart attempted to console the fallen agent. "You would not have survived the final assault. You saved a lot of lives this morning."

"Well that is one thing." Kenner weakly responded.

"You're fighting on the wrong side, son."

Kenner looked up at the bear of a man sitting across from him. 'Perhaps he was right?' Kenner thought to himself.

Desert Doc

Pax Americana Chapter 29 - Rebel Yell

Then arose that do-or-die expression, that maniacal maelstrom of sound; that penetrating, rasping, shrieking, blood-curling noise that could be heard for miles and whose volume reached the heavens - such an expression as never yet came from the throats of sane men, but from men whom the seething blast of an imaginary hell would not check while the sound lasted. - Confederate Colonel Keller Anderson of Kentucky's Orphan Brigade

Col. O. M. Roberts commanded the 11th Texas Infantry in several battles in Louisiana, and left this account of Texans and the rebel yell - *The Texas soldiers in line of battle, with their attention intensely alive to what they were doing and how they should act, were cool enough and intelligent enough to pass the word along the whole line of battle like an electric current; and when the command was given, "Forward, charge!" it, too, would be rapidly passed, and then simultaneously the Texas "rebel yell" burst out from the whole line, as all together they dashed at double quick toward the enemy. The effect of that yell was marvelous. . . .Such yells exploded on the air in one combined sound have been heard distinctly three miles off across a prairie, above the din of musketry and artillery.*

IT WAS A TRAP! Major Gunter Neumann sprang out of his vehicle and dove behind a small stonewall as a hail of deadly accurate high-powered rifle fire ripped through the Homeland Security Forces that he had been riding with. The LAV in the lead of the column erupted into flames - its occupants screaming to escape the burning death. The HUMVEE he had been riding in just seconds before was being riddled under the steady barrage of rifle fire, the driver killed in the first volley twitched as each subsequent round added more insult to his dead flesh. This was worse than Bosnia, worse than anything the German Major had ever experienced. He wished he could pull his old Leopard heavy tank out of his pocket and wrap its steel armor about him.

Suddenly the solid stonewall began to disintegrate around him as well aimed twenty-millimeter rounds blasted through searching for soldiers that had escaped the carnage on the road. Gunter hugged the earth as he crawled down into the ditch beside the road. He looked back to see a soldier that had sought shelter beside him just moments before ripped in two as the wall explosively shattered through him. Blood and burning fuel were slowly mingling with the green putrid slime at the bottom of the ditch. Gunter crawled into the muck as rounds ripped

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

just centimeters above his flesh. If only he had his tank! He thought. Just when he thought it could get no worse - IT started.

David McMillan walked beside his beloved Denise as they carried her out of their ruined house on a litter. Doc Bell had done the best he could for her under the present conditions, but insisted that she be removed as quickly as possible and brought to the clinic in town. Her poor mangled flesh had taken a beating and the Doc couldn't give any reassurance that she would pull through.

"David . . . I'll do everything I can, everything son. But I can only do so much with what I've got." The old country doctor placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"I know Doc . . . I know." David felt the air go out of him and his knees wobble slightly. The Doc's grip tightened on his shoulder.

"Dangerous Dave" Allison sat perched on the ridgeline watching the road below. He'd spent the entire night rigging up his party favors and the moment of truth was just seconds away. He looked left and right down the line and could see all was ready, waiting on his signal for the carnage to begin. They had just received the word that the battle of the McMillan place was over. Larry O'Connor was dead, Denise badly wounded, David and Ski would sport minor scars but were ok.

Davy shook his head. He had always liked the McMillan's, especially Denise. As the county nurse on the go she made house calls far and wide, helping anyone and everyone. Even if they didn't have the money to pay for her services she would find a way to get them the treatment and medicines they needed. He said a little silent prayer for the Creator to watch over her, then turned back to his business at hand.

The relief column was just rounding the first bend in the distance. In another few minutes they would be entering the kill zone. Seconds turned to minutes and minutes to hours as the convoy moved closer and closer. Davy flipped the safety cover off the switch and poised his thumb over the toggle. "Just a little further . . . just a little more. Closer . . . closer . . . closer . . ."

Andrew Creek could feel the adrenaline slamming through his veins. It pulsed up from his toes, plowed across his gut, blasted through his lungs until reaching his vocal cords where it emerged as a low-deep guttural growl that rose in pitch and tempo until it exploded into the air. Burrowed into the muck and mire of the ditch Gunter heard the hellish wail rising above the explosions and gunfire. As if all the demons of hell had been suddenly set free onto the world, the wall of ungodly protest raced around the perimeter as each militiaman picked up the chorus until they joined as a single voice.

Sound exploded into motion as Andrew and his fellow rebels were suddenly compelled to fully engage in the battle lust. Like demonic wraiths they sprang into action and began racing down the surrounding hillsides

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

through the trees and brush. Their hearts pounding in their ears, their feet slamming into the ground angrily as they leapt over branch and bramble their motion a blur to the eye. Gunter could hear the demon yell getting closer, he instinctively reached for his pistol and came up empty. Foreign Observers were, as a rule, unarmed! He looked about for a weapon, any weapon and spied an M16 abandoned just ten feet from him. He began to crawl towards it in earnest.

Senator Eli Simpson of Georgia sat stunned at his desk. How the hell could the President adjourn Congress? IN THIS CRISIS?! As chairman of the Senate Arms Committee he had felt compelled to brief the President with the grim news of the renegade military units. Those lackeys that he called a cabinet were not about to drop such dire news on their boss. Someone had to do it. These were not little issues to be swept under the rug. They were facing a full-scale disintegration of the entire federal system and all those idiots in the White House could yap was all was well, getting better, going smoothly.

“F*CKING COCKCOLDS!” He muttered sternly under his breath.

“Sir?” His secretary looked at him strangely.

“Oh . . . nothing Margaret. Just my potty mouth getting the better of me dear. Please excuse an old man his rantings” He focused back in on the moment. “Now where was I?”

She looked down at her stenographer’s notebook. “You were saying, ‘Never in the history of the United States have we faced such dire times. Now is not the time to reject the very body of leaders that can help you bring this great country back on course. You ended there, Sir.’”

‘Ah . . . yes. Hmmm . . . have you heard the rumor that he actually has asked for foreign military and medical assistance from NATO and the UN?’ The southern senator shook his head. Margaret nodded in affirmation.

“Foreign troops on U.S. soil. I never would have thought I’d live to see such a day. The American people well nev’a stand for this Margaret. We shall see blood in the streets, American blood.” He slowly spun his chair around and looked out his office window. “Nev’a stand for this.”

The militiamen exploded from the tree line like the fabled Mongol Hordes of Genghis Kahn. Their yell pierced the air and surely woke the Blue and Gray that had fallen at Manassas, Antietam, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg and Chickamauga. It echoed off the distant hills and froze the Homeland Troops in their boots as they watched the on rushing militia. It was the infamous Rebel Yell, not heard in the South for over a hundred years. Not heard in anger since that distant struggle until today as it echoed off the hills.

Andrew Creek’s combat boots beat a pounding drum roll as he neared the line of burning vehicles. He hurdled the low stonewall with the power and grace he had displayed during his reign as the low and high hurdles state champion. His rifle held high and horizontal he flew across the impediment, landing in a full sprint and delivered a horizontal butt stroke to the slack jawed Federal troop staring at him wide eyed and full of terror. The

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

well oiled American Walnut stock of the Springfield M1A1 met bone and shattered its way through the troopers jaw. Rifleman First Class Andrew Jackson Creek of the Georgia Free Militia drove his rifle butt through the soldier's face and never missed a beat. Leaping the ditch he plunged his bayonet into the chest of the next victim pinning him to the side of the HUMVEE. Creek shucked the now dying federal trooper from the end of his pig sticker and went hunting for more enemy invaders to slay.

The Rebel Militia swarmed the security convoy like ravenous army ants the were all over their prey without mercy. They showed the same lack of remorse that the federal troops had displayed as they ransacked and burned their way across the southern landscape earlier this very same day, that it to say . . . none at all. No quarter was given and none was received. Major Gunter Neumann lay in shock horror in the stinking muck at the brutality of the American militia attack. They seemed consumed with a raging rabid madness that released itself only with the violent and bloody end of their enemy. His predecessor from the American War Between the States was right. "We must never fight these people!" "For they are surely mad." He thought to himself. "Surely mad!" He was witnessing that very horror before him right now!

The battle was over as quickly as it had started. Gunter lay quietly frozen in the stinking mud afraid to move, afraid to even breath as these demons from the hills quickly and methodically stripped the dead of any useable weapons and equipment. The M16 he had sought was just inches from his fingertips, but he dared not grab it now.

"UUGH!" The German officer grunted as one of the scavenging militiamen stuck him in the leg with his bayonet.

"FRANK! WE GOT A LIVE ONE OVER HERE!" The Militiaman shouted, still holding the burning bayonet in the Major's leg pinning him to the ground.

Burly hands roughly grabbed the Major's arms and he was suddenly jerked upright. He found himself surrounded by heavily armed and camouflaged militia as he now witnessed the carnage that they had left in their wake. Fifty yards away sat the remains of the Homeland Security Forces that he had be riding with just minutes earlier. Five Homeland troopers huddled up against the remains of the stonewall under heavy guard. Only five from the platoon he had been riding with had survived the ambush. Only five.

"Well, well, well, what have we got here Billy?"

"Ah don't know Frank . . . his uniform looks kinda different from the others."

Frank looked over the mud soaked officer being held before him. Not Army, Frank had served eight years in the Army. Not Marine or Air Force and definitely not Navy. He didn't look right somehow.

"Who the F*CK are you Mister" Frank demanded.

Just then shots rang out and Gunter saw the remaining federal survivors slammed against the stonewall before they slide down to the ground, very dead.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

The German stared at his captor and quickly decided that keeping silent was probably not a good idea in this situation.

“I am Major Gunter Neuman, Deutsche Panzergrenadiere, Federal German Republic. I am here as a military observer and guest of your government. I wish to speak to your commanding officer!” He tried to straighten to attention but the militiamen that still held him and the bayonet wound in his leg made that all but impossible.

“You’re a freaking KRAUT!” All the militiamen in the immediate area froze and turned towards the German Major. “WHAT THE F*CK ARE YOU DOING HERE?! TEACHING THESE @SSHOLES YOUR STORM-TROOPER TACTICS!! YOU MOTHERF*CKING SON OF A B*TCH!! The militia commander spat into his face. Franks Combat Commander nearly jumped out of his shoulder holster and buried itself in the German officers neck. Gunter could see the rage literally explode in the militia leaders eyes. For the first time in his life he was truly terrified.

“Dangerous Dave” Allison thumbed the toggle sending an electrical pulse snapping down the ridgeline across the valley, through the drainage pipe and up the far side of the road to the buried charges that he had planted the night before. The first to go were three flame fougasse bombs. Each of the bombs was made from a fifty-five gallon drum filled with thickened gasoline that erupted like napalm across the tail end vehicles totally engulfing them in intensely burning flames. Milliseconds after the first explosions three shrapnel cannons built from six-inch diameter iron pipes buried into the hillside sent twenty-five pounds of metal nuts, bolts and drywall screws ripping through those same trailing vehicles. A chain of smaller explosives along the length of the road pelted the convoy with more metal nails and shrapnel tearing through exposed flesh and thin skinned vehicles.

Davy thumbed the second toggle and a deep rumbling explosion shook the ground beneath their feet. The center support for the main bridge into town started to lean ever so slowly before it buckled and dropped into the stream bed below. The convoy was now trapped between a missing bridge and a wall of fire, the proverbial rock and a hard place.

Four almost simultaneous explosions sounded off to Davy’s left. Great puffs of gray-white smoke gave their positions away to anyone in the distance but the black powder had already done its job. Davy wasn’t sure this idea would really work. It was untried, but the cannoneers had assured him that they would hit their marks. Four bowling balls were now arching high over the mountain pass and would shortly begin their decent to the stranded convoy across the narrow valley. He just hoped the fuses worked.

Pandemonium was setting in as the Homeland Security troops sought shelter from the ambush. Many saw the puffs of gray-white smoke on the ridge across the valley but only a few caught a glimpse of four tiny black objects against a crystal blue sky rapidly dropping on them. One hundred feet above the ground and sixty feet short the first bowling ball exploded sending out a shower of metal fragments that had been packed into the hollowed out core that rained down on the cowering troops. The next two fell long and only one of the sixteen-pound bombs exploded as it impacted the rock face in the tree line above the road. The fourth and last bowling ball slammed into the top of one of five ton trucks that was still half full of invading troops where it exploded violently. Its deadly shrapnel spraying out in all directions into and through the nearest soldiers creating a mess of torn flesh and screaming agony adding to the panic along the convoy.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Militia snipers along the ridge top then opened fire. For three minutes they hammered the convoy six hundred yards away. Every one of the riflemen were experienced hunters and frequent shooters. Unlike the so called Homeland Security “soldiers” and federal agents now cowering behind their vehicles and returning only sporadic fire, these so called good ol’ boys practiced almost weekly with their favorite arms, rather than grudgingly being dragged to the range for their mandatory semi-annual qualification as their opponents. The training advantage of one over the other was more than readily apparent.

The militiamen felt the pulsing beat of their rotor blades almost before they heard them racing up the mountain valley towards the battle zone. A pair of black rotary winged death machines now stalked the combatants on the ridgeline. Two AH-64 Apache gunships opened up on the rebel forces spraying the ridgeline with 30mm cannon and 2.75 inch rockets. Shattering rock and splintering trees the pair of attack helos ripped through the militia ranks. Davy dropped to the bottom of the spider hole he had blasted and dug for himself the night before and hoped the rest of his comrades had done likewise.

The Mountain ridge seemed to burst open with belching smoke and flying debris as the Apache’s pounded the scattering militiamen. Much like the carnage they had let loose upon the invaders of their mountain home, they were now reaping the whirlwind of their enemy’s vengeance. Davy peaked his trench periscope up over the lip of his fighting hole and witnessed the havoc being wreaked upon his fellow patriots. The scope was wickedly wrenched from his hands and punched him in the face as it rebounded from a large slab of rock blasted out the mountain from a nearby rocket strike!

“SH*T! THAT WAS TOO DAMN CLOSE!”

Rubbing his eyebrow where a solid lump was now forming he once again pushed the periscope carefully over the lip of his fighting hole. The pair of helos were advancing on the militia’s position belching forth death and destruction.

“Hang on there boys . . . Daddy’s got a little surprise for these bastards . . . ”

Keeping his good eye on the pair of black demons advancing up the ridge “Dangerous Dave” reached beneath his flak vest and pulled out a small transmitter. With practiced precision he flipped the safety cover off the toggle and single button on the face. Flipping the toggle he armed the system and now rested his thumb lightly on the large red button.

The Apache’s marched steadily towards the Patriot trench line pounding anything that moved. The result of their deadly accuracy was that nearly half of the militia force had been destroyed in the onslaught. Davy waited patiently, poised, ready to release his own maelstrom, just a little further, just a little more.

The Security Forces from the ambushed column watched as the back birds hammered the rebel forces on the ridge above. No longer threatened with instant death they rose and cheered on the advancing Apache attack. The birds were midway into their attack when the valley floor exploded with dozens of small puffs of smoke. At first the watching troops didn’t see anything, but the pilots of the Apache’s could see death rapidly approaching them in the guise of small spidery lines arching over the top of them. Dangerous Dave in his devious little mind had taken dozens of relatively harmless Beer Can mortars, attached several hundred feet of high strength 600 pound

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

naval test shot line to the cement filled soda and beer cans used as projectiles. To that line he mated a length of fine stainless steel cable and finally six feet of steel chain.

The helo's jinked and jived madly to avoid the overlapping shots, but there was no way for them to evade the encircling net. Their blades wrapped up several shotlines in seconds reeling the cable and chain up in buzz saw fashion to literally Cuisenart the two assault helicopters into so much metallic confetti before the main rotors seized and dropping the birds like fiery rocks into the valley below. Both sides starred in stunned silence at the flaming wrecks that now littered the rocky streambed. Both sides took in a collective breath that was answered by a resounding echo that danced off of both walls of that narrow mountain valley. A single word reverberated through the canyon. That word was:

“YES!”

“Dangerous Dave” Allison screamed at the top of his lungs as he danced on the edge of his fighting hole. “YES MOTHERF*CKING YES - YES - YES - YES - YES!” He spun about dancing and bowing to his fellow Patriots and adversaries below.

Less than a week later the first foreign medical and military personnel were disembarking from their UN transports at JFK international airport and were just touching American soil for the first time when Senator Eli Simpson received the call from the congressional mailroom. Several Secret Service agents met him at the observation window overlooking the room where all mail was screened and inspected prior to being delivered to the legislators.

“Senator, this package was mailed to you from your district headquarters in Georgia.” The taller of the three agents said to him.

“Why all the precaution? I get mail from my headquarter offices all the time.”

Two mailworkers in full biological contamination suits were carefully opening a moderately sized square parcel. One of the workers carefully reached in and retrieved a large clear plastic zippered bag full of small shiny oblong metallic plates.

“Looks like dog tags.” The worker turned to show the Senator and agents in the glass booth above him. “Maybe a hundred or more.”

“OH MY GOD!” The second worker shouted as he pulled the black plastic garbage bag open that had lain under the dog tags. There with the same expression of shock and surprise was Major Gunter Neumann's face staring up at the worker. A second smaller clear plastic zippered pouch carried a simple handwritten note printed in bold letters.

“Molon Labe”

Desert Doc

Courtesy of Preparedness Educational Services, Inc. Visit us at http://www.frugalsquirrels.com/friends_links.html

Pax Americana Chapter 30 - Angel of Mercy

Mark looked at the two cooling bodies lying in the gravel of the country road. The blood had begun to dry in the dust, and flies had already begun to feast. As Mark recovered from the shakes, he reflected at how fast it all had happened; yet as the incident was occurring, it seemed to take forever. Time seemed to be simultaneously speeding along at four times the normal speed, and yet creeping along with agonizing slowness. These were the second and third people he had killed in his life, and while it wasn't easy, it did get easier. He kept glancing around, waiting for something - anything - to happen. From his experience, you just can't just kill two people without answering to someone, no matter how justifiable. Could you? This more than anything unsettled him.

He retrieved the revolver from the dead form on the side of the road, and tossed it in the Eagle's open passenger window. He then opened the rear hatch on the car and retrieved a box of 9mm Winchester Silvertips, and topped off the magazine for the Glock 17. Both the felon's pickup and the Eagle were still idling. After topping off the magazine of this pistol, he reached into the kit in the back of the Eagle and withdrew a siphon hose and the empty "spare tank" cans. He walked over to the battered truck and turned off the engine. The truck appeared to be a mid-seventies model, and Mark guessed it didn't have the anti-siphon device in the filler neck. A few moments later, he found that it did not. His siphon hose was a store-bought kind with the squeeze bulb, so the user needn't risk a mouthful of gasoline. It was a time consuming process, but all told he managed to get nearly six gallons of gasoline from the truck. A cursory examination of the truck's interior revealed some bloodstained cash, watches and a bag with some potato chips and pretzels, as well as three two-litre bottles of Coca-Cola, and a six-pack of Budweiser. Mark took the food and left the cash and watches. The bed of the truck held little of interest: Some bags of aluminum cans, a short length of logging chain, and some empty cardboard boxes.

Mark considered burying the bodies, but then thought better of it. He owed these men nothing, and it would be a waste of his efforts. Plus, there might actually be an investigation. He was sure a jury would see this as self-defense. Mark put his newfound items in the Eagle, climbed into the driver's seat and drove away at about 45 miles per hour to maximize fuel efficiency. He had roughly ten gallons of fuel in the tank, and that would get him about 150 miles, as a conservative estimate. At least with mostly real gasoline in the tank, he could shut off the engine.

The gravel road continued for miles, and eventually passed through a small village. "Brearton: Unincorporated" read the small green sign. There was a small gas station and a tavern, but not much else. Mark pulled into the parking lot of the gas station. He immediately noticed a plywood sign with "NO GAS" written in red paint propped against the pumps. Another sheet of plywood looked freshly nailed in place where he presumed one of the windows should be. Several marks scarred the wood in what appeared to be bullet holes. As he exited the car, he checked to see that his Glock was in place on his hip, but covered with his shirt. He walked slowly to the station door with his head on a swivel. There was no movement in the little town. No children played in the yards, no dogs barked. As he drew near to the door of the station, the door quickly opened a crack and a shotgun barrel protruded. Mark stopped and slowly raised his hands.

"No gas! Go way!" Shouted a voice from inside.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“I saw the sign. I don’t want gas. I need to talk to a cop. There’s been a shooting.” Mark said, in what he hoped was a loud, clear and strong voice.

“There’s been a lot of shooting, mister. Some from us, some at us. Now get out of here. No cops around here.” The voice replied.

“Can I use the phone?” Said Mark, gesturing vaguely to the blue, egg-shaped phone station mounted to the wall next to the door.

“Phone don’t work neither. Now get the hell out of here. Next time I tell you, it’ll be with buckshot.”

“Ok, ok. I’m going.” Mark said, as he backed slowly toward the car. He was sweating heavily as he realized there was nothing preventing the man behind the shotgun from shooting him, then taking all of his supplies. If things continued the way they were going, if this same situation had happened in another month, he suspected the man would have. As it was, most people didn’t realize how bad things were getting.

Mark reached the Eagle wagon, climbed in and pulled away. As he drove slowly out of the village, he noticed more than one set of curtains drawn back slightly, and subtle movements behind them as the villagers watched him go. He silently wished them luck. They were going to need it. And yet, these people had withstood one attack already, he presumed from the damage to the gas station. That’s probably where their extreme caution had originated. He couldn’t blame them, really. He was a little paranoid now, himself.

The road lead once again through the rural countryside. Trees were green, but the crops were mostly withered and brown. He saw not a soul. No farmers in the fields, no kids on bikes. No rural mailman or UPS driver. No road crews. It was peaceful in a way, and yet disturbing in another. The sun was already low on the horizon, and long shadows played upon the ground, and Mark began to consider stopping for the night. He began to look for little used paths that went into the woods. He knew from his childhood these were sometimes used by landowners to collect wood from their forests. Some tracks were used for only two weeks out of the year during hunting season. He began to look for areas that were the most sparsely populated. He finally found a faded track in a large section of dense forest that looked inviting, and he slowed the Eagle to a stop. He exited the car, looked around, and saw no one. Stretching, he walked closer to inspect the trail. The dried, brown grass had grown tall in the wheel ruts, and upon examination, had not been bent or broken. Mark was not a tracker, but he was pretty sure that no one had been down this track in at least several weeks. He walked slowly up the path looking for signs of human activity, but saw none. The forest quickly hid the car, as well as the road, and the track soon curved back behind a knoll, completely obscuring the road. It seemed to be more than adequate for a night’s stay. He walked back to the Eagle, put it in “drive” and slowly eased it down the lane, driving until the car was hidden behind the knoll.

The weather was pleasantly warm with the sun still up, yet Mark knew the night would become cold. He drew the sleeping bag from his car, as well as some of his food and a flashlight. The forest slowly resumed its activity as Mark sat quietly, lap full of potato chips. He decided to save the Coke, as he might need the sugar and caffeine that it contained at a later time. The events of the day played again and again in his mind. He began to consider what he could have done differently. The shoot-out had left him alive. He couldn’t think of anything different that he should have done. The incident at the gas station, well, he doubted that they were really out of gas, but he didn’t doubt that without too much provocation, the shotgun would have been used. He finished the

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

salty potato chips, and drunk nearly the entire contents of his one-quart canteen. It was nearly full dark now, and the crickets and frogs were beginning to sing. It had been an incredibly long day, and despite the thoughts racing through his mind, Mark was beginning to fall asleep. He stretched out beside the car, letting sleep take him.

He was awakened later that night by something moving through the forest. The loud sounds of crunching leaves and breaking branches in the surrounding quiet seemed to indicate to Mark that it was either an escaped bull or a person. Either way, Mark eased the Glock from his waist and held very still. Hopefully, whoever or whatever it was would pass by in the night, none the wiser of Mark's presence. As he waited, the crashing became slower, and began to hear ragged breathing, and an occasional groan.

"Human, then." Thought Mark.

There was the sound of something falling to the forest floor, then no more crashing. The sound of the heavy breathing remained, but began to relax and become less strident and ragged. Mark lay still, considering his options. The person was about 25 yards away, near as he could figure, and still breathing. Who the hell was it? Friend or foe? Why had they stopped? Did they have night vision? Were they drawing a bead on him even now? Mark figured waiting could hurt nothing. As far as he knew, whoever it was didn't know Mark was there. He could just sit tight, and wait to see what happened. He glanced at his watch, noting the luminous dial said time was one in the morning. He lay still, and couldn't help but be curious about whoever it was.

After an hour, Mark couldn't take it any more. He took the flashlight in one hand, and his Glock in the other, and rose as silently as he could. He moved in the direction that he last heard the noise, walking ever so slowly and placing his feet with the utmost care. It still sounded to him like he made the noise of a herd of cattle, and Mark winced with the noise, but continued. He took frequent stops to listen. He could still faintly hear the ragged breathing, and inched his way closer.

It took him nearly another hour to walk the 25 yards to the person laying on the forest floor. When Mark felt that he was within 10 feet of the figure, every nerve tingling, Glock extended toward the sound and flashlight clamped in the supporting hand, he clicked on the light.

The dazzlingly bright light blinded him for an instant, but revealed the figure on the forest floor. It looked like a young teenager, dressed in black pants and a dark blue shirt. His right lower pant leg was sticky with partly dried streamers of blood. His face was streaked with sweat and dirt, and the light showed his face deathly pale. His breathing was rough and deep, and though Mark's only medical training was his "Combat Lifesaver" class in the Reserves, he could see this kid was in trouble. The kind he didn't think he could fix by himself.

"Hey kid! Wake up!" Mark said, gently shaking the shoulder of the boy.

The only response was an incoherent groan. Mark touched the back of his hand to the boy's forehead. It was cold and sweaty. He found a pulse at the neck and femur, but not at the wrist. That told him the kid's blood pressure was probably between 70 and 80 systolic. Not good.

"This kid's in bad shape." He said to himself, as he holstered the Glock and tucked the flashlight under his arm. He reached down and gathered up the boy in his arms, quickly carrying him to the Eagle. While managing to hold the kid in his arms, he was able to raise the rear hatch and roughly place the boy inside. The weak dome

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

light provided plenty of illumination for Mark's eyes, which were still mostly adjusted to the darkness. He grabbed his sleeping bag off the ground and threw it over the boy, then retrieved his first aid kit, withdrew the EMT shears and began to cut up the seam of the pants to expose the leg. The amount of blood startled him. It was easy to miss how much there was in the darkness, and against the black color of the pants. As Mark cut away the pants, he became aware that they were heavy: Sodden with blood. The boy's lower leg was caked and blackened with dried blood. He went to the front seat and retrieved his other canteen and soaked some gauze 4X4 pads, then began to scrub the blood from the leg. Several times he must have contacted the wound itself, as the kid moaned and thrashed weakly, but soon resumed his lethargic stupor. Several minutes of scrubbing revealed two wounds, one to the back of the calf, and one to the front. The wound to the front was larger, with small amounts of tissue protruding from it. Embedded in the tissue were bits of leaves, dirt and clots. Fresh bleeding that his scrubbing had created obscured his vision. Mark drew a battle dressing from his kit, and managed to cover both wounds with one dressing. He quickly tied the tails of the dressing tightly around the kid's leg. He arranged his pack and gun case under the boy's legs to elevate them, and tucked his sleeping bag around him like a cocoon.

The boy needed a hospital. He probably needed surgery and blood, and certainly needed the wound cleaned out and IV antibiotics. Although he had the knowledge and equipment to start an IV, but only had a couple litres of Lactated Ringer's solution. Two things were stopping him from doing that. The first reason was - though Mark hated to admit it - selfish. The medications and other contents of his aid kit were there to help him through the tough times. He was as generous as the next guy was. Maybe more. But the way things were going, he would need that stuff.

The second reason was that he still had hope that there were hospitals still accepting patients. All sorts of questions would be raised if a boy showed up in the back of a four wheel drive station wagon with a complete stranger, and had an IV in place, with what looked for all the world like a gunshot wound to the leg. Yes sir, lots of questions. A part of him knew that was bullsh.it. He had killed two men not 12 hours ago. How much more trouble could he get into if he started an IV to save a kid's life? He could see it now:

"Mr. Foreman, have you reached a verdict?"

"Yes, we have your Honor. Guilty of two counts of manslaughter. Oh, and one count of practicing medicine without a license. We recommend he get the chair for that, your Honor."

"Christ" said Mark as he reached for his aid bag, "When you think of it that way . . ."

Mark fished out one of his wool socks, and slipped a litre bag of IV solution into it. He fished out an MRE heater and put it in the sock too, then added a little water to the heater, and set the conglomeration aside as he slowly prepared his IV equipment.

In the active duty Marines, he had become friends with one of the Corpsmen who taught him this trick. Mark didn't believe it at first, but as he tested it, he found it was true: A 40 degree litre bag of IV fluids can be brought to about 104-110 degrees with two MRE heaters. Mark figured the fluids from his kit were already warmer than 40 degrees Fahrenheit, so he used only one heater. To make certain he didn't get the bag too hot, he applied a "fever strip" thermometer found in the drugstore pediatric section. It wasn't calibrated, it was a little hard to read, and it only went to 106 degrees, but it was easily secured to the bag with a piece of tape, and was the only

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

thing he had. When (after kneading the bag to evenly mix the heated fluids) the temperature began to climb off the scale, he removed the heater from the sock and spiked the IV bag with the administration set.

With some small difficulty, Mark started an IV in the kid's arm, and began to infused the warm fluids. He hung the IV bag, wool sock and all, from the hanger above the rear door. He made a final check of the connections to ensure that there was not fluid leaking, crawled out of the back of the wagon.

Stretching, he retrieved his GPS unit and the Atlas and Gazetteer, and began to look for the nearest hospital. The kid needed to get there fast.

AGreyMan

Pax Americana Chapter 31 - Lazarus

Mark drove with cautious speed down the winding country road. The GPS and map showed him many miles from the interstate, with many more to go to the next town that was shown to have a hospital. When going through several small villages, he hunkered low in the seat and peered forth like a blue-haired matron in a Cadillac, as the towns seemed to become increasingly hostile with each passing hour. While driving through the last town, he saw men in the midst of dragging large trees across the county road with a huge John Deere tractor. Most of them had leaped behind the downed trees and pointed their deer rifles at him, but whether they judged him not a threat, or they were still unprepared to open fire without significant provocation, he drove past without a shot being fired. The reason for that particular town's attitude became apparent. A small grocery store was blackened and charred, it's roof gone. The burned wall studs reached like skeletal fingers from a grave into the sky. Mark could have convinced himself that the fire was accidental save two scorched cars in the parking lot with bullet holes in them.

The boy continued to lay in the rear of the car. Mark had braced him into position with some of his supplies to prevent him from rolling around as the car moved. His condition seemed to improve slightly with the two litres of fluid that Mark administered. He could once again feel a pulse in the boy's wrist, and he seemed less cool and clammy. He did not, however, seem to have regained consciousness. Occasionally, Mark would stop the car in a deserted stretch of road and check on him. The Carlisle battle dressing that Mark had placed on the boy's leg showed some blood, but did not appear to be soaked through. That was the extent of the good news. The bad news was that the nearest town with any kind of hospital was still fifty miles away. It was a relatively small town of 5,000 people, but the map legend indicated that it had medical facilities available. He reflected that it was probably good the town was small. It was less likely to be overrun with injured or plague victims. . .at least according to his logic. On the other hand, the small number of patients that may become injured or infected may easily overwhelm the capacity of a smaller hospital. It was a wash, he decided. He just hoped that there would be somebody there to help the kid before gangrene or something set in.

Mark found himself speaking to the kid as he drove. It began when a particularly rough stretch of road elicited a groan from the boy.

"Hey, are you awake finally?" He had asked, looking for movement in the rearview mirror.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

"Hey. Kid?" Mark said. There was no response.

"Ah well. You're not missing anything. The only people out there to see look like they want to kill us, so it's a good thing there aren't too many of 'em. Looks like they already got a head start on you, though. Can't figure it out; you look like you're Amish, or Mennonite. Can't imagine why anybody would want to shoot you. 'Course, the two guys yesterday who tried to ventilate me didn't have a good reason either. Christ, but that was scary. I bet you were pretty scared too. Nahh: You're probably too tough to be scared. Not me though! Whew! I'll tell you something. I was active duty in the Marines, and in the Army Reserves: Nothing's quite as scary as real bullets comin' at you. I mean, you personally!"

The boy of course said nothing.

"Listen," Mark continued, "I know you're probably pretty tough, and don't need any advice from me, but my tip for you is to hang in there. We'll get to the hospital soon, they'll work a little magic on that leg, and then I guess we'll find your folks. They're probably worried sick."

Mark paused in his speech. "Would ya listen to me? I'm rambling like a drunken sailor, and believe you me, I've seen a few of those! Anyway, I'll let you sleep. I'll wake you if anything happens, like a parade or something."

The Eagle's wheels ground away the miles. His one-sided banter with the boy was mainly to mask his nervousness. The world had gone crazy in such a short span of time. Literally, one day he was on his way to his Mom's house for a visit, and the next day he shot two men who were trying to kill him, and left their bodies to rot in the middle of a gravel road. A day later he had picked up an unconscious kid with a gunshot wound and - after starting an IV - was driving him to the hospital 50 miles away. Despite all that had happened, he still had difficulty wrapping his head around it all. Though he considered himself a realistic person, expecting the worst while hoping for the best, the speed of society's deterioration surprised him. He had always believed that the veneer of civilization had become quite thin in America. Though most of the people were mostly good, riots had become commonplace on the justification of a sports score or jury verdict. Looting occurred with any provocation, with the common justification of "But I need this!" and "They owe me!" People stood by while crimes were committed against their fellow man, half because they were too apathetic to help, the other half because they risk imprisonment by the "authorities" by helping. Television showed footage of accidents, riots and murders while providing humorous voice over commentary. Children were stolen from their families, raped and murdered. We had teetered on the brink of collapse for so long that it was hardly a surprise when we actually fell. The Plague and the Brown had merely been the pebbles that tripped us.

But it did surprise him.

A small part of Mark had hoped for a cataclysm like this. He had daydreamed of a time when his problems would be related to the very real difficulties of food, water and shelter. A time when he could build a shelter without a permit, keep what he made without taxation, and live his life without fear of being sued. But the reality was different. He had been shot at, his car was nearly out of fuel, roads were becoming hostile private property and there was no power. He didn't have a piece of fertile land to grow food, and winter was around the corner. A gunshot wound in the kid that could have been a just warm-up for a competent surgical team could likely result in his death. Those details were much more harsh in this reality than they had been in his daydreams.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

The town of Trinkston and its hospital were a mere five miles away when the window behind Mark exploded. Glass showered the interior of the car and Mark was so startled he yelled a string of obscenities as he hauled the steering wheel to one side and stabbed the brakes, then the accelerator with his foot. The car nearly rolled onto its side as it slid sideways into the shallow ditch. Rooster tails of dirt and dried grass spewed from the rear tires as Mark kept the accelerator to the floor, jouncing with increasing speed along the ditch. Another round flew through the rear window and exited through the roof next to Mark's head. The wind roared along with the car's engine in his ears as he hunched low in the seat and concentrated on keeping the car on its wheels. The ditch shallowed even more, and he was able to get the Eagle onto the macadam.

Mark risked a glance at the aging wagon's speedometer, which showed 40mph and climbing. Another glance in the rear view mirror showed the kid had been tossed into a corner of the car by the vehicle's wild maneuvering. A vibrating, rattling car and an equally vibrating driver had traversed five miles at top speed when the engine gave first one cough, then another, then stopped all together. Mark looked down at the dash in the sudden silence of the coasting car. The fuel gauge was empty, the "Oil Press." light was lit, and the temperature gauge was off the scale.

"Sh.it." said Mark into the quiet. He hauled on the steering wheel to get the car over to the side of the road where it coasted to a heavy stop. There were mostly fields surrounding the car, but a finger of forest projected toward them several hundred yards away. He slumped in the driver's seat for a moment, head resting on the steering wheel. He heard the boy stir slightly in the back. Then he heard another faint sound that made his blood run cold: Engines. Several of them, from back the way he had come.

Mark ran around to the rear of the car, flung open the hatchback and grabbed his gun case. Working the latches quickly, he reached inside to grab the National Match M14 that lay there. He cursed as he noticed one of the spare 20 round magazines had been shattered by a bullet. That left him with just three. A quick glance revealed no obvious damage to the rifle. He stuffed two magazines into the pockets of his windbreaker, inserted the third into the well of the M14 and slung the weapon. He gathered the boy up in his arms and grunted with the effort. The kid was a good 130+ pounds.

He ran down into the ditch then up and across the open brown field toward the nearest extension of forest. The engine sounds were louder now and he was sure that they would spot him. He ran anyway, his arms aching with the boy's weight and the M14 slamming awkwardly into his back, causing a breathtaking stab of pain every other footfall. The engines grew louder, and Mark made a rapid pirouette to see behind him. There was a pickup truck with several people in the bed, and five people on four-wheelers. The four wheelers traversed the ditch in a few moments then began to race across the field toward him. They fired wildly inaccurately with pistols while they bounced across the uneven field, rifles slung across their backs. The pickup stopped by his car, and people exited and began to poke around in it. The woods loomed ahead of him, and Mark collapsed with the boy just inside the tree line.

"Well kid, this is it." He said to the young man as he turned to face the oncoming threat. The boy uttered a groan in reply.

He pulled a round into the chamber of the M14 and fell onto his belly. The Glock savagely dug into his hip so he rolled to the side, unholstered it, and set it beside him. The nearest four wheeler was fifty yards away when Mark put the crosshairs on his chest. The rifle was sighted in for much farther, and between that and the bounc-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

ing target looming huge in the Kahles scope, he was not at all certain of the shot. The M14 barked and pushed Mark's shoulder and a quick glance showed the four-wheeler riderless. As he traversed the muzzle to the next closest rider, they seemed to realize what happened. All the riders peeled off in different directions, all bent on flanking his position. Mark picked off another at about a hundred yards, but the trees obscured the rest as they departed from his line of sight, riding behind the protrusion of forest. He figured it would take them some time to come up behind him. He focused his attention on those intent on pillaging his car. This was more the kind of shooting that he was used to: Long distance and stationary targets.

From long habit, he drew a deep breath and centered himself, letting all outside distractions fade away. The sound of the four-wheelers faded and his awareness focused only on his rifle and the targets. His breathing slowed and all else faded away. Just like in the training, center the crosshairs on the upper chest, compensate for the wind. Breathe, relax, aim, slack, squeeze. The figure next to his car looking for him with binoculars crumpled to the ground. The others flinched and scrambled for cover, but Mark scored a hit another man before he could scramble away; the man tumbled to the ground and crawled a short distance dragging his legs. Mark noted where another man had leaped into the ditch, and estimated where his head would pop up to look for him. After a few seconds, Mark took up the slack in the trigger and found his guess of the man's location was only a little off. He centered the sights and squeezed the trigger quickly and the man's head seemed to expel a cloud of reddish mist before falling out of sight. Some of the others seemed to panic, and Mark scored at least one more hit as the remaining men jumped wrestled the bodies into the truck and sped away. He considered disabling their vehicle, but then decided that the sooner and farther they fled the better.

As his sphere of awareness expanded, he considered the men on four-wheelers trying to flank him. He rolled to the side to try to find them, when a "crack - crack - crack - crack - crack" struck his ears. He finished his roll facing upward, and looking on in surprise as the kid, eyes wide with terror, pointed Mark's own Glock at a man coming up behind them. The man looked surprised as an invisible wind plucked at his jacket time after time. The man's amazement was short-lived, when Mark swung the M14 toward him and tapped the trigger. After the second .308 round blew through his chest, the man dropped to his knees, then forward onto his face.

Another "Crack-thump" sounded and Mark was pelted by bark flying from a tree close by his head. He looked to see another man standing straddle-legged holding a rifle to his shoulder, and trying to work the bolt of the rifle.

"Christ kid. Get down!" yelled Mark as he centered the crosshairs on the man and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. Mark automatically tried to push the safety forward, then re-pulled the trigger. Again nothing. He then took the rifle from his shoulder and cursed as he saw the bolt was held open, the magazine empty. Faintly, he recalled not loading it fully to keep the springs from taking a set. While he ripped the empty 20 round magazine from the well, he again heard "Crack - crack - crack - crack" as the boy pointed the pistol in the general direction of the man who had just taken his rifle from his shoulder to finish working the stubborn bolt action. Though the man was fifty yards away, the boy made no great effort to use the sights. All the same, leaves and twigs rained down on the foe, and dirt from the forest floor sprayed his front. Still the boy pulled the trigger "crack - crack - crack - crack."

Before Mark could fully seat the magazine, the man screamed and threw his rifle as he fled pell-mell through the forest. When Mark finally shouldered the rifle, all he could see in the scope were wildly swaying branches where the man had fled. He dropped the rifle from his shoulder fractionally and scanned the area in a rapid 360

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

degree circle but he saw no immediate danger. He dropped the M14 to his lap and studied the boy. His eyes were wide with fear and elation, and his face pale with the same, as well as his leg injury. He continued to clutch the Glock in his hands as he stared at the man whom he had shot. His breathing was deep and fast. Mark thought he was on the edge of hyperventilation. The boy's eyes did not waver from the body for several minutes, but soon his breathing slowed to a normal rate.

When he finally looked up, Mark shivered. There was an edge of madness in the boy's eyes. He stared at Mark for several minutes.

"I have killed" he said simply.

"I know." Said Mark. The next few moments could send the boy cascading into madness, or prevent that fall. "You saved my life. Those men were trying to kill us. Thank you."

"You saved my life, too." The boy's expression remained flat, but the gleam of insanity had faded. Mostly.

"What's your name?" asked Mark.

The boy thought, and for long moments said nothing. Then, "I used to be called something else . . . But you can call me Lazarus."

AGreyMan

Pax Americana Chapter 32 - Rescue and Reunion

The Director's fist slammed down on the dark walnut desktop. He did not react to the jolt of pain that shot up his arm; his rage cancelled all other sensations from reaching his fuming brain circuits.

"IF I HEAR OF ONE MORE FAILURE TO FOLLOW MY ORDERS I WILL HAVE THAT BASTARDS HEAD ON A PIKE AND THEIR ENTIRE FAMILY THROWN INTO THE CAMPS! DO I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR?!" He bellowed at the assembled suits in the room.

Twelve paled expressions nodded back in synchronous agreement.

The Director of Homeland Security reclaimed his composure as he slowly backed up, straightened his tie and veiled his anger once again behind his bureaucratic mask. Resuming his reigning position behind the great desk that dominated the large office he waved his hand to continue the briefing.

A nervous FEMA Director stood up and with a sheaf of paper in hand quickly shuffling through them to find the one he wanted.

"Ah . . . er . . . Mister Director the good news is that THREE Disaster Relocation and Sorting Camps ARE ahead of schedule, fully staffed and able to begin receiving pris- . . . er . . . ah detain- . . . ah . . . evacuees at this

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

very moment.” He patted his sweaty nervous brow with a white handkerchief and continued detailing the progress of the other camps and trying to avoid the deadly glare of the Directors cold predatory gaze.

Sergeant Major Jeffery Lee Strothers, Marine Corps Retired, loved the morning just before the sun cleared the horizon line and splashed daylight across the landscape. Ruger, his trusty Rottweiler, panted in the chill morning air, his breath condensing and making him appear even more foreboding for his breed and size. There was just something about the stillness of the world at that fleeting moment.

“Damn I love the dawn!” He muttered to himself as he glassed the road off in the distance.

From the small bluff the horizon line was over fifteen miles. It was the point just three miles ahead of where he left the secondary highway that he was most interested in. Jeff didn’t like the open expanse of the plains and here on the edge of Colorado he felt especially exposed and naked. This type of terrain was a killing field for armor, air power and long-range snipers. Good for defense, suicidal for the attacker or the guerrilla fighter and damn exposed for a smuggler. But the battle scarred old veteran also knew that such terrain could be very illusionary, masking shallow arroyos and cuts that entire armies could march through undetected. It all depended on a warrior’s intimate knowledge of the landscape.

Strothers had maintained his drive west sticking to the major highways for speed and trusting in bureaucratic stupidity and his flawless authentic travel papers. But here, near one of his drops he was forced to leave the main freeway system and travel the secondary arteries. The last encrypted burst transmission he had received directed him to these very specific coordinates. If it were not for the fact that the sender was absolutely trusted by Strothers he would not be there watching the check point several miles in the distance. He scanned the road looking for any sign that would foretell of what he was expected to be watching for, but what ever or whom ever he was intended to witness was well versed in the fine art of camouflage. This too he knew to be an illusion, so he waited and scanned the terrain in the distance. Then he caught it . . . movement.

Angel MacMurtry-Chavez clung to the shadows as he moved silently through the alleyway in the predawn light. He had gone in search of food left behind in the abandon homes and had spent the entire night trapped under a redwood deck in a vacant backyard as several firefights waged around the neighborhood he was crossing through. The violent scabs that squabbled over the remnants of civilization were fighting another turf war. Sirens continued to scream off in the distance intermittently. The air was filled with wisps of smoke from the fires from the other side of town as Angel paused and listened intently for any hint of danger up ahead.

He had been a junior at Central High when the world that he had known suddenly went to sh*t one day. First came the Twin Towers and Pentagon attack of 9/11, then began the war on terrorism with the government hawks rattling sabers looking everywhere for an enemy that vanished into smoke. Not to be put off of a good fight the feds then turned their focus to a target that couldn’t just fade into the mists of places like Tora Bora or Mindanao. They chose instead to finish some unresolved business and started looking around for excuses to pick another fight with Iraq. We still had a huge presence in the region . . . why not put them to good use and after all

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

they argued, we're going to have to get involved sooner or later because as everyone knows, THEY ARE SO EVIL!

The second Persian Gulf War started with a whimper. A gradual build up of hostilities that began with increased air strikes and punishment raids. As if on cue the US sent in advisors and special operations types to build the Kurds into a legitimate force to be reckoned with. Again we were playing another rube as a pawn in our game of expansion and control. From there it was only a matter of time until US Marines and Rangers set foot in the land of ancient Babylon, as the latest in a long line of conquerors. This time however Hussein had spent over a decade secretly building up his army to fight the infidel invaders and he was determined to play his version of Seven Card No Peek. After all, he had nothing to lose and no conscience to back it up. This meeting would be a dogfight, a junkyard . . . dogfight with all gloves off!

In the mean time back in the States the twin plagues (human and plant) had kicked the country solidly in both gonads and left it sucking serious wind. Angel had lost his mother and most of the extended family he had in the first wave of that deadly virus that sweep through the city. Local officials reeled from the devastation wrought by the sudden evisceration of their communities. Angel and thousands of other instant orphans were thrust into a system with too few foster families to begin with and many that themselves had barely made it through the initial assault of that deadly disease and then fell victim to the whiplash as the plague rebounded and slammed back through the wounded communities a second time.

Due to his age (eight months away from eighteen), several of his surviving teacher's endorsements, and the government's desperation Angel had managed to push through his emancipation paperwork. He had never felt so alone in his life. It had always been just him and his mother, his father long gone from the picture for various reasons, the greatest was that he was a total flake. Yet despite the hand he had been dealt Angel was as determined to finish high school as he was determined to survive the current crisis. He knew of some distance relatives, Uncles he had met once or twice growing up, but he had no way to get to them after martial law was declared and the cities slowly turned into death traps. For now it was survival day to day.

Another scream pierced the early dawn air as Angel crept further down the alley. This one closer and he was sure . . . female. He inched forward. There was a struggle going on between the houses up ahead. Someone was desperately fighting for their life. Angel peered around the corner of the garage through the cracks in the fence. Three "Bangers" were grappling with someone. He caught a flash of blonde hair - gringa! More screams pierced the early morning air. Angel quickly looked for a weapon among the trash and debris piled in the alleyway. A handle caught his eye.

"BENDEJO B*TCH!!" The lead gangster yelled as the struggling girl sunk her teeth into his arm. He pounded his free fist into the side of her face until she let go as she faded into unconsciousness.

She was a bit on the chunky side and they were having a difficult time peeling her designer jeans off due to her struggling. Roberto was now pissed because his brother had knocked her out, he liked it when they struggled, now he just had a limp fish. They had finally yanked her pants off and as he grabbed a handful of her panties and started to pull them away exposing her soft pubic hair there was a strange hollow echo reverberating within his head, a flash of brilliant light and then sparks fading out to nothing as he dropped face first into her lap.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Strothers focused in on the guard shack and caught a tiny glimpse of movement near the porta-potty. He could see the two guards in the lit shack, idiots! They had probably just finished their thirtieth hand of spades without looking out the windows of their shack the entire time. These bozo's deserved what ever they were about to receive and the grizzly Sgt. Maj. was sure it was going to be a very early retirement . . . without any benefits at all!

One of the guards threw down the last of his cards and began to stretch as he stood up and looked around. He checked his watch and headed out of the shack and started to march up to the porta-potty twenty yards behind the building. About half way there he stopped to light up a cigarette and as he took in that first puff and looked up his life ended there as the garrote snapped closed around his throat and he was viciously dragged backwards into the brush beside the path.

"DAMN, that was sweet!" Strothers commented to Ruger.

The remaining guard was tidying up the table and never heard a thing. He walked over to the window on the far side of the shack from the direction that Strothers was observing, unlatched the window and pushed them open to vent fresh air into the stale smoke filled room. As he leaned forward to push the windows open Strothers caught a glimpse of his head suddenly jerking down and he was rapidly pulled out the window. The last image was of his feet clearing the windowsill.

"KEEEY-RIST!" He exclaimed. "Who the F*CK are those fellows!"

Suddenly the area around the shack was alive as brush and grass clumps transformed into professional warriors. He noted that several gillie suited forms emerged from the GP medium tent that quartered the off duty guards. Strothers doubted that any of those Homeland Security boys would be making muster this morning, at least not here on this planet.

Within just a few minutes the guard post looked perfectly normal. Several of the new arrivals got a fire going in a fifty-five barrel drum used for warming the guards in this isolated outpost. Everything looked perfectly normal . . . hmmm, so what were they up to? He heard the trucks before he saw them as their big diesel engines hauled their heavy cargo up the steady grade. Seven trucks and two Humvee's were approaching the checkpoint. Yeah the post looked very normal and quiet. It didn't take much imagination to know that the early morning quiet was not going to remain that way for very long.

Angel whipped the number one driver into the side of the first would be rapist's head with a resounding "THWACK!" He caught the second assailant on the back swing square in the center of his forehead and sent him reeling back into the wall of the house. The second strike nearly broke the head off the golf club and it flew off as he whipped the club towards the third rapist. The empty shaft slapped the remaining gangster across the arm as he tried to block the attack. With his arm up it blocking not only the strike of the golf club but his vision as well, he didn't see the snap kick that caught him under the jaw crushing his windpipe and shattering his tracheal cartilage. The leading edge of Angel's Doc Martins drove nearly to the cervical spine as the kick blasted deep into the targets flesh, just like his sensei had taught him to do.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

In a matter of seconds it was over. Two of the would be rapists died almost instantly, the third would linger on for many hours but never regain consciousness until he finally succumbed to the loss of blood as the feral dogs that roamed the shattered city ate a hearty breakfast.

Angel had never used his martial arts training before in anger, his mother had raised him as a strict pacifist even though it was she that insisted on the lessons. She knew that reality sometimes demanded action and it was better to have the training and discipline that went along with it than to be naked before the world. Sometimes you must take a life to save a life, she had been thinking about her son at the time and the vicious unfair world that he had been born into. Caught between two worlds, neither white or brown, he would be alone someday, very alone.

Angel grabbed the remains of the unconscious girls clothing and quickly pulled her up and onto his shoulder. It would have been bad enough had she been awake, but out cold she was nothing but dead weight, yet he had to get her away from here as quickly as possible incase there were others about that wanted in on the rape or the remains.

Cynthia Mathews-Saxon felt something cool and soothing on her forehead as she drifted back through the gray clouds of consciousness. She moved her arm knocking off the cool compress and was jolted awake from the sudden shot of pain, then she remembered! A wash of panic flashed across her mind, she bolted upright and that was a mistake. She rolled over and began to throw up. After several heaves with her head pounding and her eyes trying to pop out and come into focus at the same time, she surveyed the room she was in. It was nice with a strong feminine touch. The windows were open and fresh air was lightly blowing the thin drapes open. There was an old lady smell about the room . . . lavender . . . yeah that was it. She was laying in someone's bed between clean sheets . . . naked?!

Gathering up the top sheet as a wrap she carefully and quietly with head pounding crept out of bed. She could hear someone further out in the house moving about. There was a strong smell of cooking in the air and despite her nausea she found herself hungry. As she slowly inched forward she could feel every muscle and joint of her body screaming in pain. The last thing she remembered was the struggle as she was pulled from her car by a group of gang bangers at an empty gas station. She had fought hard and remembered biting down on someone's arm and tasting blood as they were trying to pull her pants down and then nothing.

The house was neat and well kept. She passed down the hallway and looked briefly at the family portraits that lined the wall. They were mostly those of a nice looking white women and her attractive dark skinned child. She could see the child grow as she moved closer to the center of the house. She was on the edge of the living and dining room and the last photos were of a handsome young man. Nice legs she noted from his soccer pictures, athletic.

The smell of something warm and inviting filled the air, was that bread? Fresh baked bread? She peeked around the corner and saw the young man in the picture crouched before an iron pot in the fireplace. He looked up as she moved around the corner into the room.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“You should not be out of bed, Miss.” He said quietly to her. “You were hit pretty hard.”

“How did I get here . . . and where am I?” Cynthia asked as she eased herself into the nearby chair, her knees shaking and weak, her head pounding.

“You’re lucky to be alive.” He said lifting the lid on the cast iron pot and checking the contents. “What were you thinking of, being in this part of town?”

She put her head in her hands as if that would stop the pounding. “I was nearly out of gas, I just wanted to get home.”

“Well you nearly got yourself killed.”

“How did I get here? And where is here?”

“This is my house, where my mother and I lived.”

“So your mother is she the one . . .” She looked down, referring to her nakedness as she pulled the sheet closer around her.

“No . . . my mother died in the first plague.” He sighed and paused for a few seconds. “I tried to clean you up a little before I put you in her bed . . . you were . . . ah . . . pretty . . . ah . . . dirty and all.” He turned back to the pot.

“I didn’t do anything, honest, just tried to wipe you down with a wash cloth to get the worst of it off. I . . . ah..well I’m sorry if that bothers you.”

Cynthia could see that he was embarrassed and let it drop. “Do you mind if I lay down on the couch?” She asked. “I don’t feel so good.”

Angel got up and helped her over to the sofa, then pulled out a soft Mexican wool blanket and covered her up. She lay there and watched him as he fiddled with their meal all being baked in several Dutch Oven pots. Cynthia had never seen anyone cook in this manner before.

“Do you always cook that way.” She asked.

He looked at her with a slight glare. “My mother and I used to go camping a lot. We always cooked with our Dutch Ovens. There’s been no power for some time so the electric stove doesn’t work too well right now.” He answered sarcastically. “So if you want to eat . . .”

“Oh . . . I didn’t mean.”

“Yes you did.” He said flatly. “Look, you’re welcome to stay here until you get better. But remember you are a guest in my house.” He could hear his mothers voice in his last words.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“What happened to the three guys that were trying . . . ah trying . . . to rape me?” She asked trying to change the subject.

“Number One Wood . . . four hundred yard drive.” Angel answered flatly.

The trucks pulled up to the checkpoint and the lead co-driver jumped down with his clipboard in hand. He had just reached the door of the guard shack when the ditches on both sides of the trucks suddenly came alive. In single motion of slick well rehearsed military precision the drivers and co-drivers of each vehicle were quickly dispatched. The pair of guards in the back of each of the seven trucks fell forward and either onto the floor or the ground below.

The assault team pulled the lifeless bodies from the cabs and backs of the trucks and dragged them off into the brush behind the camp. The majority took their place and the drove the vehicles through the now open gate and then down a side road off towards the mountains in the distance. The few remaining troops then went about setting up a rather gruesome display. They lined the road to the checkpoint with stakes then mounted the heads of their victims on them to warn others of the folly of fighting for the wrong side.

It was what happened next that sent chills down the veteran warrior's spine. Strothers met up with the convoy of vehicles at a prearranged spot well off in the mountains and far from the checkpoint they were diverted from. There he witnessed the members of the assault team switch suddenly from vicious professional warriors to humble humanitarians as they assisted the cargo down from the backs of the trucks to the ground as freed men and women. The image hit him like a sledgehammer between the eyes of World War Two concentration camp survivors as he watched the frail forms lovingly lifted down from the high cargo beds of the trucks and carried and/or carefully assisted to the waiting medical personnel under the camouflage nets and into the safety of the mining tunnels ahead.

Strothers heard a slight commotion behind him and turned to see his old war buddy, the commander of the Southern Colorado Militia walking towards him.

“STROTHERS YOU CRUSTY OL’ SON OF A B*TCH!” He bellowed and grabbed his hand, pumping it hard and adding a solid slap on the shoulder. “It’s so good you see you again!” He said turning the Sgt. Maj. towards the caves. “We got a lot of work to do here. I understand you’ve got some toys from that old scrounge Lin? How is he doing there in the land of Klinton?” The pair of old warhorses strode like fresh boots just out of basic towards the caverns ahead. Ruger trotted off beside his master as they disappeared under the nets and into the mountain.

Desert Doc

Pax Americana Chapter 33 - Urban Outpost

Cynthia lapsed in and out of consciousness for the first week after her rescue. Angel stayed close at hand and did what he could. He nursed her with herbal broths and fresh fruit juices trying to keep her hydrated when she

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

was awake. From his mother's library he figured out that she was suffering from a severe concussion. The Merck Manual became his medical bible as well as Barbara Bates' book on Physical Diagnosis. She was a strong girl and as time went on the odds slowly increased in her favor. He just hoped that she had not suffered from a skull fracture or something worse, though he could not imagine anything worse than her current affliction and choose not to dwell on the matter.

Angel was becoming an OJT (on the job trained) nurse for Cynthia as he hovered over her during this critical period. He followed his mother's nursing manuals to the "T"; keeping her hydrated, keeping her wounds cleaned and dressed, he changed her sheets daily and became quite adept at giving her sponge baths while maintaining a level of decency that was appropriate. Day by day Cynthia's strength improved, she was awake more often and for longer periods of time. They were both grateful that the waves of nausea came less frequently. Angel even thought that the steady diet of vegetarian broths and soups was doing her some good besides just keeping fluids in her. Cynthia's color was much healthier, and she appeared to have lost a large amount of unnecessary weight. But it could just be that he was getting used to presence. By the end of two weeks Angel was able to spend more and more time away from her bedside and continue his work around the house and yard. The gardens needed severe tending and he had several projects had been neglected far too long.

Cynthia awoke to a silent house and felt a wave of panic wash over her. For the last several weeks, though it was always very quiet in Angel's house, if she listened hard she could hear her protector pattering about somewhere nearby. He always seemed to be doing something, but he would come right in and check on her when she stirred. This was very comforting to her, she still had the nightmares of that horrid attack but Angel's presence reassured her frazzled nerves.

She sat up slowly and while her head did pound with her change in position it was not as severe as it had been. There was no nausea this time and she was sure that, that was a good sign. Beside the bed on the small nightstand lay some clothing folded neatly: a pair of sweats and beneath them a bra, panties and a pair of socks. Her cheeks grew red as she looked at the tag and saw that they were her size.

"How did he know?" she wondered.

Slipping into them she noticed that while they would have been the right size a month ago, they were noticeably too large for her now. She slowly got up and looked in the full-length mirror on the back of the bedroom door and noticed that she was remarkably thinner.

"Guess I had to get mugged and almost raped to finally drop a couple of dress sizes." She muttered to herself. "I'll have to ask Angel to see if he can round up something a little smaller next time he goes shopping."

It then dawned on her that she still couldn't hear anyone nearby. She slipped into the baggy clothing and tightened up the drawstrings. She reconnoitered the house quickly and quietly before she started to check out in the back of the house. She had seen the gardens from her bedroom window but as yet had not ventured out side during her stay. She moved slowly and methodically, as she was still very weak from her ordeal.

It didn't take her long until she assured herself that her benefactor was nowhere to be seen. She did discover that her immediate residence was much more than met the eye.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

The first thing that hit her was the multitude of books. There were books everywhere, in nearly every room of this strange house. She scanned the titles as she walked through: Natural Healing, Natural Medicine, Herbal Medicine, Emergency War Surgery (that sounded scary), Solar Living Source Book, Wind Power, Wood Heat, Solar Design, Steam Engine design. There was a large section of books by someone named Audel: the Machinist's Library, Masons And Builders Library, Electrical, Plumbing, Carpentry and so on. More books greeted her: Brown's Alcohol Motor Fuel Book, Complete Outdoor Building Book, Grow It, Victory Garden, Ruth Stout No Work Garden (that was Cynthia's kind of book she thought to herself as she was known as the brown thumb of her family). In the kitchen: Putting Food By, various canning manuals, Dry It!, and an entire wall of cooking books, wine and beer making books. And still more books: Organic Plant Protection, Fur Trapping (in the city?), Self-Sufficient Gardener, Keeping Livestock, Bee Keeping (?), Aqua Culture (?) and it went on. Titles on subjects that she had never heard of, cataloged back issues of CountrySide, Back Home, Home Power, Backwoods and Mother Earth News magazines.

"This kid sure reads a lot of strange stuff?" She thought to herself.

Something else struck her as odd, no lights. She never needed to turn on a single light switch. Instead all the light needed was supplied through several bright tubes of light coming down through the ceiling. Very clever she thought. Also every window in the house except those in her bedroom or facing the garden in the back of the house was secured with a heavy shutter and locked. The walls on the outside of the house all appeared to be over two feet thick?

Having completed her tour of the inside of the house she looked out back. The back yard was full of raised garden beds with a greenhouse and several (she would learn later) cold frames flanking it. There were miniature fruit trees that were espaliered against the south facing wall of the house. There in the back grew a virtual supermarket of produce in all stages of growth. Several large fiberglass looking tanks stood against one wall of the garage. Sucking in the sunlight through out most of the day they were filled with green algae. As she got nearer she could hear the bubbler's small solar powered pump keeping the water oxygenated. Upon closer inspection of the containers she noticed movement within the tank. THERE WHERE FISH IN THEM! Each tank seemed to have different sized fish but of the same specie. They weren't anything she had seen her dad catch but they were big enough to eat in the tallest tank, of that she was sure.

The door to the garage was unlocked and she slowly peeked her head inside. Once her eyes adjusted to the shadowy light it appeared as if she had stepped into a mad mechanic worst nightmare, either that or a junkyard scavengers delight. Shelves were stacked with all assortments of things; motors, wires, gears, plumbing, wood and metal of nearly every imaginable shape and size. She recognized various tools; a table saw, a drill press, some sort of machine for making metal parts. Sawdust and metal filings covered the floor but the tools and equipment were clean and while they appeared old they were well maintained. A large dark shape covered with a heavy tarp filled nearly a third of the area inside the shop, some sort of large vehicle judging by the huge tires not covered by the tarp. A thin oily odor filled the air that she recognized as WD-40, something her father swore by when he was restoring his old sports cars. Dust motes danced in the still air as she walked carefully around the shop. She recognized welding tanks and an arc welder. It looked like you could fix or build just about anything if you wanted to here.

She squinted her eyes as she emerged back into the daylight. Everything appeared normal but she was still uneasy with Angel gone. Back in the living room she laid down exhausted from her first adventure outdoors in

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

over two weeks. Pulling the warm heavy wool blanket across herself she drifted off to sleep. So tired . . . so very tired she started to drift off to sleep with thoughts of her family and home.

Brentwood Davis stared into the toilet and flushed its contents away from him. Like his breakfast that had just left, he wished that he could flush away the insane mess that he suddenly found himself in. All he had ever wanted in life was a good reliable steady job as a bureaucrat with a nice pension attached to the end. He had long ago given up on fame and fortune. Pencil neck computer geeks don't win such hands in the game of life. He'd even settle for having a steady girl friend now and then, but even that escaped him. But this situation was too far beyond any reality that he could ever had imagined for himself.

He pulled himself up and quickly washed his face and hands and checking himself in the mirror before he headed back to his office. His thoughts were spinning like whirlwind inside his head and difficult to focus on. He had survived the massacre in Pennsylvania where the Marine unit had gone rouge and wiped out nearly a battalion of secret UN troops. His knees still felt weak as he thought about spending those two days hidden in that ditch after the column he was traveling in was ambushed. Trapped and partially submerged in a flipped vehicle with his dead driver floating nearby Davis was frozen with fear as bullets and explosions shredded the rest of the column. Then the quiet followed. That loud and overwhelming quiet. By the time he finally managed to extract himself from the wreckage of his custom government Suburban the rogue Marines and over half of the town had vanished by the time the federal relief column arrived.

He was shocked at the carnage he had emerged to, an entire company of heavily armed troops had been wiped from the face of the earth in under five minutes, if that long. The Marines had been viciously thorough, of the over two hundred souls in that column only Brentwood had escaped. The relief troops found him in a mindless stupor slowly walking through the charred bodies and vehicles. By the time he returned to his job in Washington he as been proclaimed an official hero and survivor of the rebel massacre. He finally had his fame.

In his newly elevated position as one of several leading undersecretary's for the Director of Homeland Security he had been suddenly thrust through the veils of bureaucracy at some of the highest levels. The onion was slowly being peeled back to the heart before him and the new revelations that were emerging startled him to his very core. Brentwood had never really given much thought about evil. Good and evil had always been metaphors with varying shades of gray attached. What was good for one person could well be bad for another. It all depended upon where you sat in the matrix. But something was emerging that could not be reasoned away. Something frightening was approaching the corner up ahead and there was no place to hide. Brentwood was scared of what lay just up around the corner. More than scared . . . he was terrified and he was caught right in the middle of the storm that was about to hit.

Cynthia awoke to the smell of fresh bread and stew filling the room. It was now dark outside and Angel was reading by one the many oil lamps scattered throughout the house.

"What are you reading?" She asked as she sat upright.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

He looked up from his book. “Roman History.” He continued after receiving a puzzling look from his patient. “I still have to graduate high school you know . . .” He paused. “When it starts up again.”

Cynthia shook her head slowly. “Angel I don’t think things will ever be the same again . . . ever.” She let out a heavy sigh.

“In a way I hope you’re right.” He answered. She looked very puzzled now. “Think about it, things were pretty f*cked up the way they were going. Sort of like this Rome book I’m reading now. At first they had a pretty good thing. Real civilization, everybody took their duties and responsibilities seriously, they served with pride and dignity. My mother used to say they were totally on track.” He paused for a moment thinking about his dead mother.

“Look what has been going on now, the same thing as back then. Totally screwed up man, totally. Nobody is responsible for anything. Nobody is accountable. Did you know that the Romans had a massive form of welfare, tons of bread given freely to feed the poor. They moved more grain daily into Rome than any other civilization until about World War Two. No city could supply as much water daily as Rome until the 1950’s. Then there were those huge bloody gladiatorial games that were used to keep the poor entertained? And in the end it all went to sh*t. It went to sh*t because no one wanted to be responsible for anything anymore.”

This was the most that Cynthia had heard Angel say at one sitting, and he was on a role.

“Cynthia, we are right now on the edge of another dark ages. My mother said that everything was so interconnected that if one strand breaks everything is likely to pull apart. Did you catch the news before the plague?”

She shook her head no.

“Japan was in major trouble with its economy and had been for some time. Argentina’s economy had collapsed and several other South American Countries were right behind. Russia was still having a rough time of it over ten years after the fall of communism. Europe was trying to come together and holding their own. Africa was a total mess and the Middle East was on the brink of war . . . AGAIN! Then here we get attacked on 9/11, wade in to Afghanistan and then take on Iraq again. Then the Plague and everything falls apart.” Angel put down his book and moved over to the fireplace and began building a small fire to stave off the evenings chill.

“So here we are on the edge of the next Dark Ages.” He turned around and slowly waves his arm. “This is my castle, my monastery against the cold and evil that has been set loose.”

“Monastery?” Cynthia looked at him.

“Geez Cynthia! Haven’t you read anything?”

“I don’t get it.” She answered.

“All these books, everything you see in this house was because my mother was preparing for just this sort of thing. Knowledge. She always said that knowledge was power.”

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“You still don’t get it?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “I’ve never heard of half of what you’ve talked about.”

“I thought you were in college?”

“I am, but it’s not like I’m a History major or anything. It’s my first year and I’m totally Liberal Arts and I don’t remember anyone talking about this kind of stuff when I was in High School.”

“That’s because they don’t. I was home schooled until just last year. Mom felt that I needed more social contact with people my own age.”

“Oh . . . well I’ve heard that home schooled kids are pretty smart.”

“Well I don’t know if we’re smarter or not . . . but we sure have spent more time studying than those of you that went to public school!”

“So what is your point?”

“My point is that the world is turning into a total sh*t sandwich and we’re stuck in the middle of it. My mother knew that and this . . .” He waved his arms about him.

“Was her answer.”

“A house?”

“No . . . a castle.”

The convoy of seven trucks and its two-humvee escort vehicles approached the FEMA camp. A little behind schedule but close enough for government work. Sgt. Dunlap keyed the electronic gate control and the column barely missed a beat as it sped through the high security fencing. He never saw the small red laser dot on his chest or muzzle sticking out of the last vehicle that flashed in near silence popping a string of explosive nine-millimeter rounds towards him. The first round caught him just above his shoulder on his neck, the second ripped through his windpipe. Numbers three through seven arched back up and across his face before eight burned off the tip of his left ear. He never felt the heat from the rifle grenade that leveled the guard station, but then neither did a lot of other fellow Homeland Security Force guards that night.

Strothers lead the first assault team as they hit the central administration building. The younger troopers raced ahead and slammed into the unsuspecting Guards. The front doors vaporized under the impact of two rifle grenades. The lead troopers then fanned out in two man teams and cleared the building. Strothers monitored the assault and took up his position with the second team in the building.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

They moved rapidly through the building kicking, flash, and spray each room before moving on to the next. Kick the door in, toss in a flash bang grenade, and then spray anything that moved in the room. This was a total recon by fire mission. Search and destroy.

Suddenly the old Sgt. Maj., now newly promoted Light Colonel in the Southern Colorado Militia, felt something wet and warm spray across his face as the trooper in front of him took a shotgun blast to the face. Strothers was in a combat crouch and the buckshot passed through the trooper in front of him and harmlessly over his own head. His combat instincts went into overdrive as he sidestepped the dead militiaman's falling corpse dropping into a full crouch and targeted the guard rapidly spinning back around the corner ten feet up ahead. Strothers fingers double tapped in rapid succession the fading image and followed the imagined track through the wall.

He saw the end of the shotgun barrel jerk and knew he had struck home. Switching the weapon into his off-hand he sent pounded another double set of spitzer rounds through the drywall and into the thigh of his assailant trying to hide behind the corner of the hallway. In one well practiced and smooth motion he pulled the frag grenade from his right-hand ammo pouch swung it towards his left ring finger of the hand holding the pistol grip of his M-16A2, caught the safety ring pulling it out and then backhanded the grenade down the hallway to hit the far wall and careen into the lap of the wounded shot gunner around the corner. Strothers turned and managed to get two quick steps away from his forward position knocking down one of his own people in the attempt before the grenade detonated. His end of the building suddenly became very quiet.

Lt. Col. Strothers finished with the clean up of the headquarters building without any further events and was sitting out on the front steps as the overall commander for the mission and the militia walked up to him.

"Getting a little long in the tooth for this sort of crap aren't you Jeff?"

"Ain't that no Sh*t Bear!" He answered as he offered a seat beside himself on the steps. "Well . . . was it worth it?"

"It was to them." He said as he pointed to over a hundred prisoners now being lead away from their barracks and out the main gate to awaiting buses.

"How the F*CK did it come to this Bear? What the F*CK is going on here?" Strothers said shaking his head.

A young Militiaman hustled out of the main building and approached the pair of weary warhorses. "Commander, Colonel." He reached out and offered two cold beers to the pair.

"AH, spoils of war Patterson?"

"Er, ah, Yes SIR, Dietrich sends these with his regards to the Colonel for saving his @ss in there Sir." The commander looked questioningly at Strothers.

"Sgt. Major's number one rule." He answered.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Ooh, the old ‘to ensure friendly reception into unfamiliar places always precede entry with two hand grenades rule’.”

Strothers took a long pull of the cold amber liquid, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and answered.
“That’s the one.”

Desert Doc

Pax Americana - Chapter 34 - The Approaching Twilight

A good plan, violently executed now, is better than a perfect plan next week. - George S. Patten, General

Todd staggered from the wreckage relatively unscathed. His cadet gray military school uniform was torn and caked with mud and some else’s blood. His right leg ached and felt shaky but he was able to walk. It was dark, very dark and he could just see a few stars overhead peaking through the leaves and branches of the surrounding forest. Behind him strewn like a child’s broken toy the train was piled up on both sides of the track. Well forward up near the engine a small fire had begun and was gaining in strength. Its smoke drifting off into the still night air and clung about the wreckage like a hovering wraith collecting souls.

Cadet Second Class Todd Curry had been a passenger on the sleeper train that now lay dead and crumpled across the landscape. The military academy he had been attending in North Carolina had finally closed its doors, another victim of falling enrollments due to the plague, bureaucracy and the general state of the nation. Forced by the current circumstances the Commandant of the academy had finally been obligated to send his entire remaining students home.

Todd was among the last group of cadets to leave, reluctantly. Going home was not something he looked forward to, it was something to dread. His primary mentor at the academy a Retired Sergeant Major Frederick McKenzie tried to explain to the young cadet that life is a series of trials and tests and this was one. The Sgt. Maj. was a follower of the old adage “That which does not kill us, makes us stronger.” And while Cadet Curry understood and indeed tried and wanted to believe the grizzly old Marine, leaving the academy was like losing his home for the third time. The first time had been when his father died. The second when his mother remarried and his new stepfather convinced his mother that military school would be the best thing for a grieving and defiant ten-year-old boy. Now, five years later the entire world had virtually gone to sh*t in a handcart and he was once again leaving his latest home and headed off into the unknown.

The reality of the situation was beginning to dawn on him as the fog cleared from his head. He went into his cadet military mode and immediately began to assess his situation. There was no immediate outside threat to his life, he had moved away from the wreckage and was physically safe for the moment. He quickly checked his own condition running down a mental list from top to bottom. He had headache and a nice sore goose egg on the side of his head. That would account for his immediate fuzzy thinking, but that was fading - have to keep an watch on that. Fingers, hands, arms, shoulders seemed to function fine. Ribs on the right side sore but his breathing was unimpaired. His right leg burned, needed to check that. Uniform unsat, torn, dirty, but functional. His kit!

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

He had somehow walked from the wreckage with his travel backpack in hand! That meant that his basic emergency kit was with him. He quickly rummaged through the pack and came up with his LED (light emitting diode) Flashlight. It had been a gift from the Sgt.Maj. when he won the Obstacle Course competition during last seasons Cadet Olympics. The Lightwave 2000's four super bright LED bulbs and solid circuitry design were so efficient that its lithium double A batteries would last fourteen times longer than a standard flashlight. He immediately flipped on the light and began to reassess his condition. The right leg of his uniform trousers was slashed open from the calf to nearly the ankle. What ever had done that when he had been thrown about the sleeper cabin had also managed to inflict a nasty six-inch slash down the side of his calf; it had bled but not seriously. Thankfully there was only moderate amount of venous bleeding and not much of that. It was going to require stitches in the deepest part to properly close but with a quick dressing and bandage he could eliminate any immediate threat.

From a side pouch of his backpack Todd pulled his personal first aid kit. He began by spraying the wound with Povidone solution. It smarted but was not nearly as bad as he had expected. He applied a healthy squirt of Betadine Ointment to his only battle dressing in the kit and then placed it over the deepest and worst part of the laceration and secured it by crossing the dressing's tails around the leg snugly and tying it off with a square knot over the center of the dressing. That done he opened a small pouch of roller gauze and secured the dressing further also covering the remaining parts of the laceration that were still exposed. With that priority addressed and his wound adequately protected he stood and began to make a further inspection of his situation. It didn't look good.

Angel sat on the high balcony taking in the cool night air. He laid down his history book and looked out over a dark city that was in its final death throws and wondered if fifteen hundred years prior someone much like himself was thinking these same thoughts. Wondering how a Roman civilization that had achieved so much had been brought to its knees by its own greed and arrogance. He wondered if his world was facing the same end and the beginning of a new dark age.

Over half of the city was now in ashes. The majority of its citizens were either dead from the plague, dead from the violence and rioting, dead from starvation, shipped off to somewhere else by government troops, or if they had been lucky escaped on their own to somewhere else. From the top of the old turn of the century wooden water tower that his mother had rebuilt he looked out at the approaching twilight and wondered where this current insanity would all lead.

Cynthia's health had progressed well and she seemed fully recovered from the severe concussion and beating that she had received in her attack. She was healthy enough to travel, but to where? It was no longer safe for anyone to be out alone on the roads. There were rumors that anyone traveling without the appropriate government permits would be arrested and taken away. Some had mentioned that the government had relocation camps for the homeless and unclassified, which was just about everyone not in the government. She was trapped here until they could get word some how to her kin.

To that end Angel had been spending much of his time trying to gather up and put together a short wave communication system. Angel was the consummate scrounger. That was his niche in the new social order that was

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

coming together from the survivors that remained behind in his community. Cut off from the outside world they had been forced to form a loose confederation of feudalistic gangs and local warlords. The city had been divided up between the strongest groups in to more or less permanent territories. An edgy peace had resulted as enforcers within each warlord's zone of control struggled to keep some form of order.

Angel's urban homestead was located in an area of dilapidated factories and small industrial independent businesses in one of several "Free Zones" that stood as buffers between rival territories. His skill at finding and making broken things work placed him relatively high on the survivor's pecking order and gave him, even for his age, a limited autonomy within his Free Zone.

Sequoia was running for his life through the grove of giant Redwoods. Pillars of light stabbed through the ever-green canopy far above like intermittent spotlights on the dark stage of the thick forest. He was scrambling deeper and deeper into the old growth forest away from his pursuers, the murders of his clan. Pure animal fear propelled him on deeper into the womb of his mother the forest. He could hear the shouts and occasional shots of rifle fire as they attempted to locate and bring him to ground as they had the others. Tears streamed from his eyes as the images of the last few minutes flashed across his panicked mind. He could see in slow motion the bullets rip through the flesh of his friends and of his lover. She was only eighteen and new to the clan, but that didn't matter. The Homeland Security Troops had been ordered to clear the forest of "their kind". The clan had been living outside the law and outside society for too long as far as the government was concerned and that would no longer be tolerated. There was no longer any tolerance for independent thinking, absolute and immediate compliance was the order of the day . . . with no exceptions. When his people refused to board the trucks to be taken off to the relocation camps and began to run, the Troopers opened fire.

Bluebird his love; warm, cuddly and innocent little Bluebird, she was one of the first to fall victim. Her blood sprayed across his face from the 5.56mm round that had ripped through her neck and severed her carotid artery. He never saw the trooper that butt stroked him across the side of his face as he held her dying in his arms, and he too would have died there with his love had not Fastwater, his older clan brother, leapt at the Trooper posed in the middle of raising his rifle to bayonet him. Sequoia wasn't even sure how he escaped the maelstrom that was ragging around him, he just ran, and ran, and ran, and ran.

The sounds of the government invaders faded from his ears as he fled deeper and deeper into the forest. He had never been this far in, never intruded to her dark green depths. But now he was seeking sanctuary from the murderers that sought to add him to their list. Finally after what seemed like hours of running he splashed across the last of over a dozen streamlets and fell into the wet sand and gravel on the far side. Exhausted and spent his chest heaved as he sobbed openly for the loss of his friends and his love.

His clan lived in the woods to protect them. Every one sworn to non-violence and passive resistance, thus they were totally helpless against the assassin's battle rifles when they came and were cut down in swaths much like the great ancient trees that they were trying to protect. His entire family of young idealists now lay with their life's blood at last mingling with the forests they so loved, at last one with the natural world they had sought so hard to protect from the ravages of gluttonous excess of the modern industrial complex.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Brentwood Davis drove his custom Range Rover aimlessly through the Pennsylvania countryside not quite sure of what he was looking for or how to find it. He had been on the road for five rugged days and looked it. The urgency and the insanity of his mission was slowly sinking in. He was a dead man if anyone in the present government fathomed what his was up to, and he was probably very likely dead if he met the people what he was looking for. But someone had to know, the word had to get out.

Brentwood wondered what Benedict Arnold felt like when he took the plans and secrets of West Point to the British and switched sides. Did he ever understand that he was lining up with the wrong side? Was he, Brentwood Davis making that same mistake . . . or worse. He really didn't know. But he couldn't just sit idly by knowing what he knew. Knowing what he didn't want to know. It seemed that he was cursed no matter what he did . . . DAMN! But something had to be done. People had to know.

When the first shots rang out the implication of danger didn't immediately register in Cadet Curry's mind. With the smoke, growing fire and confusion of the survivors staggering from the wrecked train there was only so much that one could assimilate at one moment. The numbness of the moment dropped away with a near miss that sparked against the car wheel near him and then the sickening thwack of a high velocity round hitting soft flesh. The man that Todd was helping up the side of the embankment crumpled into a dead ball and fell away from him. Another round whistled past his head. That was more than enough hint for this young military cadet to take instantly to ground behind the nearest cover. For a few seconds his thoughts raced as he looked for options. He was in some sort of an ambush. He was unarmed. He was in the kill zone. He had to get out of there and get out of there now!

The crescendo of gunfire rose sharply sounding like a pan of popcorn as it reaches its climax. The sound of death and destruction echoed through the smoky night and then tapered off. To move with the flames behind him would instantly silhouette him as a target. Todd pulled himself closer to the earth and became part of the timber debris; they would be coming very soon.

There was something about this stretch of road that Brentwood now drove over. He pulled over to the side of the blacktop and got out. His back was cramped from driving and he stretched in an attempt to relieve the growing ache. There was something about this place . . . he searched his memory, why was this so familiar. Then the shock of realization smacked him in the back of the head. This was where that rouge Marine unit had ambushed the Homeland Security convoy he had been riding with!

“SH*T!”

He spun around and suddenly recognized the area! He ran across the road and found the ditch he had spent almost two days in, trapped in the flipped Suburban as a war raged about him. His knees suddenly gave out and he collapsed into the gravel and starred at the grass growing up over the rusting relic that had almost been his tomb. Hidden beneath the growing brambles and grass the detritus of war was suddenly visible.

Sequoia awoke to the scattered beams of filtered light that strained to reach the forest floor. He began to sit up and suddenly his snug and warm comfortable bed rolled over and dumped him flat onto his face on the hard packed earth beneath! It was then that he realized that he was naked with his backside was exposed to the cool morning air. He rolled over to see that he had been sleeping in a hammock underneath some sort of camouflaged roof. Military green wooden and metal crates made up the walls on one side of the shelter and stacked sandbags for the other three walls that he found himself in. He looked around for something to wear and noticed folded neatly on a large box beside the hammock a stack of clothing. Holding it up he recognized the pattern of camouflage that some of the older forest dwellers wore. They were called Tiger Stripped Cammies.

“OH SHIT!” Sequoia thought to himself.

Fear began to rise again from deep within. His clan had had run ins with some of the ‘Nam vets that lived in the deep woods off by themselves. They were the wraiths of the forest. They existed in an in between time, not here and not there in their minds. They avoided human contact and lived like hermits trapped in a war that had ended decades ago. At best they were unpredictable. At worst they were deadly. He scanned the immediate area for any evidence that the hermit that had brought him here was still about. He had heard that their lairs were often booby-trapped and to invade their space could be very dangerous. Even the heavily armed dope growers in the region avoided confronting these rouge warriors of the deep forest. It simply was not worth the risk.

Sequoia looked about for his familiar clan clothing, but they were nowhere to be found. Cautiously he pulled on the ripstop trousers and pulled the tabs tight against his waist. That was when he noticed the bandage on his side that had wept a small pink-red spot through in the middle. Also on his left upper thigh and down near his ankle were dressings. He didn’t remember being wounded in his flight from the federal troops. With the trousers secured he slowly and cautiously explored the camp. There was a military feel about it. Everything was neat, orderly and organized, far different from the controlled chaos of his clan’s encampments. He had heard about these old vet camps, strongholds they were called. It seemed that somehow he had jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire.

Like evil specters they emerged from the tree line and cautiously approached the sprawling wreck. Todd froze and willed himself to become the dirt beneath him.

One of the attackers was slowing approaching Todd’s hidden position. The specter was looking side to side but not down where he walked. His right foot came down on the edge of the small bush just inches from the young cadet’s face. Todd felt for sure the man standing over him could hear his heart as it pounded in his ear. Todd had his mouth open trying to keep the sound of his breathing as silent as possible. The heavily armed ambusher moved on closer to the wreck, he had overlooked Todd. . .for now.

Whatever their intent it was not one of rescue. From time to time a shot would ring out as survivors were located and dispatched. These ambushers were leaving no witnesses behind. The cadet held his position looking for an opportunity to escape. Now the line of raiders was behind him and engaged on pillaging the victims and the twisted wreckage. The smoke from the forward section of the train was beginning to increase and had

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

started to drift heavily back along the scattered cars on the tracks. Todd pulled his pocketknife and flipped out his largest blade a paltry three inches long, not much, but it was better than being totally unarmed. He took several long and slow breathes filling his blood with oxygen like a swimmer just before he springs into the water. He had thirty maybe forty yards to the edge of the tree line and at least several hundred yards to get into the forest until he could consider himself safe from immediate attack. Perhaps several miles to go before he would reach a road but he could take that at a slower pace.

He slowly pulled his feet up into a crouched position and dug the toes of his combat boots into the soft soil. It wouldn't do to slip coming off the blocks. He looked back and saw only the backs of the raiders as they searched the dead passengers and the crumpled cars. One last long breath and . . . he shot out of the underbrush like a rocket! Forty yards . . . thirty-five . . . thirty . . . twenty-five . . . shouts from behind . . . twenty . . . shots ring out and one zipped by off to his left - ZIG RIGHT - fifteen . . . ZIG LEFT - THEN - RIGHT AGAIN . . . more shots - POP! POP! POP! ZIG LEFT- lungs burning . . . fifteen yards . . . ten . . . the sound of popcorn exploded from behind DIVE - ROLL - POP UP - five yards to the trees, his feet pounded the ground like a steam locomotive running wild Todd's adrenaline flashed through his veins igniting every muscle fiber in his body! He hit the tree line still gaining speed and quickly slanted off through the ferns to his right.

The thought of “. . . put wood - lots of wood behind me!” Raced through mind.

More shouts from behind, more rounds ripping through the evergreens as the giant trunks whipped past. Todd suddenly saw he was on a trail and just as the thought flashed through his mind he saw a shadow pop up in front of him. He met the specter low with his right shoulder at full speed, a perfect midsection tackle that drove wind from the looming specter with the explosive force of a gale wind sneeze. At the same instant he flashed up his right hand and drove the small blade of the folding knife deep into the groin of the windless raider. The contact drove the two to the ground where Todd landed with his full weight on the mans chest driving the last ounce of air from them, he allowed his momentum to swing himself forward and tucked into a tight roll landing just a few feet beyond the now profusely bleeding and unconscious shadow lay. He could hear his pursuit off in the distance and suddenly his mentors gravelly voice flashed through his mind.

“Always look for a way to take advantage of any situation, adapt, improvise, overcome.”

Todd crept quickly forward and grabbed the raiders rifle. The feel was a familiar one, M16A2 . . . with the safety still on? Loser! He then began to strip him of anything of value, web gear, butt pack, canteens, ammo pouches, bandoleers, shoulder holster and pistol, machete. The sound of the raiders comrades was getting louder. It was time to “Didi Mow” as the ol' Sgt. Maj. would say. He quickly slung the gear on, he could adjust it to fit his smaller frame later, now it was time to put some distance between him and the approaching raiders. Cadet Second Class Todd Curry silently faded into the dark forest like a mist.

When the raiders found their comrade a short time later he had drained of all his life fluids onto the moss covered forest floor. It had taken less than four minutes for his heart to pump out through the severed artery in his groin. It was just like the ol' Sgt. Maj. had said many times “Be swift, silent and deadly, it is the quickest road to victory.”

Desert Doc

Pax Americana Chapter 35 - Changing of the Guard

Author's note: I often name a chapter at the very beginning when I first start writing. It helps me to keep everything flowing in a particular direction. Most often the story jibs with that title . . . somewhat, well that is the idea. However after careful consideration I felt that this story deserved a different and more appropriate title. I hope this change has not confused anyone. Oh and by the way . . . there's an additional little kicker at the end. Just couldn't keep my hands off, hope you don't mind. - **Desert Doc**

*Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

Dylan Thomas

Cadet Curry felt that he had stepped through a time machine into some fragment of the primordial past. He had covered at least fifteen miles since his escape from the ambush at the train wreck last night, through some of the roughest terrain he had ever crossed. He had never seen trees so large in his life or a forest so dark. The world he now journeyed through seemed to be forever shrouded in twilight, yet he knew it was close to mid-day. He had pushed hard for as long as he could through the night half stumbling along blind.

On a gravel bank beside a small clear stream he rested under the shelter of one of the fallen forest giants. Thick ferns growing along the stream bank, their enormous fronds provided instant camouflage and concealment, covering his position under the roof provide by the fallen redwood. Sitting down for the first time since the wreck Todd started to dig through his gear to see just what he had to work with.

He had managed to hang onto his travel backpack during his escape and shed that to his side. Piece by piece he peeled off the captured raiders gear and laid it out to inventory. First things first he checked the M16. A quick field inspection showed that it needed to be properly cleaned but appeared to be in operating order. The bore was clear and serviceable, the action functional overall. The number stenciled to the butt stock meant that it

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

probably came from a military armory. The magazine was about half full, he tapped the mag against his leg to assure the rounds were seated properly and then reinserted it, chambered a round and set it beside his right leg. The pistol was also of military issue, one of the older Berretta 92 SBF's. It appeared unused and clean with a fully loaded magazine. At least he was now better armed than his original pocketknife that he had lost last night, when he collided with one of the raiders attempting to block his escape.

He continued to sort through the gear: the shoulder harness and attached web belt contained two canteens and two small bottles of water purification tablets. He opened and checked the canteens; the second one burned his nose when he took a sniff - BOOZE!

"What idiot would put BOOZE in his canteen?" His disgust trailed off with his voice.

He sat the "loaded" canteen to one side. He had no intention of drinking it, but it might do to clean his wound with the alcohol. The last thing he needed was an infection right now. He continued on with the inventory: one canteen cup, four ammunition pouches with twelve fully loaded magazines (what luck!), a butt pack with poncho and poncho liner (that Todd immediately wrapped around himself), a twist of 550 cord-maybe fifty feet or so, the remains of a partially consumed MRE pouch (he opened and made quick work of the dessert bar), a small roll of trip wire? A rifle cleaning kit - that even had a few patches in it and a small bottle of CLP! There was an incomplete first aid pouch attached to the side of the butt pack. Back on the web belt a knife sheath with the bayonet for the M16. Up on the harness a compass and compass pouch - now this was a major find! One of those cheap Mag-Lite copies that didn't work. One military shoulder holster with two more full mags for the Berretta, all in all a pretty good haul.

In his backpack he pulled out his partial first aid kit, a sewing kit, two spiral binders (homework - he had to chuckle), several pens and mechanical pencils, his cadet pullover sweater, two complete MRE's he had stashed from a field op, and his cadet windbreaker. He didn't think he would need the History and Economic books and tossed them to the side - thought again and put them back in the pile. He upended the pack and out dropped a half empty pack of gum, two Snickers candy bars, several empty gum wrappers and the small Swiss Army knife his father had given to him before he died! He held the knife gently in the palm of his hand and closed his fingers around it.

"Oh Poppa, where are you when I really need you?" he murmured to himself and felt his eyes begin to water. "Now is not the time for such things Cadet." He admonished himself and wiped his eyes dry.

Dressed only in the tiger stripped cammie trousers that he had found beside him when he woke up, Sequoia slowly and cautiously moved about the small compound. It was so well camouflaged that someone would have to be right on top of it and then fall in before they would notice it. As he moved silently through the tiny encampment every sense was straining. Somewhere, probably nearby, the grizzly hermit was watching him now. He could feel the hair on the back of his neck stiffen. Sequoia saw a small opening in the brambles that guarded the perimeter like barbed wire and started to move towards it. Just as he was about to step over a large barbed cane a deep voice that resembled the sound of large boulders rolling across the bottom of a deep river spoke calmly to him.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

"That would be a mistake there Private."

Sequoia froze in mid stride. Not one muscle moved as he slowly turned his head towards the warning voice and began to make out the image back in the shadows. He slowly brought his leg back and placed his foot softly on the hard packed earth.

"I didn't mean to come here Sir." Sequoia stammered. "I'll leave now if you'll show me the way, Sir."

"Can't go out there now Private. Too many gooks on the loose." The old warrior rose up out of the shadows carrying a small black assault rifle and walked past Sequoia and into the center of camp muttering. "Damn NFG's (New F*cking Guy), cherries everyone. You just can't teach them anything."

The old warhorse popped open a large artillery ammo can and pulled out an old beat up squad stove. In the blink of an eye he had water on and was beginning to brew up a hot cup of Joe. Sequoia squatted across from him and starred quietly. Finally the old man looked up and seem to squint his eyes and stare through the young long hair.

"I saw you escape from the gooks Private. You moved pretty good for regular army, how long you been in country?"

Sequoia looked at him searching for the correct answer. He had to play the game if he was going to survive.

"Two years in the, ah, bush, Sir."

"Sir, SH*T! I ain't no f*cking sir sonny. You can take that Sir sh*t and shove it up your @ss. Just a common ol' dogface Sergeant here. Hell my parents were married, f*cking call me a Sir, Hmmm Two years huh?" He looked hard at Sequoia again. "You've gone native haven't you? Been gone up there with them f*cking Monties for so long you've gone f*cking native!"

He poured the boiling water into two waiting canteen cups that he had been dropping various powders in. Taking an old metal spoon from his pocket he stirred the contents until most of the powder had dissolved, then offered one cup to Sequoia. As he brought the steaming liquid to his mouth he could smell the coffee and chocolate as he blew across the top of it to cool it down a touch.

"Gone f*cking native, weell I can't blame you. Sure beats the hell out of standing inspections. F*CKING OFFICERS!" He took a slurping sip of his own cup. "Yeah, nothing like saddling up to one of them cute monties for a little of that mountain poon tang at night sure beats the hell out of standing post down here."

Sequoia wasn't quite sure just what "poon-tang" was, but he got the general idea. He just hoped his luck would hold out until he could slip away. You never knew what would set off one of these old hermits. Many had never made the mental trip back to the states and after years of trying to cope in a world that didn't want them, they drifted off to the seclusion of the empty spaces. And there alone for sometimes years at a time they finally lost all touch with reality. Like wounded animals they crawled off into the deep brush to die, for some the dying came quickly, for other it could take years, even decades. It was a sad end to many promising lives.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

He felt empathy for the old man. Very sad. And now like the old man before him, he too had lost his world. Something had turned an already insane world upside down and inside out. Just yesterday he had been part of a happy family, the clan. Young idealistic vagabonds out to save the world, one tree at a time. Now, today he was a fugitive, all of his closest friends were dead, in prison, or worse. His lovely Bluebird was dead. All because they had chosen not to rape the planet, they had chosen to be different, to be free. And for that they shot his love and all their friends.

He could feel the rage that boiled just under the surface. He used every ounce of his Chi to try to calm the pain that screamed out for vengeance. That road he knew was the way of the dead, not the living, all the same, Sequoia wanted the SOB's responsible for the massacre of his people to pay, and to pay dearly. Perhaps, just perhaps this old man could help him, could teach him. Sequoia suddenly realized that he would not sit ideally by, passively, nonviolently, and take the hand on the other cheek. If he ever saw that hand rise towards him again he could cut it free and beat the aggressor with it. Sequoia wanted blood, he wanted payback! F*CK being passive. He had witnessed first hand where that got you! It got you dead! He had made up his mind.

"The gooks killed everyone in my village Sarge." Sequoia began quietly. "Even my, poon-tang. If you're up for it I could sure use your help for a little payback."

The old sergeant looked over the top of his cup.

"Well you've got balls there Private, big mother-f*cking balls." He chuckled. "Taken on the entire VC army all by yourself." He laughed louder and rocked back.

Cadet Curry heard the laughter as he moved closer. He froze and slowly worked his eyes across the twilight landscape in front of him. It was then that he noticed the movement off to his immediate right and across the way to his left. At least a squad of cammied soldiers moving in a sweeping formation through the tree roots and fern leaves. Todd recognized the uniform almost instantly when one of the troopers stupidly crossed near a beam of light. Homeland Security forces were out hunting, but what and who he had no idea. It could be the base camp of the raiders that had ambushed the train, or maybe something else. Once again Cadet Curry became part of the landscape and faded back into the shadows.

The first pop up startled both the attackers and the attackees. It was followed quickly by the screams of several Homeland troopers when they tripped several of the rather painful traps set by the ol' Sarge to detour uninvited guests. The old man suddenly sprang into action and out of nowhere grabbed and tossed an M 16 with ammo pouches to Sequoia and pointed him to the opposite side of the compound. Sequoia had never held a gun before and suddenly found himself behind the worlds biggest learn curve. This was beyond sink or swim, this was shoot or die!

He ran to the firing position that Old Sarge had pointed to and carefully peeked through the firing slot. Not forty yards away he could see at least a half a dozen armed troopers that looked just like the ones that had destroyed his forest family. He pulled a magazine from one of the pouches and tried to figure out how to load it into the unfamiliar weapon. Panic began to spread throughout him as he tried vainly to insert part A into part B. Finally

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

he flipped it around and it snapped into place. His right thumb found the lever on the left side of the receiver and he flipped it to the "F" position. He hoped that meant fire.

Sticking the barrel into the firing slot he pointed it at the biggest advancing trooper and pulled the trigger, nothing. He pulled it a second time, still nothing.

"SH*T!" His hands started to tremble and he tried to think.

What was it he had seen in the movies, those action adventure films that he had grown up watching as a kid before swearing off violence? There was something he had to pull. There was something, a lever, a switch? Something near the stock he was sure. His hands scrambled over the unfamiliar rifle looking for something to pull. He noticed that there were projections to both sides sticking out just above the stock and under the rear sight, low on the carrying handle. He grasped it awkwardly with two fingers and felt it click, release and pull back along the top of the stock. He pulled it until wouldn't go back any more and then released it. The loud metallic "Shaaa-wick" sound it made filled the air.

Once more he pointed the weapon through the firing slot and saw the line was now only thirty yards away. Sequoia tried to peer through the little hole in the rear sight and see the approaching trooper. He knew the front sight did something, but what? He lined up the center post with the bottom of the peephole and positioned it right at the gut of the lead trooper and slowly squeezed the trigger. He was surprised when the gun went off and even more surprised when the trooper that had been his target grabbed his groin and fell to the ground screaming. The rifle bucked against his shoulder six more times as he sent a hail of fire downrange. Twice more he connected with something, judging from the strange thwacking sound followed by a scream as another trooper went down.

Curry, from his vantage point, watched the first trooper drop from the group in screaming agony. For a brief few minutes the entire forest exploded in small arms fire as the surrounding Homeland troops began to open fire from behind the great trees. The firefight seemed rather one sided as from Todd's perspective it appeared that only two riflemen were defending the well camouflaged redoubt. While up to two squads of troopers flailed away in that direction without results.

Todd moved further back into the foliage just in time as more troopers moved through his position to try and lay another flank under siege. As with the other night one of the troopers nearly stepped on the young cadet before moving off to follow his comrades. Two more troopers, perhaps officers stood just feet from him and lit cigarettes and watched the proceedings.

"Do you suppose that one of them in there is the b*stard that got Jamison three nights ago?"

"Could be. It doesn't matter much, I'll gut them all just for the fun of it."

"Yeah! That f*cker three nights ago sure cut him cold. Damn near cut his balls clean off!"

"Well it probably served him right. The fat f*ck was probably half drunk again. What p*sses me off is the son-of-a-b*tch that cut him got his rifle and all of his f*cking gear!"

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

"Come on Weingart, let's get this f*cking show on the road!" The raider said throwing his cigarette on the ground and the pair moved off in the direction of the others.

Todd took in a quick breath. 'Shit, those are the b*stards that attacked the train!' he thought to himself. He checked his weapons condition and cradling the M16 in his arms he began to low crawl off through the undergrowth in search of an adequate fighting position.

Sequoia had gone through more than half his magazines and scored no more hits that he could tell. The fire from the troopers seemed to come from everywhere at the same time. Half the time he just stuck the rifle into the firing slot and pulled the trigger without even trying to aim. He could hear the occasional cackle from the crazy ol' vet on the other side of the redoubt, which gave him some reassurance. At least he wasn't alone.

Cadet Curry pulled himself into a log jamb of fallen giants and realized that they formed a catacomb of interlaced pockets for well over fifty yards, it was perfect. From his position he had total over-watch of the ongoing assault. He wished that he could have taken the time to battle zero this weapon, but didn't wish to advertise his presence should someone be nearby. He quickly checked all his magazines and tapped them against his thigh. Curry realized this would be down and dirty and if he didn't make every round count it would be a short fire-fight. His hands were shaky as he brought the rifle up to his shoulder and his eyes refused to focus at first. He drew in a long breath and held it for a few seconds and then took another slow long pull from the musty morning air. This was for real, he knew that. He could just walk away and play it safe, but something in him, his code of honor the Sgt. Maj. would call it. Wouldn't let him take the easy way out. Suddenly two of his famous list of quotes flashed through his mind. The first was from Voltaire:

*"I have never made but one prayer to God, a very short one:
'O Lord, made [make?] my enemies ridiculous'."*

The second was reputed to have come from General George S. Patton:

"A good plan, violently executed now, is better than a perfect plan next week."

Cadet Second Class Todd Curry made a quick prayer for the ridiculous and then began to execute the violence. He picked for his first target a trooper off a hundred or so yard that was broadside to him with a giant redwood to his back. He took aim at the center of his chest and took in a breath. For a few seconds his vision became just that more clear and focused. He didn't realize that he had squeezed the trigger until the rifle bucked against his shoulder. The intended target suddenly jerked as his right shoulder was tacked to the tree behind him.

"Hmmm shoots to the left."

He made the quick adjustments and raised the rifle again. His next shot was dead on and dropped a second trooper and thus began his counterattack. Curry proceeded to take two rapid shots and scoot to a new position along the log jamb. One by one he picked off the tail end Charlie's of the assaulting troopers. He had remembered back to one of his all time favorite movies, Sergeant York, about a World War One Medal of Honor winner. Though Todd had never hunted turkey's as York had, he remembered the strategy behind the method. Rarely in a firefight does an attacker look to his rear. If Curry could keep up the sporadic fire in the York mode he would whittle down the raiders one by one until the attack failed under its own weight.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

But time was not on his side. The far flank was pressing hard on the redoubts unprotected side and was on the verge of reaching the perimeter when Curry recognized the arching lob of hand grenades headed in bound towards the defenders. Todd shifted his fire and in rapid single fire swept the advancing line of troopers. Like bowling pins they dropped under the accuracy of his deadly fire. Unfortunately his action while relieving the pressure on that flank also gave his position away to the raiders and he was now coming under increasing pressure as wood chips and bark started to rain in on his position as the troopers attempted to suppress his supporting fire.

He ducked down and half ran and crawled through the interlocking limbs and branches to emerge in a different area where he immediately sought the nearest threatening target. Curry again took up his pattern of firing off several quickly aimed shots and then moved his position left or right and brought on more fire. To the attacker it appeared that more than one, probably several different riflemen were engaging them and this slowed down their advance. He crawled under another limb and returned fire again. Two more troopers dropped like lead weights into the moss covered forest floor. He changed position again and dropped another attacker.

The Troopers were quick to realize that they were outflanked and suddenly caught between two support groups of shooters. This was not the kind of combat that they were used to. It didn't take long or much courage before their ranks began to slim both from the effective firepower that was now being delivered from their rear but also from the troops that had decided to slink back into the forest and fight another day.

Curry recognized one of the two men that had been smoking a cigarette waving his arms and attempting to rally his troops back into the fight. He took careful aim and sucked in a long breath. The rifle bucked and he could see the man was still standing.

"Shit, a miss!"

He tried to calm himself and took in another slow deliberate breath and focused on his target as he called to his men. The rifle bucked a second time and the target dropped to his knees with a look of surprise on his face. The third round cracked through his skull at supersonic speed and ended his command permanently. That was all it took to break the back of the attack. Like rabbits on the run he saw the troopers beating feet away from the heat of the crossfire.

Curry sent them on their way with a few additionally well-placed shots, less to worry about later.

As quickly as it had started it was over. A uneasy few minutes passed before he could see movement from within the redoubt. An old gray haired man in tiger striped cammies slowly reconned his way out of the fortress to survey the damage, strip the dead and finish off the wounded. The young Cadet cautiously emerged from his timber cover and slowly walked forward to meet the grizzled old vet.

They eyed each other carefully then the old vet extended his hand.

"Sergeant Mick Jorgenson"

"Cadet Todd Curry."

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

They grasped hands as men should and met strength with strength.

"Ahh I should have known, Academy man. Getting younger all the time!"

Addendum

Sequoia watched the stranger cautiously move down towards the old man. His clothing was strange with an old style high stiff collar originally meant to protect the wearer from sword slashes and of a dark gray color with streaks of brown and black splashed across it. He carried similar gear to the troopers that had just ended their attack, but . . . he wore it differently, like it was more a part of him - almost like the crazy old man. Both kept their weapons at the ready but in a relaxed self assured manner. He saw them stand a few feet apart and then clasp hands. The young warrior was little bit shorter and a leaner version of the old war veteran, and had that same hard look about him. Little did the born again pacifist realize that he was witnessing a changing of the guard. There was no fan faire, no bugles sounding or waving flags being passed from one to the other. But the colors of freedom had changed hands, from the old warhorse - to the young colt. The new guard had arrived.

Desert Doc

Pax Americana Chapter 36 - The Needle in the Haystack

Power always has to be kept in check; power exercised in secret, especially under the cloak of national security, is doubly dangerous. - William Proxmire

The Americans will always do the right thing . . . After they've exhausted all the alternatives. - Sir Winston Churchill

Cautious eyes followed the stranger, as he pulled up next to the gas pumps in his brand new British Racing Green Range Rover to refuel. Resembling a tired L.L. Bean catalog that had been used to swat too many flies with, a haggard Brentwood Davis looked around at the dusty broken down gas station and tried to figure out what his next move would be. He had crossed and double-crossed the countryside surrounding the area that the rogue Marine unit and half of a town had fought hard to defend before they faded into the surrounding landscape. He himself had nearly been killed here in an ambush. The Federal and UN troops he had been with were considerably less fortunate and many of them did not survive the encounter. Six months later he was back going over the same ground looking somehow to run into members of that very same resistance force that had nearly ended his life. He kept thinking how ironic life could be and what a sick sense of humor fate had.

He finished pumping the gas and walked slowly towards the counter through the broken screen door. The place was as worn and rough on the inside as it was on the outside. Most of the shelves in the store were bare and the old man running the register gave Brentwood a hard once over as he approached. Davis offered him his government charge card and the old man just stared at it.

"Sorry son, we don't take credit cards." He said flatly.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Brentwood looked at him in disbelief still holding the card out. “It’s good I assure you Sir.”

“Don’t care how good it is. It ain’t no good around here. You got cash or hard silver on you, I’ll take that but no plastic.”

Brentwood was stunned. He had never had his card refused and traveled with very little cash as a result. It never occurred to him that someone would actually refuse his government visa! He rummaged around his L.L. Bean vest and dug up enough money to pay for the gas and placed it on the counter.

The old man looked at the bills carefully and tested each on with a pen.

“Well Ok, looks fine.” He grumbled and handed Brentwood back his change.

Brentwood hesitated and then spoke quietly to the attendant.

“What happened around here?” He asked cautiously.

“Whaa?”

“Around here, what happened?” Brentwood paused. “I had driven through this part of the country a year or two ago on vacation and now it looks like it’s been through the ringer. I know the plague and all has taken its toll everywhere, but here. . .?”

“Don’t follow the news much do you Mister.” The gruff old man began. “Doesn’t matter much as they censor so much of it anymore.”

“Censor?”

“Well you think that crap they have on the networks is the real news, SH*T SON, ain’t been any real news on the airwaves for years now. Censor, spin doctor or just plain out and out lie.” He paused and looked over Brentwood carefully. “Say lad, what part of the government do you work for?”

“Transportation Department. My job is trying to keep the highways open and rolling. I’m out doing inspections right now making sure everything keeps moving.”

The old man let out a whoop. “WELL SH*T SON! YA DONE F*CKED UP THERE AIN’T YA!” He slapped his knee and sat back down in the chair behind the counter chuckling.

“Ever since the war started here the Fed’s ain’t allowed sh*t to come through. It’s sort of a punishment I guess. You’re lucky that I just got a partial shipment of gas yesterday or you’d be out-ta luck. “

“War? Started here? What are you talking about old man?”

“Don’t you folks in Washington know anything?” The old man grunted. “Well that explains a lot.” He said shaking his head as he leaned back in the chair.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Ever since those Marines turned Patriot and some of the towns folks nearby joined them to put down that group of government gangsters and foreign soldiers that were trying to disarm the entire countryside here, well . . . we’ve been placed on the black list so to speak.”

“Turned patriot? Oh you mean that rogue outfit that attacked its own leadership and then attacked the Homeland forces?”

“Its all a matter of your point of view there government man. Those Marines upheld the Constitution, that’s their job. We don’t like foreigners muscling around in these parts and we don’t have no kings here in this country. Threw the last one out over two hundred years ago. I guess those folks up in D.C. have forgotten about that.”

Brentwood was at an impasse. He knew exactly where this conversation was going to go; he’d heard it enough in the last week. People were getting pissed off and it was the government that was getting the blame. The old man was right though; those folks up in D.C. had forgotten an awful lot about America and most of all about Americans. Up to this point most of the folks Brentwood had run into were extremely cautious when talking to him. Perhaps, just perhaps this old man would hold the key for him to get in contact with the Patriots in this area. He was about to roll the dice; he closed his eyes for a second and prayed that he wouldn’t crap out.

“If I wanted to get a hold of some of these . . . Patriots.” He hesitated. “Just how would I do it?” He rolled the dice and waited to see what came up.

The old man looked at him very closely, his lips were drawn tight as he was thinking about the question just put to him. The next thing Brentwood knew he was looking down the wrong end of a sawed off double barrel twelve gauge shotgun.

“SHIT!”

The small fire took the chill of the evening air. Todd had joined the old Sergeant and the young tree hugger called Sequoia as they gathered up the small amount of equipment and supplies from the redoubt as well as the weapons and equipment from the dead security troopers. It was a heavy load that Todd and Sequoia hefted for several miles before the old vet secured the gear and weapons in several scattered caches along the route.

“We’ll be back later for this stuff.” He explained. “Right now we need to make some time so that we can reach my base camp before dark.”

It was just as the last light was fading from the sky that the three reached the outer perimeter of Sergeant Mick Jorgenson’s forest retreat.

“Make sure you step EXACTLY in my foot steps or you’ll loose a foot . . . or worse.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

The three finally arrived through the maze of booby traps and pitfalls to the security of the inner stronghold just as the last light was fading overhead. Now gathered around the small fire in the central bunker, weapons cleaned, the three fed and watered the they began to discuss recent events. Sequoia described the nightmare that he had survived when his tribe of Earth Firster's had been decimated, as well as his failure to fully participate in the firefight. His honesty surprised both Todd and the old vet Mick.

"I just . . . just . . ." He paused. "I just never fired a gun before . . . and . . . and . . . I was so - so scared." He hung down his head.

"You know son, we all have to start somewhere and the middle of a firefight ain't the easiest of places to start." An old calloused hand patted the young man on the shoulder. "But you held in there lad, you didn't run and . . . you got a couple of those b*stards even if t'was by accident."

Todd nodded his head in agreement. After a few minutes of silence Todd picked up where Sequoia had finished. He related his coming across country after he left the military academy and the details of the train wreck. When Todd had finished the old Vietnam vet got up and fetched a couple of more logs for the fire.

"Well I've got to admit lads." He began as he was sitting down. "You've both done a lot of growing up over the last few weeks."

He dropped the split on the fire and sent a small flurry of embers up into the air.

"Cadet you sure know how to handle yourself when the sh*t hits the fan and for a damned tree hugger Sequoia, you're a tough little nut there too."

He paused as if he was doing some serious ruminating.

"I'd be pleased if you both would consider signing up for this outfit of mine. It ain't much but there are others here and about that would join in the fight."

Sequoia was the first to answer. "I don't know if I'd be much help." He said looking at the ground.

The Sergeant gave Todd a stern look. Todd swallowed hard and found his voice.

"Sergeant, I've got family up in Washington that I was headed for and will head for once things settle down, but for now . . . I'm here."

"Fair enough there Cadet!" He looked at the dower tree hugger across the fire from him. "Todd . . . I'm putting you in charge of Sequoia's training. You'll start first thing in the morning, during the afternoon we'll work together on advanced training for the both of you."

He rose slowly and painfully straightened up.

"Now it's lights out for everyone. We've had one muther f*ck of a long day and it ain't going to get any easier from here on out."

Brentwood raised both hands and started to back up, his eyes locked onto the receiving end of the big sawed off.

“I’M SORRY MISTER, I’M SORRY!” He stuttered as he angled towards the door.

“You better get your damn government @ss off my property and the hell out of this county before I blast you in two!” The old man growled.

Brentwood stumbled backwards out the broken front door and landed flat on his @ss in the dirt and gravel. He continued moving backwards in a half crab, half skedattle mode when he slammed into the side of his Rover with the back of his head. Slipping and scrambling around the front of the vehicle he managed to get into the drivers door and fumbled with the keys all the time with his eyes locked on the old man, who was now standing in the broken doorway with the 12 gauge still leveled at him.

As calmly as someone in total panic could, the Transportation Deputy pulled out of the driveway and rocketed back onto the blacktop keeping his eyes on the rearview mirror until the gas station and that damned huge shotgun was totally out of sight. It took another thirty-five minutes or so before the pounding of his heart in his ears finally stopped. He wasn’t exactly sure where he was, but it didn’t matter, he wasn’t back there and that was all that was important right at the moment.

Brentwood backed off the accelerator and slowed the Rover to a more respectable speed. His breathing finally under control he rolled down the window and took in several deep breaths. He wondered just what the hell he was thinking of! Out in the middle of nowhere looking for people that didn’t want to be found. That had already tried to kill him once. He must truly be mad, but he knew that he had no where else to go.

Just then something up ahead caught his eye and he started to slow down. It was midday as he pulled over into the grassy field that was the parking lot for a strange assortment of motor and horse drawn vehicles. The sign on the side of the road where he turned off had said ‘Flea Market Today!’ Down the gravel road several miles off the main tarmac pitched in a farmer’s field sat an array of shelters and tents and the largest accumulation of people that he had seen in this area to date.

Right from the start he knew that this was not an ordinary flea market. The young man that directed him into the parking field did so with an AK assault rifle slung across his back. It was not done in any threatening way; it was more along the lines that the weapon was a part of his attire and to be expected. Before Brentwood left his vehicle he reached into the console and removed the Glock that had been issued to him when he joined the Homeland Security Transportation Directorate. Having never been a part of the gun culture he was rather apprehensive around weapons. But after this morning’s event and on the road that he was now traveling, perhaps it was time to rethink his lack of appreciation for weapons.

The new shoulder holster felt uncomfortable and chaffed his armpits. The weight of the pistol and two extra magazines seemed heavy and odd, but he was not going to be out walking around naked any more. He had his federal concealed weapons authorization card, which made him beyond legal where ever he went, even on

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

board aircraft. He just hoped that he wouldn't really need to use it as he had had only an ounce of training and less than a week of range time. He couldn't believe that he was actually doing this.

As soon as he entered the perimeter of the flea market he realized that he was definitely over dressed when compared to the rest of the participants. He had barely a weeks worth of wear on his L.L. Bean outdoor wear while the majority of buyers and sellers appeared to have been living in the rough for months if not years. The image was one that reminded him of something somewhere between the Sherwood Forest scenes of the down-trodden peasants from the various Robin Hood movies and some apocalyptic vision from the future. Only here it was in your face in full living color with all the odors of reality attached.

Brentwood could not image an outdoor bazaar of this type within the borders of this great country. It reminded him of an open market one would find in their travels throughout the third world, yet here it was in one of the founding states of the union. If this was what a year and some months of hard times was yielding what would become of this great nation if things continued. He shuddered when that thought crossed his mind. He knew fully well what was going to happen, what the government had planned. After all he had seen the blueprint of future events and carried the evidence with him locked into a small circular plastic disc. As poor as these people had it now, the current situation would be sheer luxury compared to what was awaiting them in the very near future.

Sequoia was an eager and quick apprentice under the tutelage of Cadet Todd Curry. He may have been a pacifist less than two weeks ago, but recent events had turned him one hundred and eighty degrees around. Like a starving man he embraced the cult of the gun and devoured every morsel placed before him. He still maintained the Rastafarian dreadlocks and refrained from wearing combat boots preferring to go barefoot instead. But he more than made up for his strange looks with his enthusiasm at his new studies.

As promised Mick kept them busy every afternoon with hard physical conditioning and advanced studies in tactics, military philosophy, demolition, trips - traps - and other assorted nasties. The pair of young men were quickly becoming a matched set of razor sharp killing machines that could react without thinking to each other's needs. In other words they were becoming exceptionally deadly to any one or anything that would make the mistake of coming up against them. The old Sergeant held back his proud smile. He knew that he was not much longer for this world. But his legacy would continue on a little longer . . . perhaps with luck, much longer.

Brentwood had wondered around the market for better than an hour and still had seen only fraction of it. There was heavy trading and bartering in the necessities of current living: Candles and candle making supplies, oil lamps and wicks for the same. Herbal tinctures and unguents, older non-electric tools and appliances were going for top dollar; that is if it were dollars that were being traded. It seemed that most of trade done was for real commodities that were bartered or old silver coins, those minted before '64, before the government began to substitute lesser valued metals into the U.S. coinage. He even saw a few various denominations of gold coins passing quietly between deals for larger commodities. He recognized solar panels that had previously belonged to the state used to power highway signs and call boxes. Car batteries were being charged with human and solar power off in one corner.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

He rounded one isle to walk smack dab into an entire row of weapons armorers. Here were small one and two man shops set up to manufacture and repair virtually any weapon imaginable. He tried not to stare at the vast array of weapons knowing full and well that virtually everything here was either restricted or out right banned from ownership with in the borders of the United States. The fact that everyone was walking around armed did not seem as strange now, an hour later, as it had when he first entered the market place. He noted that everyone, and he meant everyone was extremely well behaved and cordial. Perhaps an armed society was a polite society as he had read somewhere. Even the children seemed different, more alive and yet better behaved.

He was half way down armorers row when he spotted the old man. He was standing up ahead pointing at him next to several extremely rough looking men. Brentwood froze in his tracks and started to turn back when the lights suddenly went out.

‘Strange he thought . . . it’s early for stars . . . ’

Desert Doc

Pax Americana Chapter 37 - The Seed

Secrecy is the beginning of tyranny. - Lazarus Long

Do not think there are no crocodiles because the water is calm. - Malayan Proverb

Cynthia joined Angel as he was inspecting the gardens. She had been with him now for over six months, sheltered in the self-sufficient oasis designed and build by his mother over the course of many years. It was still far too dangerous for her to consider leaving and she was in no hurry to risk repeating the events that brought her here in the first place. The disease that had ravished much of his garden six months back seemed to be well in check. While he had lost over half of plants when the virus first reared its head and was spreading across the countryside, Angel had managed to reclaim the heavy losses and bring the gardens back to life. Now and then a weakened plant did show the first signs of disease, when that happened Angel immediately pulled and burned the infected offender. While much of the foundation of America’s dominance in the agricultural world community was withering on the vine, he had somehow managed to stay one step ahead of the creeping rot.

“The gardens are looking much better Angel.” Cynthia commented.

“It would seem so.” He flatly answered as he inspected every inch of a climbing cucumber vine. “It still pops up every now and then, with weaker seeds . . . but I think we’re ahead of it now.”

“I keep hearing over the short-wave that everyone’s crops are dying. How are we able to keep so much growing?” She said as she joined in on the inspection, checking out a nearby Eggplant.

“It’s like I said the other day. The strength is in the variety of seeds that we have.”

“Oh yeah, genetic diversity . . . something like that?”

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The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Remember that history book I was reading about the Black Death of the middle ages. In every plague or epidemic there are a few people or species that are already immune or quickly gain immunity and survive.”

“Ok, I remember now.”

“Well my Mom was all about biodiversity when she created the gardens here. She was very big into collecting Heirloom seeds.”

“Heirloom seeds? Do you mean like antiques?”

“Something like that. Heirlooms are seeds that have fallen out of popularity. Now a days it’s usually because they can’t be farmed with modern equipment or take being shipped across the country or around the world. Lots of people save their seeds and use them for their next crop.”

“You can do that? I thought that they wouldn’t grow quite right.”

“That’s hybrid seeds, HYBRIDS won’t grow true, but the big seed companies want you to believe that all seeds are that way. Then you’ll have to come to them year after year for new seeds. It’s a real great gig for them.”

“So all these plants here are Heirlooms?”

“Yep. Some of them have been around for over a hundred years, some even longer.” He waved his arm. “The strength of Heirlooms is their genetic variety. Some are weak and can’t compete with modern diseases or diseases that we’ve imported. But some, the very special ones, are strong enough to fight off the disease and survive, that’s the one’s we want. My mom showed me how to pick the strongest seed for our location and climate, so that each season our seeds are getting better adapted to were we are.”

“So why doesn’t everyone just grow Heirlooms?”

“Well it does require a lot of care and organization. See those bush beans in the back there.”

“The ones under the screen box?”

“Yeah, you have to pay close attention to separating similar varieties so they don’t cross pollinate sometimes, especially if you want to keep a strain pure.”

“Aren’t there companies that grow heirloom seeds.”

“Some, but not a lot of specialty suppliers are left; the big companies have run most out of business.”

“That’s not right!”

“And it can come back to bite us in the @ss. Mom said that back in the seventies there was a huge corn blight that nearly wiped out the entire corn crop in the U.S. When the scientist’s got into looking really hard to find out

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

why all the corn was dying so quickly they found out that all the corn grown in the country was related to a single hybrid strain. And that strain had a weakness to the fungus that was killing them. In the entire country only two small commercial strains of open pollinated corn were immune, but hundreds of seed savers had strains that were unaffected by the blight.”

“So the home gardeners saved the farmers?”

“Well you would have thought so, but no. Instead the big agri-companies tried to make saving seeds illegal.”

“Can they do that?” Cynthia looked up from the Brussels Sprouts she was checking.

“Well they tried to. Started applying for patents on all kinds of different seeds. It’s sort of like when they tried to outlaw the word “organic”. The big corporations are always looking for ways to shut the little guy down.’

“Buy why? How can a little guy hurt them? They're huge companies!”

“Mom, used to say that it was all about control and monopolies. The whole N.W.O. thing.”

“N.W.O.?”

“New World Order, something about corporations becoming the next type of supreme government, controlling everything. She would go on and on about corporate corruption and every time some scandal would pop up it was somehow related to the New World Order. I guess one of our presidents even talked about it.”

He sat down on the side of one of the raised garden beds and let out a long sigh.

“Mom saw a pretty scary future all around us. I guess that’s why she worked so hard on this place. She always talked about building an Ark in the middle of all the madness. That’s this place.”

He let out another sigh.

“I just wish . . . ah . . . that she could have made it through everything to be here now. I don’t know anything compared to her. These were all her plants, this was her place.”

Cynthia walked over to him.

“She sounds like she was a great Mom.”

“You would have liked her and I think she would have liked you.”

She sat down beside him amid the flowing green that overran everything. It was such a stark contrast to the brown that lived just beyond the walls of Angels compound.

“Angel you did pretty good job on your own, bringing everything back to life here. A lot of people outside are not doing so well. I’m sure your Mom would be very proud of you.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Yeah, she was always saying that.” He looked around. “I just wish she was here to help.”

All across the vast oceans of the world, on merchant ships commanded by graduates of the various American Merchant Marine Academies, skippers were receiving a confidential notification that their reserve naval status (awarded upon graduation) was being upgraded to an active status and that they were now under orders from the Commander In Chief (President of the United States) to immediately return to U.S. waters and put in at the nearest American port. The communiqué went on to state that they were not to off load any cargo, especially any food items or grains, but to return at best speed post haste.

Brentwood felt like he was floating in a gray cloud, drifting slowly down. Voices faded in and out from far away. He couldn't make them out at first, but as they came closer he could start to discern individual words.

“Colonel, I think he's coming around.”

The sound of several footsteps coming closer.

Slowly Brentwood became aware of something cool wrapped around his head and across his eyes. It was about this time that the pounding in his head came forward into his consciousness.

“Ooooooh.” He moaned and tried to bring his hand to his head, but it was suddenly stopped.

“Easy there Mr. Davis. You'll be alright. Just a little knock on the head.”

“Ah . . . little . . . knock . . . oooooh?”

“Doc is he going to be alright?”

A gruff voice, older and across the room answered. “He'll be groggy for a little while and should be kept calm for a day or two . . . but to answer your question - yes, he'll be fine. That is if your gorillas don't waylay him again.”

“Thanks Doc, Yes is sufficient.”

Someone was helping Brentwood slowly sit up. This did nothing to improve the pounding in his skull. He pulled the damp towel from around his head and felt a slight stab of pain as he opened his eyes. The room was dimly lit by two oil lanterns and several rather robust young warriors stood off in the waving shadows of the flickering light. An older version of those stoic warriors was sitting backwards in a chair just a couple of feet from Brentwood, he seemed to be the man in charge and was talking to him.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Now that you’ve found what you were looking for Mr. Davis would you like to explain why someone of your influence and position would be looking for us in the first place?”

Brentwood leaned forward to place his head in his hands, as if that would calm the pounding in his head. A abrupt wave of nausea passed over him and he suddenly found himself on his knees dry heaving into the dusty wooden floor.

When he next awoke the surroundings were more pleasant and comfortable. The soft mattress under him seemed to hold him afloat and the feel of clean sheets against his skin almost made him think that he was back in his Washington D.C. apartment. But the smell was not right. He cautiously opened his eyes this time to a bright room filled with pictures and the signs of life and family. He slowly tried to scoot himself into a sitting position but the pounding in his head came back. Instead he just slid back under the covers and tried not to think about the messages being sent between his head and his stomach as he faded off once more.

He felt something cool softly being patted across his forehead. The light was not so bright now and the view had suddenly improved. Her eyes were the greenest green he had ever seen and shone with a gentle light. Her touch was soft and tender, at first Brentwood wondered if he had actually died and gone to heaven. He fell instantly in love and then was viciously reminded of his condition when he abruptly tried to sit up.

“Damn the headache!” He muttered.

Flight Lieutenant Jonathan Briggs walked briskly across the tarmac and into the head shed with the film canisters in hand. As soon as the he entered the intelligence people and photo interpreters took charge of the canisters. Less than three hours later Air Group Commander Dalton Lovell stood before the Prime Minister.

“Its been confirmed Sir. The plant virus has arrived not only on our shores . . . ” He paused.

“Yes Group Commander?”

“Well . . . er . . . um . . . Sir, there are traces on the continent as well.”

“DAMN!” The Prime Minister jumped out of his high backed leather chair and began to pace the room in an agitated fashion. “How bad is it Dalton?”

“Too early to tell sir, I’ve got my boys going over the new film and going back through the records to make comparisons. Could only be minor outbreaks but . . . ”

“But what?”

“Its too early to tell Sir with the limited information we have.”

“Then I suggest that you get your lads busy Group Commander Lovell, and get them busy now!”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

The gangly gray haired Flight Officer gave his Prime Minister a brisk salute, turned sharply on his heel and strode purposefully out of the plush office. Meanwhile a phone call was made.

“Get me Buckingham Palace Lizzie, this is urgent.”

In a French vineyard one of the field hands noticed a spreading brown patch on the leaves of several vines near the center of one field. He wondered what it could be this time and went on to check the rest of the field.

Dr. Malcolm Danielson, Professor of Contemporary American History and Ethnic studies was suddenly awakened when the antique front door of his modest Brownstone shattered inward from the force of the police battering ram. He hardly had time to sit up in bed before several riot armored and machine gun carrying officers pulled him from his home with nothing more than his pajama's and a flannel robe hastily grabbed as he was handcuffed and thrown into the back of the police van. Fifteen minutes later he was joined by one of his university colleagues Dr. Edward Green, Professor of Early American History and Constitutional Government, who had fared a little worse in his handling due to his weak attempt at resistance to the invasion of his home.

The pair would travel together for several days. No charges were given, no questions asked. At times they were hooded and could tell that there were others around them but any attempt to communicate brought swift and violent retribution by the ever-present guards. When the Grey Hound Bus with blacked out windows finally rolled into its final stop the guards briskly ushered the disheveled and confused passengers out and onto the cold blacktop. Danielson and Green in horror recognized immediately the implication of the last several days. The structure before them was unmistakable, their situation as grim as they could imagine. The pair found themselves looking through electrified fencing and razor sharp concertina wire and realized that they were walking into an American Gulag.

Desert Doc

Pax Americana 38 - Ides of March

If once the people become inattentive to the public affairs, you and I, and Congress and Assemblies, Judges and Governors, shall all become wolves. It seems to be the law of our general nature, in spite of individual exceptions. - Thomas Jefferson.

War is the remedy that our enemies have chosen, and I say let us give them all they want. - General William T. Sherman

Senator Eli Simpson of Georgia sat in his dark office and watched the last light of the day fade from the Washington D.C. sky. The thought crossed his mind as he looked down the Mall from his congressional office window past the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial off at the far end, that perhaps our light, the American light, that had burned so bright for over two hundred years, was finally fading. Certainly the events since 9/11 had forever changed the world that Southern Senator had known so well. He slowly shook his head when he thought about the centralization of power that now emanated from the executive branch of govern-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

ment. Congress had lost control, given up their authority to represent the people due to that damned Patriot Act as well as the multitude of Executive Orders that now spewed forth from the White House. His colleagues had kowtowed under the banner of security and safety and failed to perform their vigilant responsibility to the people. Thus the fine balance of power that had steered a clear course for so many decades had finally been broken and he now felt the country was now spinning wildly out of control.

Simpson leaned back in his high backed leather chair and wondered if over two thousand years earlier some senator in Rome had contemplated the same dark future as he was now when the republican power of the senate was usurped by the imperial throne. He wondered 'what would be our Ids of March?' Though his Roman History was more than a bit rusty he felt that he could almost understand the motivation behind Brutus and the senators that brought down the mighty Caesar that day. Perhaps Jefferson had spoken more truth than he realized when he said, "From time to time, the tree of liberty must be watered with the blood of tyrants and patriots."

A solid double tap knock echoed from his office door.

"Come in." Simpson answered as he slowly spun his chair around.

Into the twilight that filled office walked a shadowy figure. Simpson had hesitated setting into motion the cogs of the machine that would culminate in this meeting, but the escalation of current events gave him no other choice. He was about to play the biggest gamble of his long life and either way it came out he was probably going to end up paying for this decision with his life. Well, it had been a long life, much longer than he could have imagined back when he was a runny nosed eighteen-year-old PFC at the beginning of a long march out of a frozen wasteland known as the Chosin Reservoir of Korea. He strangely wished he was back at the Chosin now, at least there you knew who your enemies were. He remembered back to that grim time. What he wouldn't give for another Chesty Puller now.

The city was dying, not the slow insipid decay that quietly rotted away the walls of hope and created desperation, but from the sharp pangs of starvation. The emergency supplies that had government had trickled in had only barely kept the community alive following the initial outbreak of plague. Those menial emergency supplies had stopped a month ago. At first the survivors had managed to stave off the crushing pangs of hunger by raiding the homes of those killed off by the plague, but that hadn't lasted very long. In this modern age people rarely kept more than a weeks worth of food on hand. Damian's gang had fared better than most after stumbling upon the homes of several Mormons. Here were a people that planned for bad times. But that source quickly dried up, as those few surviving members of the local ward were more than adequately armed to resist the gang raids and as the price became too high Damian steered his gang away from them. Besides which, what did they expect to do with hundreds of pounds of dry wheat seeds? What they needed was food!

Escape from the controlled zones was impossible as well fed and armed government security forces blocked any flight from the city. They were trapped and doomed to a slow painful death unless they could somehow manage to find more food. The Homeland Security Patrols had become more vicious as time went on. In the beginning they might arrest you and beat you a little before allowing you to crawl back into the fetid hole that had once

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

been a thriving metropolis. Now it was down to just shooting on sight anyone caught out in the open. Well, unless it was a girl that they caught. They still ended up dead, but it just took longer to die.

Damian's gang was a mismatch of plague survivors that for one reason or another had gravitated to his side. He could find food and they were hungry, it was almost as simple as that. Yet unlike most of the gangs that cruised through the ruins searching for scraps his group was made up of a much larger age range. His was more like a village than a hunting group and that was where his strength came from. Only the strongest and swiftest patrolled and ranged for food, while the elders of the group guarded the home front. It was this division that allowed his gang to maintain some resemblance of civilization. It also allowed his people the ability to rebuild a small section of the old community. While the young bloods patrolled and gathered, the elders repaired and maintained. Their weakness was that they could not produce the means of their own survival and sooner or later there were be nothing to bring home.

Old Man Washington looked out over the remains of his city. Damian joined him at the roofs edge.

"Sir . . . you best get back from da edge. Sixth Street Devils kin tap you from dare if'n you skyline yo'self."

The old gray haired stooped octogenarian slowly turned around and glanced at his great-grandson.

"It would almost be a blessin' Boy. It breaks my heart ta see da world done fallen down like dis."

He shook his head slowly and took his characteristic waddling steps back to the center of the roof.

Damian looked at his Great Grandfather confused.

"Da whole damn honky world kin burn to da ground fer all I care."

"Don't be so quick to judge dare Boy, we'z a part of dat dere world."

"You wantin it like it waz?"

"Oh no, not like it waz, but also not like it iz." He turned and pointed off in the distance. "Tings waz getting better, not good young'in, but better. Dis t'aint no good. Now daze just shoot us when ever day pleeze, t'aint no laws, t'aint no rights, just the lawz of the jungle. T'aint no future now." He walked past Damian muttering. "T'aint no future now."

Colonel Melton, late of the United States Marine Corps and now the defacto commanding officer of the rogue 1st Patriot Marine Force looked up as Meredith Rasmussen descended the stairs. She was a strong and graceful woman and had tended the wounds of many of the local militiamen and Marines during the long struggle, a struggle that began for Captain Melton when he made the critical decision to follow his oath to the absolute letter of the law.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

His company of Marines had fought hard to defend the civilians whose rights as Americans had been summarily dismissed by a runaway government. When they discovered foreign U.N. troops masquerading as American soldiers among the dead and wounded in the aftermath of battle his troops, to the man, crossed over the line and reaffirmed their oath to protect and defend the law of the land even if it meant that they must someday cross the Rubicon and march on the corrupted capital of the nation itself.

Now he had a very strange dilemma to sort out. Meredith had spent the last several days nursing a pencil necked bureaucratic paper pusher from the very heart of the deceitful government that Melton was now at war against. Why had this Davis fellow ventured deep into enemy territory to find them? What kind of trap were they looking at? He certainly didn't look the type to be a spy or an operative from any one of the many different government agencies. His credentials checked out. But why would the Transportation Secretary for Homeland Security venture out into the wilderness looking for what must be to him contemptible revolutionaries and traitors? They had gone through all his personal belongs and basically come up with diddily squat. Well except for that mini DVD disc, but none of his people had been able to hack into it and they had tried.

"How is our guest today Ms. Rasmussen?"

"I think he'll survive provided nobody else tries to rearrange his brain housing . . ." She looked at Melton for the word.

"Group, Ms. Rasmussen. His brain-housing group."

She blushed. "Oh yes, that's it. You military types, your language is most colorful."

"That it is. So is he awake?"

"Oh yes and quite apprehensive I would imagine."

Brentwood recognized the officer that entered the room from the pictures he had seen during a security brief. While it was known that a company of Marines had, it was believed, mutinied. It was not known if any of the officers had been apart of that mutiny. It was generally assumed, after looking at the personnel files of the officers in question, that they had most probably been taken out before the unit went rogue. The implication of this officer's very presence indicated that things were far worse than the higher ups could have imagined.

The media was being kept completely in the dark about the various seditious events that were escalating across the country as a result of the powers now wielded by the President and his Homeland Security Director under martial law. Yet seemed that the harder the federal government tried to bring things in line the more they unraveled at the edges. Few knew the whole facts, unfortunately, Brentwood Davis was one of those few.

Damian watched the Crips in full colors out on patrol. Man what he wouldn't give to have the hardware they were carrying. They were a defacto army and ranged pretty much were ever they wanted. Packing full auto assault rifles only the government troops had heavier firepower and they knew it. They were the undisputed kings of the ghetto.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Damian's advantage was his knowledge of every back street and alleyway in his part of the city. His troops were street kids like himself. They could fade instantly into the background and watch the hunters parade through their turf without them ever knowing they were even there.

Tonight's raid was a tough one. Most of his young bloods were bitching and complaining under the weight of bags of steer manure and potting soil they had raided from a midtown Kmart. They didn't understand the reason behind the night's mission. After all there was still plenty of food left for the taken. They were also not thrilled with busting up empty parking lots to turn into vegetable gardens. The whole thing was crazy as far as they were concerned. But they still complied and hauled the plastic bags of smelly manure and potting soil.

It didn't matter to them that the old man that Damian listened to was crazy and talked to himself most of the time. Damian was plenty street smart and must have something up his sleeve. He'd done good by them so far and that was good enough.

Damian signaled silently and his group moved out. They had barely covered half a block when the dark streets suddenly came alive with tracer fire from behind them. Damn! The Crips had walked into a government ambush! That would mean . . . Damian heard the roar of the big diesel engines just before they armored personnel carriers burst around the corner and out onto the main street! He was now caught in the vice meant for the Crips patrol that they had watched just minutes earlier.

"BREAKOUT!" Damian yelled.

Like cockroaches hit by the light his group instantly dropped their heavy loads and scrambled into the nearest hole. Damian led a small group down the narrow passage between two brick buildings. When a light suddenly flashed across the opening the other end he slid to a stop. The windows to either side were boarded up but that didn't matter now. They were in the kill zone and had to find another way out immediately.

He whipped off the crow bar that he carried strapped across his back and drove the hooked end through the boards that covered the window. Using every ounce of leverage he had the old rusty nails finally gave way and their escape route was now open. The dark void into which he dropped smelled of machine oil and dust. One, two, three, four and finally a fifth survivor dropped into the dark unknown. He broke out small red lens penlight and scoped out their hidey-hole.

"Stack dem boxes up against dat hole." Damian ordered. "Cover it up good!"

With that done they cautiously moved single file through the basement storeroom. It was a maze of crates and piles of plastic containers. He cautiously listened for the sound of the owners that might be nearby but heard only the faint echo of gunfire from the streets above. He knew the arrangement of basement meant that they had discovered a Mormon cache, a gold mine of food and survival supplies. It also meant that their very lives were in immediate danger if the owners were anywhere near about.

The door out of the basement creaked loud enough to wake the dead and Damian ducked as the sound pierced the inner silence of the building. He signaled for his people to wait at the bottom of the stairs and he slowly climbed each step one at a time, trying to keep his weight to the outside of the stair where it would be attached

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

to the riser and hopefully less likely to advertise his presence. It seemed like hours had passed before his head was at floor level to the first floor. He leaned forward and tried to listen for anything on the other side of the door. That's when it hit him. That sickly sweet smell that he knew too well. The owners would not be threatening them tonight, or for any time soon. He slowly opened the door and held his nose. It took him less than twenty minutes to check out the rest of the house. Breathing through a cloth rag he found the former occupants, or what was left of them. Back in the basement he quickly located the emergency sleeping bags and cots. To night they would be sleeping like kings while the world went to hell all around them.

Meanwhile on the streets above the Homeland Security Forces finished their sweep of the area. One of the troopers dismounted the APC and checked the bodies of two of Damian's gang that hadn't moved quite quick enough.

"HEY SERGEANT WILL YOU LOOK AT THIS!"

"Are they dead Private?"

"As door nails, but check this out." He lifted up a bag of steer manure. "THEY'RE EATING SHIT NOW!"

The troopers on the APC roared with laughter.

"We'd better report this to the Captain. He's gonna love this!"

The trooper reached down with his bayonet and removed the right ears from the dead pair and remounted the APC as they continued on their mop up operation.

While it was near midday, it was still dark in the boarded up basement when Damian finally awoke. He quickly roused every one with him and they set out exploring their find. He quickly realized that it would take them several days to transfer all this stuff back to the hood. It was truly a sweet find.

Eli, Damian's cousin called to him. "Man Yo, you betta come check dis out Cuz!"

Damian crossed over to the far side of the basement storeroom to see what had his cousin's attention. Young-blood was a wiz with locks, there was virtually nothing that he couldn't pick and this time he had picked a cherry. Damian's eyes about popped out of his head at their find. The smell of gun oil was heavy in the air as he ducked his head and stepped into an armory of weapons.

"Man oh man, dis mudderfucker wuz one bad Mormon!" He whistled.

As organized as the rest of the basement was, were stacks of weapons in gun racks, enough to more than give his people an edge against any gang in the city. And maybe against the damn government troops that kept them caged like animals trapped in this dying city. Damian now felt like his people had a fighting chance. He sat down on one of the many crates in the room and took a deep breath.

"Now we gotta a chance, cuz, now we gotta a chance."

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Dr. Malcolm Danielson Professor of Contemporary American History and Ethnic Studies at Columbia University in New York sat stoically, wearing only his pajamas and bathrobe in a cheap folding chair across the table from a bored processing sergeant wearing a Homeland Security Forces uniform.

“Name?” The sergeant droned. He waited a few seconds then asked again.

“Name?” A few more seconds ticked by.

“NAME?” This time he looked up and met the glare of the prisoner across from him.

“Look buddy, you might as well give me your name. If you don’t.” He nodded his head towards the gorilla looking guard just a few feet away. “I’ll order Corporal Rivers there to knock the sh*t out of you until you cough up either your name or your balls.”

Dr. Danielson just glared at his interrogator, and the young Sergeant signaled to the huge corporal to begin convincing the university scholar to cooperate with the interview. Dr. Edward Green, Professor of Early American History and Constitutional Government watched quietly as the burly corporal brought the stock of his rifle up quickly and smashed the side of it against the side of his colleagues head sending him flying a good five or six feet off the chair and on to the concrete floor.

Several prisoners standing at attention against the wall wearing orange jump suits quickly collected the unconscious professor and dragged him off to the side and out a small door. The bored sergeant looked up at Dr. Green.

“NEXT!”

Dr. Green picked up the chair and sat down.

“Name?”

“Dr. Edward Green.”

“Occupation?”

“Professor of Early American Hist . . . ”

“Teacher.”

“Address?”

“Excuse me, I’m a university professor or . . . ”

“I don’t give a sh*t where you worked.” He looked up at Green. “You teach don’t you?”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Well . . . ah . . . yes.”

“Then you’re a teacher, Address?”

“What am I being charged with?”

“Huh?” The Sergeant looked back up.

“Charges, what are the charges. What am I doing here?”

“You don’t know?”

“I was pulled out of my house in the middle of the night, it was two . . . no . . . maybe three days ago and you’re the first person I’ve been able to talk to.”

The Sergeant rifled through the paperwork before him. “Green, Green, Green . . . ah here it is.” He paused to read through the first couple of pages. “Says here you’ve been convicted of sedition and high treason, hmmm, that’s bad sh*t.”

“Convicted?!” Dr. Green was visibly shaken. “I haven’t even been tried, let alone notified or arrested until this moment!”

“Hmmm, strange . . . mmm. Oh . . . here it is . . . well that figures. Damn I hate it when they drop the paperwork like this, third one this morning.” He looked back up at the university professor.

He made a clicking noise with his tongue. “Secret tribuneral, found guilty, sentenced to relocation for . . . ummmm an unspecified period of time.” The sergeant looked up with a big grin on his face. “I guess we’ll be seeing each other on a pretty regular basis here on out professor.”

Dr. Green felt his stomach drop to the floor. “That’s impossible! This is against the law, it’s, it’s, IT’S UNCONSTITUTIONAL! WHERE ARE MY RIGHTS! I’VE GOT RIGHTS! YOU CAN’T DO THIS!”

“You ain’t got shit anymore professor and I can do whatever I like with you. NEXT!”

Desert Doc

Pax Americana Chapter 39 - Fool’s Errand

Andy walked down the sidewalk toward the mall, the sounds of diesel engines and muffled shouts making their way to his ears. He repositioned the heavy duffel bag with its deadly cargo on his shoulder and assumed what he hoped was a military gait. His mind reeled at what a half-baked plan he had devised. What was he thinking? Steal a CUCV? Plant explosives? This wasn’t some cheap Golan and Globus movie, this was real life. Real bul-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

lets. Real blood. Real death. But his wife and friends needed this. It was for the greater good. He was aware of the ear bud speaker/microphone in his ear connecting him to Max, but couldn't think of anything to say.

It was late morning, and if it weren't for troops all-too-prepared to shoot him dead, it would be a fine day. The sun was occasionally peeking from behind some high clouds, and the trees were mostly all green. Before he knew it, he was drawing close to the little strip mall. Three 6X6 trucks, several humvees and CUCVs littered the parking lot. Several civilian vehicles remained there, though most were missing windows, which were in several thousand pieces on the ground. There were many soldiers still in MOPP gear going into and out of all of the stores, but it seemed an equal number were milling about, or clustered in small knots. Some soldiers were facing him as he walked into the lot, but no one seemed to pay any attention to him. He reasoned that it would look suspicious now that people had seen him to walk over behind one of the humvees and start messing around, so he walk briskly into the crowd and moved through it in a random pattern, pausing here and there. He even received a few half-as.sed salutes, returned in an equally half-as.sed manner. Most of the soldiers were entertaining themselves by trying to tell stories through the gas masks and generally screwing around in the manner of soldiers since the Roman legions. After nearly ten minutes of this mingling, he made his way back to one of the 6X6s. He glanced around quickly, then placed one of his pipe bombs behind the rear bumper of the truck, the timer set for thirty minutes. The cow magnet that had been taped in place held it securely in place.

He stood and walked over to the rearmost CUVC. It was nearly identical to a civilian full-sized diesel Chevy Blazer. He tossed the duffel into the passenger's seat, cranked over the engine, and it started with a typical diesel rattle. One or two heads turned, but then quickly swiveled back to their muffled conversation. He put the CUCV in reverse and slowly backed out. He dared to think that this might be easy. He considered screwing this whole diversion thing and driving the CUCV back to the house, loading it up and getting the hell out of there. It was tempting. If it worked it would be so easy as to be laughable. It also had the attraction of being quick. But he remembered a book about Carlos Hathcock, the Marine sniper in Vietnam. Hathcock had said that there was always the temptation to change the plan to something easier. In the middle of a 1000 yard crawl to a firing position, the temptation was to get up and walk, or to only crawl 500 yards, convincing yourself that you could easily make up the difference. The point was, you made a plan and stuck to it. Not to the point of manic inflexibility, but not abandoning it on a whim. That was good enough for him. He kept driving to the other side of town.

He spoke aloud, using the VOX function of the radio: "Step one complete."

There were two clicks in his earpiece in reply.

Across town, Andy pulled in to the parking lot of an empty office building.

Through the copse of trees at the edge of the parking lot he glimpsed the huge sausage-shaped propane tank. There were two soldiers at the end of the long driveway to the tank who were supposed to be protecting it, but they appeared not to be taking their job too seriously. This was in large part due to the fact that there was not enough propane left in the huge tank to fill a residential propane tank. However, the regional command in its wisdom decided that it was worthy of protection. Thus, the sergeant in charge had assigned his two worst troopers to "guard" the nearly empty tank, to get them out of his hair. Their shifts were twelve hours long, and at this early hour, one was drunk and unconscious while the other was merely drunk. Someone had to stand guard, after all.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Had Andy been aware of these facts, he probably would not have exercised the caution that he did while placing his “surprises.” At any rate, before much time had elapsed, he had positioned several of the pipe bombs near the large tank and around its flanks. He also set the AK rifle with the solenoid and timer attached. He aimed it vaguely under the tank and down the driveway at the guards, then covered it with some branches and leaves. The timers were set so the explosives would go off in a random manner, over roughly ten minutes. Keeping an eye on where the guards were supposed to be, he slipped back through the trees to the CUCV. He was surprised as hell when he stumbled across a very visibly drunk soldier urinating in the trees. Andy decided the best defense was a good offense.

“What in God’s name do you think you’re doing out here, private?” he screamed through the mask. He hoped the guy really was a private: He couldn’t tell.

The startled trooper straightened suddenly from peering at his member, arcing urine onto Andy’s boots. “Uh, sir, I was patrolling the perimeter of this here tank, when I had to relieve myself sir . . .”

“Where is your God damned rifle?” Andy screamed.

“Sir, it’s back at . . .”

“Don’t you know there are criminals with guns just waiting to ambush a sad sack like you? They’ll come up in here and slit your stinking throat. They’re out there.”

“Uh, they are?”

“Yes, God damn it! Now get the fu.ck back to your post, get your God damned rifle, and keep your eyes open! And get your MOPP gear back on, you idiot!”

“Yes sir.” The trooper said, and began staggering back the 100 meters to the post, while Andy turned and walked the remaining 20 meters to the CUCV.

As he did so, a small voice in his ear said, “You’d have made a fine lieutenant Andy, except you’re supposed to call privates “dickweeds” not “idiots.”

Andy grinned despite his pounding heart and regained his seat in the CUCV.

Across town, Captain Mosher was angry. The jewelry store had been a trove. Diamonds, rubies, emeralds and gold in the strip mall’s jewelry store safe had resisted the pry bars of looters, but had fallen to a well-placed portion of C-4 by an oddly competent combat engineer. All the gems, rings, necklaces and watches had been placed in a 20mm ammo can, which Mosher then commanded a lieutenant to place in his CUCV. The lieutenant came back shortly, still carrying the ammo can.

“Sir,” He said.

“What is it, lieutenant? Why haven’t you put the can in my vehicle.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Sir, your vehicle is gone. It’s not where we parked it.” The lieutenant replied.

“What? Did someone move it to get the 6X6s out?” Mosher asked.

“Sir, I asked some men in the area. All they saw was a lieutenant get in it and drive away. They assumed it was me.” The lieutenant said.

“Christ.” Said Mosher, shaking his MOPPED head. “Was the other can still in there? From yesterday??”

“Yes sir, I’m afraid it was.”

“Get me a RTO. I need to talk to Skybird 2-7.” Mosher barked.

“Yes sir.” Replied the lieutenant, heading for the door.

Andy couldn’t believe his luck. So far, everything was going better than he had hoped. The CUCV rolled down the side streets, heading back to the house. Showtime was about five minutes away. As the road took a turn, he was suddenly braking hard for a group of soldiers in the middle of the road. They began to wave him close, and Andy hoped his luck would still hold. He pulled abreast of the impromptu roadblock, and rolled the window down. A soldier walked closer holding his rifle not quite in a relaxed manner, but not quite threatening either.

“Sir, please step out of the vehicle.” The man intoned from behind the mask’s voicemitter.

“What in the hell are you talking about?” Andy demanded.

“Sir, that’s Captain Mosher’s CUCV. He wants it back. Now.”

“Tell me something. Why do you think I am in this thing in the first place? Hmm?”

The man seemed confused by the question. “Sir?”

“ I am driving this vehicle,” he said, screaming the next part, “ON THE DIRECT ORDERS OF CAPTAIN MOSHER!”

“Uh, hold on a second, sir.” He said, as he stepped back to confer with his RTO. “I’ll contact Captain Mosher and get this cleared up in a jiffy.”

“Uh-oh” thought Andy, “This is where I get to meet Saint Peter and all the other saints and apostles.”

He let the soldier get what he thought was a good distance away before stomping on the accelerator. In true diesel fashion, more smoke than speed was produced, but the CUCV began to accelerate away from the roadblock. As he rolled away, one or two rounds thunked into the body of the vehicle, but the hail of bullets that Andy expected to perish in did not appear. Before he got more than three blocks away, however, the “whump-whump-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

whump” of rotor blades let him know that his escape was not clean. Strangely, though, no rain of fire descended from the sky, rending the CUCV in two.

Inside Skybird 2-7, the pilot behind the darkened helmet visor touched a button on the cyclic. “Echo 6, Skybird 2-7 we have him in sight. Confirming observation, not interdiction?”

The voice of Captain Mosher sounded clear in his ear. “Skybird 2-7, Echo 6. That’s affirmative. Observe and vector in ground units. Uhhh . . . Samsons 1, 2 and 5 are going to be on this freq soon . . . wait one . . .”

His co-pilots eyes widened slightly as he listened in on the secondary radio frequency to frantic screaming with occasional gunfire and explosions in the background. The co-pilot keyed the intercom, speaking only to the pilot. “That sounds like some real shi.t going on.”

Mosher as Echo 6 came over the headset: “Echo 6, Skybird 2-7 . . . Disregard present mission. Divert south, propane storage facility. Firefight in progress.”

“Goddamn it.” Said Mosher as he dropped the mic. “All right, lieutenant, let’s ride.”

Inside the CUCV, Andy was beginning to piece together what happened. The sudden disappearance of the helicopter was an unexpected Godsend, but for the life of him, he couldn’t figure out why it -and the roadblock men, for that matter- had not simply riddled the CUCV with bullets, then attempted to deal with the “attack” on the other side of town.

The 20mm ammo can in the rear seat held its secrets.

Andy spoke aloud, drawing out the first word to make sure the VOX circuit had picked up the sound and keyed the mic. “Ti-i-i-me to go. See you there.”

He estimated he had about ten to fifteen minutes before he had to stash the CUCV someplace. It wouldn’t take them long to figure out what happened. If it took them longer, so much the better, but it didn’t pay to underestimate the enemy. Max had told him of the “trick” he played, using the empty garage to hide the shot-up squad car. Andy soon was on the look out for a similar situation. It had to be somewhere they couldn’t spot from the air. Once the helicopter was finished with the diversion at the propane tank, it would be out, and so would the other troops, and they’d waste no time in canvassing the area. He shrugged and pressed down harder on the accelerator. If he only had fifteen minutes, he intended to be as far away as possible from the center of activity.

Max and the girls were traveling in the same general direction as he was, but they started out from opposite ends of town. In a short while, the world outside the window began to become more rural.

Andy glanced at his watch. “Just a couple minutes,” he figured. He had been this way before on ambulance runs. He remembered there was a tumbledown barn that stood forlorn in a field not far from there. Time and weather had taken their toll, and the grey-boarded barn listed so that the roof’s edge nearly contacted the ground. An ancient, lonely farmhouse in similar condition was set off to the side. The owners had long since succumbed to age, and their grown children were not the least bit interested in farming, and in fact, had built their own house on the other side of the farmstead and planted a small forest for windbreaks. They were not

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

likely to notice anything. Andy quickly eased the CUCV off the county road and down the overgrown embankment and rolled up near the barn. The doors stood drunkenly on their hinges, one wrenched loose from the top hinge and laying aside the barn wall. Andy peered through the windshield into the gloom of the barn. Masses of garbage and broken machinery littered the floor of the barn, but with some gentle four-wheel-drive shoving, he imagined he could get the CUCV completely inside. He had only a passing knowledge of FLIR technology. Could it see through the barn? What if he was lucky enough that they didn't look here until after the engine of the vehicle cooled? Would that make a difference? His time was up, and he nosed the CUCV into the barn then shut off the ignition.

He was rapidly realizing that his plan was somewhat lacking in details. Should he set out now for Johnson's Stables? In broad daylight? As he thought he pulled his "PERK" kit out of the duffel, along with it, his AK. The "PERK" was an acronym he came up with to not scare his wife with the name "Bug Out Bag" when he first broached the subject of self-reliance under . . . Trying circumstances. PERK stood for "Personal Evacuation/Relocation Kit." It had a nice, "FEMAApproved" ring to it. During the run-up to the Y2K thing, it was almost fashionable to have one. The AK presented another problem. Though it was rugged, reliable and shot a respectable round, the US military did not routinely issue it to his troops. For a brief encounter with sheeple, it might suffice. To them a machine gun was a machine gun. But to anyone with any type of military background at all, it was a huge red flag that he was not really a tentacle of the US government. He squinted at the waning sunlight through the huge cracks in the barn. It would be a while until dusk. He needed to make his way to the stables. Go now or wait until dark? He itched to be moving, and the possibility that the CUCV was a bigger target than he was foremost in his mind. Along with the knowledge that no matter how badly it want for him if he were caught, it would go much worse if he was caught with the CUCV. In the end, his nerves got the better of him. He couldn't stand just sitting. He had to move.

From his PERK he pulled a set of clothes. A pair of jeans and a dark flannel shirt, along with a baseball cap. It would serve as much better camouflage as he walked across the field than woodland BDUs. After all, camouflage was all about blending in, and it was slightly more innocuous to see a man not running and hiding, merely strolling across the field. He wasn't too near the border of the "triangle" of roads that were heavily patrolled, so this was his best camouflage. He stuffed the uniform, PERK and his AK in the duffel bag, hoisted them on his shoulder and set out across the field.

"Once more, into the breach" He thought as he tried to affect a troubled but not guilty walk across the field, heading toward the far tree line.

AGreyMan

Pax Americana Chapter 40 - Practicum

Denise McMillan awoke from her groggy sleep. She remembered the fighting: hours upon hours of noise, dust and insanity. The flash of adrenaline pumping through her veins setting every nerve on fire. Panic, fear, elation and then the explosion. She saw the room that she had just entered transformed into a slow motion fireball that engulfed Larry O'Connor, their neighbor and friend. The concussion hit her like a violent wall and suddenly her world was slammed full of stars. In that instant she was pierced with a thunderbolt strike that seemed to sear

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

through the right side of her face. She remembered the screaming that echoed through her flesh, then faded off into the distance and was soon replaced with the still drifting quiet of unconsciousness.

The first face she saw was that of David her husband. His eyes so filled with warmth and kindness had a different look about them. As if he was looking through her and off somewhere a million light years away. Oh her David, her silly David.

Her lips were dry and felt like parchment as she tried to say his name. But her tongue stick to the roof of her mouth and her voice cracked and screeched.

“Be still my love.” His warm deep voice flowed across her like a dark velvet river. “Doc says you’re going to be ok . . .” He paused. “Just lay back Honey and rest. You took a bit of a beating but we’re safe now.”

Her voice cracked again. “Did we win?” She hoarsely asked.

David nodded. “For now my love . . . we’re safe for now.”

“Larry?” She asked.

She could tell by the look in her husband’s face that Larry had not made it.

“Joseph?” She asked.

“Joseph is just fine Dear, he made it out just fine.”

“And you?”

“A couple of little scratches it all, I’m fine Honey, just fine.”

“And me?”

She saw him swallow before he spoke. “You got a little banged up . . . but Doc says you’re going to be all right.” He looked up past her at something or someone and then looked back. “You just need to rest now Baby and you’re going to be fine in a few days.”

She remembered saying “BullSh*ter.” Just before she drifted off through the mists once more.

Sheriff Eric Eckhart put his hand on David’s shoulder. “She’s gonna make it David, she’s a tough ol’ bird. Just hang in there buddy.”

David appreciated the support from his sheriff and militia commander. He knew that Doc Bell had done everything that was humanly possible under the circumstances they were in. He had saved his wife’s life. She would never see from her right eye again and she would wear the scars of that battle for the rest of her life . . . but she would live and that was the most important thing in David’s mind . . . she would live.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

The wet chill of the evening's air whisked across the back of the neck of the young Homeland Security Trooper and sent a shiver down his spine. Private Brian Wilkerson pulled his field jacket collar up to block the errant breeze and looked out into the darkness beyond the floodlights around the guard post. He was uncomfortable with his first night on post. The company of his Senior Corporal in the shack did nothing to calm his nerves. He was a city boy and had joined the Homeland Security Forces in a moment of patriotic fervor rather than one of the "real military" services that was scouring the planet chasing the ghosts of a probably long dead Muslim terrorist. At least that was the scuttlebutt within the ranks of late. The asshole that had started this whole mess was probably buried under tons of rock in some stupid mountain on the other side of the planet and here he was getting soaked in the constant drizzle in his own country playing road guard.

For Brian it could have been worse, he had no desire to go off chasing phantoms in a dozen strange lands around the globe and he didn't want to fight in the deserts of Iraq or Iran, or off in some other 'Stan' in that part of the world. He had heard all he cared to about "THE GULF WAR" from an uncle that had fought in that war as a tank gunner aboard a M1 Abrams tank. Brian would have rather been sitting back in a college classroom somewhere listening to a boring professor but his high school grades had never been something to take home to mother. At least not unless you enjoyed being grounded. So here he was in the Pacific Northwest wet, cold, virtually alone and in the dark. He only hoped that things wouldn't get any worse than they already were and he would probably be very wrong about that.

His unit had been placed on alert, mustered up and dispatched out to several dozen remote checkpoints along the major highways spread throughout the region. They were there to supposedly contain any illegal movement by unknown domestic terrorists. In layman's terms, as his Corporal had informed him, their job was:

" . . . to stop anything and everything that moved and to fuck up anyone that even slightly smelled of sedition. If they so much as slightly look crossed eyed at you Private, we nail them to the wall."

"But don't we have to have probably cause or something like that?" Brian had asked.

"Fuck them. We've got the guns and they do what we tell 'em or we cap their ass and toss 'em in the ditch!"

Brian wondered if maybe he had made a mistake by not joining one of the "real services". If only he had listened to his parents and applied himself in high school he thought as he stomped his feet to get their circulation going. If only . . . then he wouldn't be here in this hole of an assignment watching the drizzle fall though the flood lights in the middle of the night.

It had taken nearly two weeks for Damian and his Youngblood's to transport the Mormon cache back to his hood through the war zone that his city had become. Limited to what they could carry in their arms or strapped on their backs they made the dangerous trek by slinking through the back streets and alleyways that ran like a maze through this older section of the city. Crossing major streets only when there was no alternative route available they could move the distance virtually undetected.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

There had been no more intrusions by the Homeland Security Forces into this section of the city after the ambush of the Crip patrol. They seemed to be rather systematic with their journeys into the city. Hitting the outskirts periodically as if to remind the remaining survivors that escape was impossible and that Big Brother was watching. They would bring their massive firepower to bear on any open gathering or large movement of civilians within the city. Their dark helo's cruised high overhead as a watchdog on the helpless citizens below and a constant reminder of their position in the food chain.

From within the stronghold that Damian's people had created they went about the everyday business of surviving as best they could. Damian had never really valued the knowledge and experience of his older neighbors and relatives before the collapse. They were just old, their time was past and they would soon to be forgotten. But it was their collective knowledge that fueled the engine that was now sustaining the "hood". It was old wrinkled hands that messaged the detritus of a decaying civilization and gave them a limited amount of dignity at a time when the world around them was taking a nosedive into a new dark age.

His Great-Grandfather with the help of a few like-minded friends had managed to scrap together a chain of generators that gave the hood a few hours of light each night. They had managed to plumb up a water system that not only collected and filtered their questionable water, but also supplied it throughout the stronghold to designated spigots. Three alcohol stills were in constant operation to provide "Shine" for fuel, medicinal use, and of course - some limited libation. But the 'Elders' carefully rationed this vital fuel to limit its abuse.

Early on when the true reality of unfolding events smacked them hard in the face, the members of the stronghold had taken a stand to eliminate one of the major factors in what they considered the agent of their modern slavery, drugs. The ganja leaf, various white powders and crystalline monsters that had crippled the weak and the poor among them, were not tolerated within the "hood". Addicts either left, dried up or died out, such was the hatred of this dragon that had hung on the backs of so many, for so long.

The "hood" began to evolve into what could best be described as . . . a village. Damian rose to fill the position as their war leader. His responsibility was to protect and hunt for the extended family that he was now apart of. His natural leadership abilities, quick wit and tenacious attention to detail brought him to the front where he shined as never before. Damian was a true hunter on the prowl when he and his peers were outside the "hood's" perimeter. He missed nothing, not the slightest hint of trouble or potential for gain and it was for this reason and others that he was trusted with this most important position.

His Great Grandfather and several others of his generation gravitated to fill the role of village elders. The make up of this group would probably be considered highly unusual by anthropologist's off in some dusty ivy league university, in that that over half of the elders, nearly three-quarters of their numbers were Grandmothers and Great Grandmothers. In their own way they were taking the first steps at recreating their world, trying to bring order to the insanity that whirled around them. They were becoming a true community, something that many of them had never experienced in their entire lives. They had to if they were to survive.

Dr. Malcolm Danielson came to on the cold hard floor of the wooden barracks that he was carried to after the beating in the indoctrination room. His colleague Dr. Green had covered him with a green wool government blanket from a near by bunk. His head pounded and he could barely see out of his left eye.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Easy Malcolm, take it easy. They beat on you pretty bad and you may have some broken bones.”

Malcolm slowly, painfully moved the various parts of his body to determine the damage he had received. He definitely had been pounded on hard, but nothing seemed broken at this point.

“Help me up Ed.” He moaned.

Edward and another prisoner carefully lifted the black and blue professor to the nearest bunk bed.

“Hmmm early Stalag 17 I see.” Malcolm commented, referring to the World War II POW movie from the early fifties that starred William Holden.

“Yes it would seem so.”

“So what are the charges against us Edward?”

“It would appear that we’ve been tried in absentia and found guilty of sedition and high treason.”

“WHAT!” Malcolm grabbed his pounding head. “SHIT!” “That was my first thought as well.”

“When . . . how . . . who?” Stammered the bruised professor.

“That I can’t tell you my friend but here we are and it looks like here we’ll stay.”

“Like hell I will.”

“Malcolm you better calm down, you’ve already taken a pretty good beating and from what I’ve heard there’s plenty more where that came from.”

Later that evening they were introduced to the other prisoners in their barracks. It seemed that the government was methodically rounding up anyone that openly had dissented against the reigning status quo. They were especially high handed against teachers and college professors that tended towards any leftward leanings or openly questioned the prevailing ultra Republican right. Malcolm had heard about Lynn Cheney’s agenda on freethinking educators that didn’t pander to the far right view of education. He had even heard that she and her colleagues had a “hit list” of those educators to be targeted for removal but had ignored such warnings as intellectual paranoia. He was obviously wrong on his summation of the situation.

Malcolm walked to the far end of the barracks where several colleagues were having a discussion on the recent events that had placed them in their current predicament.

“So Dr. Andrade if I understand your point here. It is that there does appear to be a plan or direction that things are leading towards. You’re not talking conspiracy theory or anything like that. But humanity does seem to cycle through various mindsets from Village to City States, Monarchies, Sovereign States, Empire building and so on.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Dr. Andrade nodded in agreement. “Yes, but also consider the recent trend of many historians that consider there to have been at least eleven world wars through out history. Not just the two we commonly refer to in our modern era.”

He continued. “We do seem to be on the road to some sort of “Imperial Presidency”. This actually began with FDR in the 1930’s as he tried to centralize control to bring us out of the depression and then to survive WWII. It continued to grow at varying rates through the Kennedy and Johnson eras with Vietnam, until Nixon botched everything up with his Watergate fiasco. From there things slowed down and took some time to gather speed once more. Reagan kicked things off again and very nearly pulled a “Nixon” with the Iran-Contra mess but somehow managed to walk away from that. So along comes Bush, Sr. and now his son, the road we’ve traveled since 1932 may have wavered slightly along the way but the direction has stayed the same.”

“Along with the increasing centralization of authority under the President, are you aware also that the Federal Government has tripled in size since the early-mid seventies? Was there a real need for that? Are we receiving better services as a result? Do you have more money in our pockets? Are we better off? Or are we paying more (taxes) and getting less for our money?”

Dr. Green chimed in. “I believe that Alexander Hamilton was correct in his concern for the potential of a run-away Federal government. It is like a cancer that will continue to spread and invade every aspect of your life unless you take drastic efforts to curtail it. That was the fear of many of our founding fathers and the reason that so many were against an overtly strong centralized government. There are many advantages to “some” form of centralized authority, but not an all-pervasive and controlling entity, which is what it has grown into and what Hamilton himself warned us against!”

Another member of the group added. “It is scary when you really sit down and think about it. Imagine a Hitler with the kinds of technology that we have today . . . THAT IS REALLY SCARY. To that end we must be ever on guard and zealous in our protection of our individual freedoms.”

Malcolm had heard enough of the intellectual discussion. These people would debate the current situation until hell froze over unless someone kicked them in a place that would get their attention.

“Gentlemen, your discussion would be a most interesting debate in the proper theater. We are however imprisoned as a result of such discussions and you sit here chat about our situation as calmly as if you were in your lounges at home.”

The room got suddenly very still.

“It would be best if we concentrated on how we’re going to get the hell out of here!”

“But Malcolm . . . we’re surrounded by barbed wire and guns, we have nothing!”

“We have our minds gentlemen, and that is the most dangerous weapon available. That is what sets us apart for the bastards that have imprisoned us here. They think that we are unarmed and harmless because we are without

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

any apparent weapons. Well I suggest we get to using the one weapon that we do have and teach them a fucking lesson they won't soon forget!"

Jamal watched the Castle's patrol cross the open street and disappear through the heavy outer portcullis gate into the fortress of Fourteenth Street. His stomach growled angrily as it had not been fed in days and he eyed the full backpacks that the patrol labored under. He had heard rumors of the Castle from the other side of town and had come to see it for himself. It was massive. It commanded the corner of Fourteenth and Elm Streets and linked four of the older four story walkups into one massive structure. All the lower windows and doorways had been bricked up and sealed tight. The upper two floors of outward facing windows were secured with heavy wooden or metal shutters. There was no way to gain access from the outside. He had heard of one of the other gang's attempts to crash through the gate that he had just seen the patrol disappear into. That attempt ended badly for the intruder and showed the power of the "Castle" as it came to be known by all the outsiders.

Jamal had been watching the Castle for two days now, from every angle trying to figure out a way in. He knew that there must be other, secret trails that lead into the mysterious Castle. Their patrols were known to roam through many parts of the city on their gathering raids. He wondered what they were doing in there. While his main concern for his gang was always food and drugs, these strange brothers seemed to be gathering up the oddest things. They would clear out a hardware store, or an automotive parts shop. They took things you couldn't eat. He wondered what they did behind those solid brick walls and he was determined to find out.

Damian stopped at the side of the portcullis and stood guard until the last of his patrol passed under the heavy steel pipe gate. He knew these last few feet were among the most dangerous. There were eyes watching of that he was sure. The hair on the back of his neck always tingled when unfriendlies were near. His eyes scanned the buildings across the street for any hint of danger, his battle rifle ready to respond in a millisecond if necessary. The Beretta made BM-59 felt strange in his hands when he first discovered it in the dead Mormon's house. The hidden armory yielded a treasure chest of weapons and equipment that his people sorely needed to survive in the ever more violent world they had been thrust into. Old Man Jacobson, an elder, had served in the Army for twenty-five years, mostly as a cook, and fought in both Korea and Vietnam, had welcomed the opportunity to instruct and train the Youngblood's of the hood. Damian still insisted that they maintain a low, near invisible profile on their forages into the city, but he felt much better knowing that if they were pressed - they could respond.

When the last member of the patrol was under the portcullis Damian backed into the safety of the entrance tunnel and the Iron Gate was lowered. A series of heavy inner doors were swung closed behind them as they carried on into the inner ward, at last they could lower their guard and relax. The welcome aroma of cooking filled the air as the troop moved through the inner yard.

"Aaah, the Chin's are cooking tonight." Damian thought to himself.

He walked over towards the large wok that was being tended by Momma Chin.

"What be on da menu ta night Momma Chin?" He called.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Far You, Dam-in, flied kitten. Ever-body else get gung pow chicken.” She cackled.

“Gun-powder chicken!” He exclaimed. “MY FAVORITE!

He reached his hand in to snatch a piece and Momma Chin caught the back of his hand with her spatula.

“You GO DAM-IN, You eat wit ever-body else! YOU GO NOW!”

He licked his fingers of the hot spicy sauce and made his way from the lower levels up to the roof where he often found his Great-Grandfather tending the garden there. The journey reminded him of one of those PBS specials he had seen on medieval castles. Over the ensuing months after the Big Death, the surviving members of the “Hood” had begun to seriously reinforce the structures that they had laid claim to by default. They cleared the buildings of the dead, burning any of their diseased belongs and began to seal themselves in from the wolves that now openly roamed the empty streets. It was the Old Man that first suggested that they wall up the windows and doors on the lowest levels to keep out the vermin. Then little by little they extended their control to that of the three other nearest buildings. By sacrificing one of the other nearby buildings, gutting it for useable materials: bricks, beams, wiring and plumbing they had been able to continue their building efforts. It was hard and laborious work as they reinforced the old tenement walkups, filled the outer rooms with cribs full of rock and rubble and thus created a solid dense wall between the outer world and their inner living quarters. Step by step, brick by brick their position slowly improved and with each improvement the survivors became more of a community and a family.

What had once been parking lot and a small concrete covered playground was now walled in and broken up to create the gardens that they hoped would one day feed their entire growing community. It was mostly the older folks of the “hood” that tended the new gardens trying to bring life back to the long covered dirt. The Chin’s, who had owned the local Chinese restaurant and the Rodriguez’s, a Puerto Rican family brought a wealth of intensive gardening knowledge to the community. While the Chin’s idea of using composted human manure was first met with disgust they proved to the Elders that it could indeed be done safely and soon their corner of the garden began to flourish.

Damian felt proud of himself and his community for the first time in his life. While he fully realized the immense danger that constantly circled outside the brick walls of their little world, he also felt hope for the first time. This group of total strangers had survived the Great Death and the famine that had followed. They were building a new world within the confines of a collapsing society. He also felt the weight of responsibility for protecting his extended family. He was no longer just some punk kid in the hood who’s future was that of drugs and welfare. He was the War Chief of this urban tribe that was trying to build a new future out of the ashes of the last. His stride was strong and he held his head high as he reached the roof and walked across it through the raised bed gardens to where his Great Grandfather was watching the clouds pass overhead. He wondered what the lesson today would be as he sat down across from the Elder.

Leslie Melton, Colonel of the 1st Patriot Marine Force could not believe his eyes as he read through the documents on the computer screen that Brentwood had opened for them. As he digested the highly classified top-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

secret Presidential Executive Orders he felt his jaw hit the floor again and again. The several other pairs of eyes that were looking over Brentwood's shoulders likewise could not believe what they were reading.

Echo's of "You've got to be kidding. Oh my God! That's got to be illegal." And a steady stream of "SH*T!" Filled the air.

The next morning Brentwood Davis was walking through the very same rural flea market that he had been captured at just a couple of weeks prior. A heavily armed escort closely watched the pair as they chatted and took in the market.

"I'm still at a loss to believe the information you've brought us Brentwood." Melton began.

"Not half as much as I was when I first came across all that." He shook his head. "What do you do when the entire world that you have believed in is ripped away from you?"

"Believe me Brentwood I know the feeling, boy do I know the feeling." He stopped and looked him straight in the eye. "But what do we do now? We know the plan. We have an idea of timeline. But how do we act on this information?"

"I was sort of hoping that you would have those answers Colonel. I'm just a paper pusher. I'm no soldier."

"Well you're one hell of a paper pusher there Mr. Davis, and you've pushed some serious sh*t right into my lap."

"Sorry . . . but . . . but I just couldn't sit there and watch this happen."

"You know Brentwood . . . at first I thought you were some kind of plant, a spy and I was just about to have you taken out into the woods. Be thankful that Meredith is a better judge of people than I am."

Brentwood's eyes widened.

"I'm still having a hard time believing everything on that disc of yours, but it all makes sense now in a sick sort of way."

"But what can we do about it Colonel?"

"We fight my friend . . . we fight."

"But can we win?" Brentwood asked in all seriousness.

"Do we have a choice?" The Marine Colonel replied. "Do we have a choice?"

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

The heavy drizzle appeared like streaks of silver gray tinsel in the floodlights around the guard shack. Private Wilkerson leaned up against the wall of the shack under the shallow eaves as much as possible to avoid the steady rain that had already soaked him to the bone. He didn't see the shadows that were circling just beyond the ring of lights at the checkpoint. He couldn't hear the near silent movement beyond the veil of rain. By the time his brain recognized the threat of the silver blur streaking towards him it was too late.

The replacement patrol found the Private the next morning. He was still pinned to the outer wall of the guard shack by a pair of steel shafts that had pierced his body and then dug deeply into the wooden shell of the shack, locking him dead against the wall. They never did find the Corporal.

Several hours later the five-ton truck and Hummer drove off and abandoned the guard station. That was the third one this week. The Lieutenant knew he would be in serious hot water for his decision, but he could not risk open mutiny by sending any more of his men to certain death in these remote stations.

"Fuck the Colonel, if he wants these shit holes guarded he can come out here and do it himself." He thought to himself. Man was he going to catch an ass chewing when he got back. But he felt it was better than getting fragged in the middle of the night by his own troops. The lieutenant was quickly learning about the full weight of leadership and survival that rested upon his shoulders.

"This job sucks!!" he muttered to himself as he leaned back and wished he could be anywhere else.

Desert Doc

Pax Americana Chapter 41 - Teach Your Children Well

Teach Your Children - Crosby, Stills and Nash

*You, who are on the road,
Must have a code that you can live by.
And so, become yourself,
Because the past is just a good bye.
Teach your children well,
Their father's hell did slowly go by.
And feed them on your dreams,
The one they picks, the one you'll know by.*

*Don't you ever ask them why, if they told you, you will cry,
So just look at them and sigh and know they love you.*

*And you, of tender years,
Can't know the fears that your elders grew by.
And so please help them with your youth,
They seek the truth before they can die.
Teach your parents well,*

Courtesy of Preparedness Educational Services, Inc. Visit us at http://www.frugalsquirrels.com/friends_links.html

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

*Their children's hell will slowly go by.
And feed them on your dreams,
The one they picks, the one you'll know by.*

*Don't you ever ask them why, if they told you, you will cry,
So just look at them and sigh and know they love you*

The CJ5 bounced along the rutted road leaving a light trail of dust in its wake. It had been three months since they made the last run to town and everyone was looking forward seeing civilization again. They had survived the winter isolated in their remote alpine valley. Spring had finally gained more than a foothold and filled the mountain with life once again.

Kevin remembered the day when they first bounced in on this dirt road. The summer had been glorious despite all the apprehension in the air when they pulled out of their driveway in early June to begin the first summer vacation they had taken in five years. 9/11 had certainly shaken everybody up along with all the revelations regarding a never before heard of group of Muslim extremists off in some dirt pile of a county on the other side of the planet. War drums were pounding but there was no enemy in sight. The dust settled and things appeared to be headed back to normal. Oh, sure, we were in a war against terrorism, but that's not like a "real war", like against a country or something. Regardless of the constant noise pitched out by the media on a daily basis they decided to take off and get a look at land the Jorgensons had purchased sight unseen through a rural property newsletter. His wife had her misgivings on the deal, but the price was right and they did have the money in savings, so throwing caution to the wind they purchased their little spot of heaven. Located just beyond the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, their thirty-five acre plot of raw undeveloped rural property turned out to be the best spur of the moment purchase they had ever made.

Kevin was glad that they had been able to talk their eldest daughter Samantha into spending the summer with them. Having just graduated from high school she would soon be off to college and out on her own. The entire family had agreed that this would probably be the last chance they would have to spend a summer together, so off they went on a grand adventure to their new property. Little did they realize that they would be spending more than just three months together.

It wasn't until they began to head back home at the end of that summer that their isolation became readily apparent. During their absence from the daily grind and the constant blast of the news of the world, everything had suddenly turned inside out. The dire situation hit the Jorgensons like a load of bricks. Plague had broken out everywhere, cities were now death traps, people were dying by the thousands, and the very fabric of the nation was ripping apart. The few locals that would even talk to them shared the grim news they had missed during their summer hiatus. Panic was spreading far and wide, the nation was at war now in some stupid sandbox and there were even rumors that actual fighting had broken out within the country itself.

When Kevin, the patriarch of the family, contacted the local sheriff concerning how he could get his family home, clear on the other side of the country, he was not greeted with the best of news. There were no travel permits being authorized to anyone if not of an official or absolute emergency nature. The entire country was under martial law and he and his family were stuck right where they were for now.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

The Jeep splashed through another of the dozen or so small creeks that dotted the landscape. Kevin thought back to the family meeting that night in the local steak and ale restaurant. Even though he was somewhat old fashioned and patriarchal in his ways, he was wise enough to know that this decision facing them was one that had to involve the entire family. He remembered looking about the table at the most important people in his life. Across from him sat his wife Stephanie. She was as petite as he was large, with long dark exotic hair that she usually tried to restrain in a ponytail or rolled into a tight bun. Her handsome looks gleaned from the mix of Irish, Native American and Jewish stock. She was as level headed and intelligent as any man could possibly stand. It was at her job as a nurse in a small medical clinic that they first met while she was fixing him up after a little accident on the job. From there nature took its course and a year later they tied the knot. Kevin always felt that besides being his best friend she was also his strong right arm. One tough little banty hen, he often thought.

His eldest daughter at eighteen, Samantha was dark and exotic like her mother, tall like her father and with a temper that matched both. His second daughter Amanda, sixteen, was small like her mother, but drew her full head of shock blond hair from her father. She was the chatterbox of the family and, matched with her bubbly personality, seemed to meld the best of both sides of the genes into the happiest of mixes. The youngest, but far from the smallest, was his son Kevin Jr., or Buck as he was called by the family. At fourteen, he was nearly Samantha's height and would soon be pressing to match his father's six foot four frame. Buck was calm and keenly observant, a lad that rarely missed the slightest detail and was as skilled an outdoorsman as his father. Kevin hailed from tall blond Scandinavian stock and while he never went beyond high school in his education, his voracious appetite for books coupled with his experience in the service as an Army Ranger and later while assigned to the 10th Mountain developed his love for the outdoors and the high country, as well as his extensive backwoods skills. Back at home he was a heavy equipment operator for the county water district. Here in the highlands of Wyoming, he was in his element.

That night in the restaurant seemed like it was a long time ago in another world. The winter had been tough, and while they were used to the cold that came with the season at home in Pennsylvania, it was the isolation that weighed heaviest on them. Modern man has so much constantly going on about them that they never really consider the quiet that is out there. Also, for the first time in their lives, day to day survival was a reality. Nothing turned on with the flick of a switch or the twist of a knob. They had been thrust back technologically over one hundred years and that was not an easy thing to live with. But the family endured.

Fortunately, the locals were still accepting traveler's checks. Though Stephanie's quick thinking, they managed to have their entire savings wired to the local independent bank and converted into hard currency before the communication lines began to fragment. It was Stephanie that seemed to fully realize the implications of the bits and pieces of news that were getting through. Her years of nursing experience allowed her to pick up on vital clues that were trickling in despite the mandated news blackouts. The information was sketchy, but she had come to the chilling conclusion that there was an epidemic sweeping the nation. Kevin picked up the alarm bells from his wife and then he too pieced together the inferences as much from what was not being said as from what was leaking through. Together, they sat down and spent two solid days brainstorming their options as a family. Then . . . they went on a buying spree!

Buck likened their situation to being the first colonists on a new planet. What would you take with you if you had a limited budget and there would be no resupply for a long time . . . if ever? It was amazing how high up on the list toilet paper and feminine napkins suddenly became. Kevin made his list based around the tools he would need to not only construct a suitable shelter but to maintain that shelter and the family in the months or possibly

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

years ahead. Stephanie leaned heavily towards keeping the family healthy and strove to plan for every possible medical contingency, even to include her becoming pregnant. Samantha, always level headed and science oriented combed, scoured the local community for any form of alternative power that they could use and hit every first - and second - hand bookstore in the area gathering up any sort of book that contained slightest bit of knowledge that they would need in the weeks and months ahead. Amanda tackled their requirements for growing, cooking and preserving the foods they gathered. Buck began by helping his father and Amanda in their searches but suddenly was drawn away with the idea of fulfilling their needs through hunting, trapping and gathering. He returned one afternoon with a shoulder load of traps, trapping tools, scents and several books on the subject. He then carted his father off to the local pawn and outdoor shop to meet the old man that ran the place he had befriended. Three hours later and nearly two grand lighter in the pocketbook the pair made their way back to rendezvous with the girls knowing full well that they'd have to do some serious talking to convince them of the validity of their purchases. It was to become an ongoing debate that lasted most of the winter.

The Jeep towed the trailer filled with firewood into town just after nine in the morning. It was a smallish mountain community that supported close to twenty five hundred souls. During their last visit, people moved about and things seemed almost normal, considering the events taking place in the rest of the country. This morning, however, as they drove into town, it took on more of the appearance of a ghost town. The few folks they did see out and about seemed to be in a hurry to get somewhere quickly. The town square was largely devoid of any signs of life as Kevin pulled over to let the girls off to do their shopping.

He leaned over to give his wife a kiss and spoke softly to her. "Keep a close eye on the girls, hon. I'll be right back after we pick up a few things at Richardson's store."

"Something bothering you, Kevin?"

"I don't know," he said, shaking his head. "Just seems a little too quiet, or something."

"Well it is a little early, perhaps." She pecked him on the cheek and jumped out of the Jeep.

"Just the same, hon, keep your eyes open." He looked around the quiet square. "tsk, just doesn't seem . . ." His voice trailed off.

She chuckled at her over cautious husband. "We'll be fine dear, just three girls out on a town having a shopping spree." She chuckled as she walked away.

Kevin slipped the Jeep into gear as Buck jumped up into the front seat and snapped in his seatbelt. They took off with a slight jerk and headed over to the Richardson's.

Professor Malcolm Danielson had recovered from his beating and he, along with the group quartered in Barracks 21, had settled down into the routine of captivity. With each passing day trapped behind the barbed wire, the rage that had begun on that first morning when he was arrested slowly simmered and gained in strength. He was absolutely appalled at the utter passivity of his fellow "detainees". They blabbered on continually about how justice would triumph if they were just patient enough and didn't start anything with their captors. That

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

was the furthest thought from Malcolm's mind. He wanted someone's cajones nailed to the top of a telephone pole, and he didn't care if they were still attached or not.

His mind was constantly running through escape scenarios, analyzing every angle and detail, trying to improve the odds. He knew, he absolutely knew, that somewhere, somehow he would find the flaw in the cage he now found himself in. He felt his greatest advantage was buried in a piece of his past that not even his ex wife knew of. During his exuberant youth, when he was first in college, he found himself drifting in the wild currents of that era of protest. The next thing he realized was that he being indoctrinated into a radical underground group on the fringe of the spotlight that shone brightly on the Weathermen and Black Panthers of that day.

Malcolm had been having flashbacks to that era of government high handedness, when the FBI and various agencies of the federal government seemed to be everywhere, digging into everything and abusing the rights of everyone. Malcolm's smartest move had been to suppress his real identity even from his fellow anarchists at that time. Later, he would come to the realization that the group he had joined under the pretense of freeing mankind from the tyranny of Big Brother, was actually more interested in committing acts of destruction and rage against the machine and then taking the place of Big Brother to force their ideals upon the masses. He had no desire to trade one oppressor for another and one day simply walked away from the group and back into his own life. But the lessons learned from that dark hidden past could now very well be the salvation to his escape and survival. It was now his task to resurrect the urban guerrilla that he once was and to suppress the passivity of academia that he was now surrounded by. It began first thing the next morning with pushups.

Shadows moved through the ruins that surrounded the 'Castle'. Like overgrown sewer rats, they scurried in and around the broken buildings of the perimeter. Hungry eyes stared across the darkness to the cold brick walls that sealed them out. The brothers inside the Castle would not share their bounty, so now the pack had the right to take it from them.

Jamal slowly, carefully, climbed to the top floor of one of the few remaining buildings across from the Castle. He had traveled this way many times over the last several weeks trying to find a chink in the armor of the complex that stood defiantly before him. Many of the surviving gangs scattered throughout the dying city had heard of the Castle and the rumors of its success. It was also known that virtually no one, outside the actual members of that closed community itself, was ever allowed inside its' protective walls. Occasionally they would accept a new member, but not unless the prospect brought to the restricted community some skill or knowledge that they needed. While Damian's group recognized that they were indeed a lifeboat cast out upon the ocean and could not save everyone that wanted to survive, the rest of the surrounding city did not understand this concept. Jamal watched as the assault slowly crept into its position in the early morning hours

It took a few seconds until the sound of the klaxon registered in Damian's groggy mind. Then the adrenaline pump shot a panic load of kick ass screaming through his veins. He couldn't move fast enough as he fumbled into his pants and boots.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Thank God for speed laces!” He mumbled to himself as he jerked his right foot into the boot and quickly locked it in.

Seconds later he was racing through the passage way to his battle station, half in and half out of his battle dress, trying to swing his arm into his combat vest, carry his rifle and calling into the emergency radio to get a fix on the trouble all at the same time. He could hear gunfire, a lot of gunfire, and that was not good. His vest finally on, he paused just half a second to secure the small Motorola radio into its place and plug in his mike and headset. Now with both hands free he picked up the pace ready for action.

The building rocked slightly from the explosion and Damian slid to a sudden stop. The door he had just passed, not twenty feet behind him in the corridor had popped open from the blast that now filled the passageway with dust and smoke. Damian jacked a round into the chamber of his BM 59 and dropped to the floor. Scurrying like large sewer rats the gang bangers emerged from the smoke and dust filled room only to be met with the bark of Damian’s 7.62mm rounds shredding them as they cleared the doorway. The big rifle bucked against his steady hold and the first three members of the assault team crumpled on the floor in front of the doorway. Damian then moved his sight picture slightly to the right and coughed out three more rounds that blasted through the door-jamb and nearby wall slamming into the next man trying to hide behind the not so solid wall. His scream as the hot brass ripped through his soft flesh froze the second team just now entering in the room up the ladder through the blasted away metal shutters.

Damian rushed to the doorway and off handedly poked the hot barrel into the smoky darkness and emptied the magazine across the room into the dark hole that had been a sealed window. His second round found purchase and caught the top intruder on the ladder square in the forehead flipping him back off and bouncing down onto his teammates beneath. A second banger lost his grip and joined his partner in their thirty-foot drop to the solid bone crunching concrete below. Damian quickly locked in a fresh mag and continued to advance spraying a wall of thirty-caliber supersonic whoop ass into the void beyond. He couldn’t hear the panic that he was creating on the ladder just below the window as the terrified invading gutter rats scrambled to put as much distance between them and the screaming death that was blasting out of the window above. All he could hear was the increasing pitch of his ringing ears as he blasted away within the confines of that small room.

Several reinforcements suddenly materialized beside Damian and added their firepower to his, shredding the remaining gang bangers that had failed to seek shelter across the street. Damian threw himself into the most forward shooter just before the gutter rats return fire would have cut him to pieces as he stood in the middle of the window laying down a steady rain of death on the retreating vermin. Four BM-59’s barked in unison into the dark rubble across the street as Damian knocked the ladder away from the wall and dropped out of the way as a makeshift steel shutter was laid over the open window and wedged into place. He signaled for two of the shooters there with him to remain and secure the window while the rest followed him out of the room and onto the next battle.

A few minute after dropping off the girls Kevin and his son Buck arrived at a burned out relic that had been the Richardson’s outdoors store. The pair looked at each other in a confused manner, then turned back to the scene that stood before them.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Pop!” Buck was looking and pointing across the parking lot.

Kevin followed his son’s gaze and caught the glint of something metallic all around a derelict vehicle on the far edge of the parking lot. As they pulled up closer Kevin stopped the jeep and got out to have a closer look. The ground was covered with brass, .223 to be exact. He bent and retrieved one of several hundred that littered the ground around the shot up car.

“Government stamped 5.56. Hmmm,” he said to himself.

The vehicle he stood next to had been riddled from one side, the side facing the Richardson’s store. But it wasn’t punked from little .22’s or .223’s. Who ever had returned fire in this firefight was a firm believer in thirty-caliber and up rounds. A couple of enormous holes went clear through each side of the car and everything in between. He couldn’t be sure but it also looked like some serious bleeding had taken place on the backside of the vehicle.

“Dad, come take a look at this!” His son was over by the remains of the store.

As Kevin walked past the parked Jeep, he reached in and grabbed the Marlin .30-30 and then walked over to the side of the building where his son was standing. He slowly scanned the immediate area surrounding the store as he walked but didn’t see anything that seemed out of the ordinary. Buck showed him the pockmarked brick around one of the stores side windows. Looking in through the broken glass he could see several hundred shell casings scattered through the muck and debris around the window area.

“There’s been some serious shooting here, Dad. I don’t like the looks of this.” Buck commented as he too scanned the perimeter for any sign of danger.

“Neither do I, son, neither do I.” Buck turned and followed his son’s gaze. “What say we grab the girls and take a run up to the Richardson’s place? You’ve been there, right?”

“Yeah, sure, Dad, it’s not very far from here.” He turned and pointed. “Just up the road a bit and on the other side of that ridge there.”

“Good, let’s get the girls and find out what’s going on here. I don’t like the looks of this . . . not one bit!”

Samantha could tell that trouble had just entered the store by the look on the owners face when she looked up. Sam, without overtly looking, quickly oriented herself to the room and everything in it. Most important was the whereabouts of her sister, off to the left looking at material, and her mother, over picking out thread. She could hear at least three sets of feet in heavy boots walking up behind her. Her warning sensors were ringing off the hook and she knew this was not going to end nicely. Slowly, seductively, she turned around to face the three approaching figures. The first thing that caught her eye besides the uniforms were the guns they were carrying; M-16’s and pistols in military holsters. They were Homeland Security Force troops and she didn’t like the way they were eyeballing her. The leading simian’s face was filled with a huge shit eating grin. His two cronies

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

stood at either side and also held her in their hungry gaze. She flipped back her wild black hair and smiled coyly at the trio.

“So where have you been hiding cutie?” The lead goon slobbered.

Just then Amanda popped up out the side aisle. “Hey Sis, check this out . . .” Then she froze as soon as she locked eyes on the three troopers just a few feet from her older sister.

“SHIT BOSS, ANOTHER ONE!” exclaimed the trooper closest to Amanda.

Now Stephanie was suddenly aware that life had just become a little more complicated and she stepped into the mix.

“Come on girls we’ve got more shopping to do.” She stepped between the troopers and her girls and tried to wave them past. “Excuse us soldier.” She said to clear the way for their retreat from the store.

“Not so fast there, lady!” The lead troopers responded and held out his arm. “Where’s your papers honey?”

Stephanie looked at him dumbfounded. “Papers . . . what papers?”

“The little papers that say you got permission to be out and about, lady.” the until now silent trooper teased.

“I don’t need any papers.” She answered indignantly “Come on, girls, we’re leaving.”

Suddenly the lead trooper shoved Stephanie back towards Amanda and stepped in to block their way.

“You know, boys, I think these girls need a little full body cavity search, don’t you? They could be some of those domestic terrorists the Captain’s always harping about!”

Apish grins filled the faces of the lesser two troopers.

“Say, Sarge, can we start with the little blond one?”

“Yeah, she looks like a terrorist to me, Sarge, start with her!”

Stephanie stood up and with her left arm waved her youngest daughter behind her as she retreated from the threat to her front. Her right hand slid across the face of the open display case as she backed away. Suddenly Samantha stepped forward assuming an attitude that Stephanie had never witnessed in her eldest daughter before.

“Say wouldn’t you rather start with me, soldier boys?” She coyly asked as she stepped forward.

Stephanie had never realize the true animal magnetism that her daughter could turn on and off like a light switch. She had never viewed her daughter as a sexual creature, but the flash of sensuality that she had emblazoned towards the three troopers would probably have made a fleet of sailor’s toes curl. All eyes were suddenly

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

on Samantha as she stepped to within just a few feet of the three google-eyed troopers. Stephanie suddenly felt something round and cold against her finger tips. She wrapped her hands around it and waited.

Samantha turned just before she reached the center trooper, who seemed to be in charge. Her mind raced through the numerous katas that she had spent endless hours mastering to test for her black belt. She had no idea where she was going to go with this but her mother and sister were in trouble and she was not about to allow anything to happen to them. An image flashed through her mind, and a microsecond later her first kick snapped through the air and caught the doe eyed trooper on the left square of his Adam's apple, crushing the cartilage and permanently sealing his wind pipe. Her right leg whipped back and, adding the momentum of her upper body to the motion, brought the heel of her foot squarely through the once solid knee of the mouthy sergeant. Bone and ligaments shattered and snapped as she mule kicked through the joint. The lightening bolt of pain blasted across his synaptic highways and overloaded his primate brain. Nothing came out of his gaping mouth as he vainly tried to gasp for air. Samantha coiled her upper body and looking over her left shoulder released a spinning back kick that slammed her left heel into the side of the now broken kneed sergeant's head. Her aim was a little off and instead of nailing him square on the temple her blow shattered his zygomatic arch and blew out the orbit of his left eye. His brain rebounded first off the skull nearest the impact of Samantha's heel and then off the opposite side of his brain housing as he lapsed into unconsciousness.

The images of the sudden carnage unleashed by their intended sex toy caught the third trooper by surprise. In the few seconds that it took for him to realize that it was they that were in fact under attack, his two partners were dropping to the floor. He blinked and then started to act by bringing his AR up to blast the bitch that had just stomped his two partners in as many seconds, when suddenly he was paralyzed with a piercing pain in the small of his back. A small but strong hand gripped his windpipe and was pulling him backwards to the aisle floor. Stephanie had a death grip on the aluminum knitting needle as she plunged it into the soldier's right kidney and pulled him down. Adding her weight to his she rolled at the last second throwing her hip into him and slamming his head into the hardwood floor with a resounding deep, hollow crack. He gripped the trigger of his rifle as his head impacted with the floor but nothing happened. He had failed in the time allotted to take it off safe.

Samantha picked up the first trooper's AR and flipped the safety off. Amanda helped her mother out from underneath the last trooper and for the first time in her life had absolutely nothing to say. Sam calmly walked over to each soldier in turn and placed a round squarely into their brain housing group. As Sam finished the last trooper off the doorway suddenly burst open. She spun around to face her father and brother as they stood a few feet into the store eyeballing the scene before them.

"It's Ok Pop . . . we're safe!"

Desert Doc

Pax Americana Chapter 42 - War Drums

Hit the other fellow, as quick as you can, and as hard as you can, where it hurts him most, when he ain't lookin'. - **Unrecorded British Sergeant Major** (On the definition of strategy)

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The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

A military operation involves deception. Even though you are competent, appear to be incompetent. Though effective, appear to be ineffective. - Sun-tzu, The Art of War. Strategic Assessments

The only easy day was yesterday. - US Navy SEALs

The battle was on, and Damian could just make out from the staccato of panicked overlapping radio reports that there were at least three other breaches of the perimeter walls. The fourth, Damian had just sealed with help from his fire team and they were now advancing at breakneck speed to the nearest breach in their outer defense. The emergency flashing red battle lights provided a slow strobe effect and made the scene they raced through all the more eerie and surrealistic. The klaxon continued to blare in their ears as they raced through the narrow corridors. Suddenly two groups moving at high speed in opposite directions slammed into each other in the narrow confines of a connecting landing.

Damian, running at full tilt with his BM-59 at high port arms, had less than a microsecond to recognize the threat that suddenly flashed in front of him. His first reaction was to high-stick the onrushing intruder, slamming the forward stock of his rifle between his left hand and the magazine solidly into the face of the invading street soldier. It was a move that would have made any National Hockey League fan proud! The thug looked like he had hit a solid clothesline and his feet suddenly flipped up into the air as he back spun into the ground. Damian side stepped the next gutter rat and solidly drove the heavy walnut butt of his rifle into the chest of the following intruder crushing bone and tissue in a gasping precordial thump that stopped the invaders heart instantly. He barely blocked the muzzle of the rifle that was jabbed at his face and went off just inches from his head. He slashed the fore end of his own rifle down it into the shooters head ripping open the side of his face and destroying his right eye in the process. Damian's right foot flashed out and caught the intruder solidly in the family jewels and he finished off the bent over vermin with a solid bone shattering butt stroke to the back of his head.

As quickly as it had started, it was over. One of his own was down, but they had cleared the corridor of five invaders. Damian checked his weapon and motioned for the fire team to continue their sweep through the stronghold. Now moving cautiously and with heavy malice, they cleared each section and then moved to the next. Coordinating by radio each team supported the next as they methodically cleared the buildings from the top down through each level of the Castle. Midway through the battle Damian had his troops fix bayonets and advance with cold steel in the lead. The vermin they faced had no stomach for this form of vicious close assault that the well-trained castle defenders presented. Nor could they hide for very long with thirty caliber rounds blasting through any walls they attempted to hide behind. Each team of defenders worked as a well oiled and well-rehearsed team, their movements choreographed through relentless hours of practice under the discerning eye of Old Man Jacobson. Damian realized now why the old man had insisted on such continuous and rigorous training. His respect for the old warrior had just moved up a couple of dozen notches.

The battle teams pressed on relentlessly forcing the invading vermin back out of each section until the situation became obvious even to the most glue huffing, brain fried member of the invading cockroaches what the final outcome would be. Losing their nerve and stomach for the fight, they finally broke and ran, streaming out of the lower levels through the break in the protecting wall of the gardens, destroying much of the gardens in their mad dash to survive.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Damian leaned against the outer wall of the gardens, totally exhausted, and slowly slid down the rough brick and concrete rubble wall to sit there in the soft dirt where he finally allowed himself a brief moment of rest. The sun was breaking over the once proud city and filling the concrete canyons and roof tops with the new days light. They had survived the first major assault against their new home. It could take weeks, perhaps even months, before all the damage that had occurred this night could be repaired. He looked up to the rooftop of the buildings that made up their stronghold and spotted one of their snipers combing the surrounding buildings for any evidence of the scum that had carried out the raid. Every few minutes a shot would ring out and find its mark.

They had tried to live at peace with the other survivors of the decaying city by consciously avoided confrontation at every corner. They were all trapped in the same situation, locked into a constant battle to survive. Yet the fact that somehow he and his group had managed to restore some dignity to their lives should not be the reason that they would find themselves at war with the other citizens of this once proud city. There had to be a way out of this dilemma, because if they couldn't find one, Damian knew that now they would have to take the fight to the enemy if they expected to survive, and that would mean taking on anyone and everyone outside the walls of their compound. There had to be another way. There just had to be. His mind drifted as the first rays of morning warmed his exhausted body. There had to be a way . . .

Kevin and Buck just stared dumbfounded at the three dead troopers, their eyes blinking in amazement. Then Kevin locked eyes with his wife and he was there by her side in two or three large steps. He pulled her close to him and reached out to his girls.

"Are you three alright?" He asked in a hushed panic.

Stephanie wrapped her arms around her bear of a husband and buried her face into his chest.

"I don't think we'll ever be alright again." She said as her eyes filled with tears.

Samantha and Amanda joined their mother in a group hug of their father and the four just stood there for several seconds. Buck was the first to realize that the old lady that ran the store was still standing behind the sales counter in mild shock, her mouth hanging open and eyes staring straight ahead. He quickly walked around the counter and, putting his right arm around her, led her by the hand, carefully walked her over to sit down in one of the well-padded chairs by the dressing rooms. He then returned to the scene of the carnage and proceeded to strip the three dead soldiers of anything of value that they had on them.

Kevin looked down to see his son pulling off the gear and rifling through the dead soldiers pockets. "BUCK! Just what in the hell are you doing?" he started to roar.

Buck paused and looked up at his father. "I'm getting anything that could be important for us to survive." He said matter-of-factly.

"Those bastards deserved to die."

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

All heads turned towards the voice that had just spoken. It was the little old lady, the store clerk that Buck had helped find a seat.

“They’ve been part of the bunch that has been killin’ and terrorizing this town for months!” She said with venom in her voice. She slowly rose out of her chair and walked over to the phone and picked it up and quickly dialed a familiar number.

“Dillon, this is Maggie. Got me a mess in the store that needs cleanin’ up. Yep. Well can you drop by and give me a hand. Uh huh, yes, uh huh. Oh about ten maybe fifteen minutes I expect. No, not for I’d say another hour or two. Ok, see ya when you get here.” She hung up the phone. “That was my son. He’ll be here in just a few minutes to help me clean up this.” She motioned to the three dead soldiers bleeding out on her floor. “You folks had better make yourself mighty scarce if you know what’s good for you.”

“What are you going to do?” Stephanie asked between sobs.

“Oh don’t you worry about me none little missy. Ol’ Maggie is mountain born and breed and this ain’t the first time I’ve seen men die.” She scratched her head and looked at Samantha. “I just had never seen a young lady like yours pull any of that Kung Fu . . .”

“Shotokan Karate.” corrected Amanda. “My sister is a brown belt in Shotokan Karate.”

“Well what ever you call it, I ain’t never seen anyone drop three gorillas like that in less than the blink of an eye. Though it couldn’t have happened to any more deserving punks than those three.”

“Well, Mrs . . .” Kevin began.

“You call me Maggie young man. I’ve buried two husbands and my days of being a Mrs. Anybody are long over. Maggie will be fine.”

She reached below the counter and came up with several large trash bags. “Now, if you wouldn’t mind bagging those boys so they don’t bleed all over my fine hardwood floor after you’ve stripped them, I’d appreciate it.”

Less than a hour later, with the gear from the soldiers loaded up under the wood in the trailer and the three bodies headed off in Dillon’s truck, the Jorgenson’s pulled up in front of the Richardson’s place. Maggie had led the way in her old beaten up Chevy truck, taking back streets and alleys (gravel and dirt roads in the mountains) in an effort to keep them off the main avenues routinely patrolled by the security troopers. Mrs. Richardson met them at the door and ushered them quickly inside as she kept a wary eye.

The group followed Maggie into the cozy living room and introductions were passed around. Mrs. Richardson recalled Kevin and Buck from the store and was happy to finally met Kevin’s wife and daughters.

“I’m sorry Frank can’t come down, but he’s not doing so good since they burned down the store around him.”

Maggie leaned forward. “Betty, maybe you ought to have Stephanie here take a look at Frank. She’s a nurse.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Betty's eyes lit up. "Oh, that would be too much for me to intrude upon you, we just having met and all."

"No, not all. Buck, would you mind running out to the Jeep and grabbing my medical kit?" Stephanie turned to Betty. "Point the way, Mrs. Richardson."

"Please, Betty."

"Then Betty it is. Let's go check on your husband." And the pair disappeared up the stairs.

In the mean time Maggie filled Kevin, Buck and the girls in on the down turn of events since the last time they had been to town three months ago. It seemed that a group of thugs had cruised into town shortly after the Jorgenson's last visit. They ran roughshod over the town's people and were finally driven out by the Homeland Security Forces that answered their call for help. But soon it became apparent that they had traded one brand of tyranny for that of an even worse sort. The town's folk hailed the arrival of the Security Forces as saviors of the community. They were welcomed with open arms and at first things seemed to be headed back to normal. Then the main body pulled out to put out other fires across the region and left a rear guard to ensure that no more goons would attempt to move in after the majority of the Guardsmen had departed. It was this rear guard that then began to take advantage of their position in a wicked way and soon the town's folks found themselves under their yoke with no way out. Those three that had gone on to meet their makers were not the worst of the bunch, Maggie assured them. There were several others whose special brand of cruelty was several grades above the trio they had put down this morning.

Stephanie came down the stairs alone and motioned for her husband to follow her out to the porch. The air was warming up and it was going to be a fine day outside. That was until Steph told her husband the news.

"He's been burned badly and wounded as well, but the worst of it is that it looks like he's got a massive infection brewing."

"Gangrene?" Kevin asked.

"Not yet, as far as I can tell. But there are forms of it that don't give off that characteristic odor." She shook her head. "But I don't know hon."

"Is there anything you can do to pull him through?"

Maggie shook her head. "If I had the right equipment and antibiotics, I might be able to do something, but even then I don't know that I could pull him through. It would take some pretty heroic measures to even give him a fighting chance."

"Well, you tell me what you need, and we'll figure out the rest. We've got to do something, Steph. If it wasn't for his kindness and charity when we first came here we might not have survived the winter."

She closed her eyes and stood there silently. A sign he knew was her way of organizing her thoughts, putting everything in order and focusing her energy before she began a project. She shook her head, opened her eyes and was out the gate . . . the race was on. The pair went back in and Stephanie laid out the plan of attack. Soon

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Maggie and Stephanie [Samantha?] were pulling out of the driveway followed by Kevin in the Richardson's pickup. Buck was to stay behind and provide security while Amanda assisted her mother and Betty as they made preparations for the battle to save Betty's husband.

Malcolm assumed the air of the defeated and shuffled along with the other prisoners as they made their way across the hard packed exercise yard to the chow hall. Yet his mind was far from defeated. His senses were fully alert and active. He had memorized every movement of every guard that came within his sight. He was soon able to recognize each one at distance by their particular walk or the manner in which they carried themselves. Somewhere there was a chink in the wall and he would find it.

After the first several weeks he had gave up conversing with the rest of the prisoners in his barracks and refused to become involved with their evening academic discussions. They were a bunch of old dusty blowhards more willing to engage in intellectual conversation than real action. He soon realized that they had no stomach for the kind of resistance he was planning, as they were perfectly satisfied with discussing or reading about history, rather than becoming a part of it. His physical exercises conducted in the late evening and early morning hours became more rigorous and demanding as he felt his body becoming harder with each passing day. He could now do over three hundred pushups and a like number of sit-ups without stopping. Not bad for someone over fifty years old. He practiced yoga and Tai Chi to improve his flexibility, strength and balance. The years of sedentary life were finally slowly flaking away . . . soon he would be ready.

Malcolm knew that it would only be a matter of time before his keepers would become complacent in their watch over the domesticated subjects that surrounded him. There had been no real escape attempts that he had heard of. Oh, sure, a few idiots that had tried to climb over the chain link and barbed wire fence, but they only provided mild sport for the guards before they became bored with the game and finished them off. No, for the most part the inmates in this prison were nothing more than the sheep their masters had created. Attuned to believing that they were free, when in fact they had been dancing to the tunes played by the real rulers of this country for their entire lives. It was these shadow like overseers that never truly set foot amid the muck and mire of the masses of civilization on this world that were pulling the strings. They were the Stratosdwellers, literally a separate race of the ruling class that remained above the din of humanity. It was these bastards that Malcolm planned to make war upon. But first he had to get free.

A little less than an hour later, the two pickups raced up the gravel driveway and began unloading the supplies Steph had requested. By dinnertime Mr. Richardson's bedroom had been cleared of all furniture except his bed and was beginning to resemble a hospital wardroom. Stephanie had her husband line the walls and ceiling with painters plastic drop cloths using double-sided carpet tape to hold them to the walls and good ol' duct tape to seal the seams. Next, he created an inner room that reminded him of a big tent. His wife had him seal every seam with duct tape. He even sealed the tent across the bed and Frank's chest. She wanted an airtight bubble around the damaged areas on his lower body into which she had Kevin direct a tube from the oxygen tank he had snatched from the welding shop in town.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Maggie had managed to get into the small clinic in town with the janitors key she borrowed, and with Samantha's help they quickly acquired the needed medical supplies and drugs her mother had requested. When Sam asked why they just didn't take Frank to the clinic in the first place, Maggie informed her that the idiot Guardsmen had killed the only physician in town shortly after the main body departed because he refused to provide them the drugs that they demanded. They had torn up the clinic trying to find the controlled medicines that had never been there in the first place. Then, they moved on to the pharmacy in town where they had better luck after seriously wounding one of the pharmacy assistants. For the last month, that was the way things had been going. Some of town's folk had managed to slip out past the road blocks and made their escape but many had no where else to go and so they simply kept a low profile locked into their homes hoping that invaders would soon get bored and drift away.

Stephanie had Kevin construct the oxygen tent around her patient in order to create an oxygen-enriched atmosphere that would be inhospitable to the particular organisms that she was now fighting. She carefully allowed the tank to slowly feed the confined space a tiny trickle of O₂ to reduce any chance of fire and O₂ poisoning of her patient. That was the reason his upper body was secured outside the O₂ enclosure. She meticulously debrided the three gunshot wounds and the necrotic tissue on the burns. By applying wet to dry dressings across the large leg burns Stephanie hoped to peel away the rotting tissue and finally get down to the healthy tissue underneath. She was pumping a powerful combination of intravenous antibiotics around the clock in to every living cell of Frank Richardson's body and still she wasn't sure that going to be enough, or if she had enough to continue this treatment for very long. But it was all she had.

By the second day of their stay at the Richardson's, Stephanie was feeling as if she was going to be forced to perform an amputation to save the old mans life. The infection had permeated deeper into the tissue layers of the left lower leg than she had originally thought and could very soon be advancing along the capsular spaces in a condition know as compartment syndrome. If that were to happen she would be extremely hard pressed to save his leg and keep him alive. There was already a serious risk of the infection going systemic and knocking him right out of the game. The hours ticked by slowly.

Besides the bedside vigil that Stephanie and the girls kept, Kevin and Buck focused their attention on protecting the ongoing efforts inside by becoming intimately familiar with the Richardson's property. The house sat in the middle of twenty semi-wooded acres up a gravel road several miles outside of the town. Kevin pulled up every bit of his past Ranger and 10th Mountain training that he could remember and with his son they began to devise a contingency plan should events prove it necessary.

The little word that Maggie managed to get back to them was that the local garrison was going door-to-door looking for their errant troopers. For now they were concentrating in the immediate vicinity of the village itself, probably figuring the trio had gone off and gotten drunk and were sleeping it off in one of the abandoned homes or had possibly taken up with one of the local ladies that was providing entertainment for the three. This was not the first time troopers had taken off for short periods of time or altogether, and Kevin hoped that they would soon lose interest and abandon the search. At the same time he was not going to trust to fate that they would quit before they reached the Richardson's place. Faced with this threat, his first choice would be to abandon their current position and retreat back into the mountains. However, that was not possible due to Frank's fragile condition. So the next effort would be to make it as difficult as possible to reach the property and, if it finally came down to a fight, to take out as many of the troopers that remained before they reached the house.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Kevin had originally thought that he only had the two .30-30's and a couple of boxes of shells that he and Buck had brought with them into town along with the three M-4's and the six or seven thirty-round magazines that each dead troopers had carried. As he laid the equipment out on the kitchen table and inventoried the war material that they had to work with, he was lamenting to his son how limited a defense they would be able to put up with just what they had at hand. Betty was doing the dishes in the sink and turned around to watch the pair as they inspected and laid out the weapons.

"Well if it's more gear like that that you need, I guess it would be alright to take you down to the bunker."

The pair at the table suddenly looked up at their host. "The bunker?" they said in unison.

Betty laid down the plate she was drying and motioned for them to follow. The trio descended into basement and walked to the back corner where she kept her canned goods. She motioned for Kevin to grab the center rack of shelves and Betty reached in and tripped the hidden lock.

"Now be careful you don't pull too hard." Betty said.

The huge cabinet pulled out to reveal a large concrete door hidden behind it. Again Betty tripped another hidden lock and the concrete door pushed in. It was so well balanced that Kevin couldn't believe the ease with which it swung back.

"Took my Frank a little bit to get the balance just right." she told them and then beckoned them to follow her into the short tunnel. Twenty or so feet later they came to another blast door, though this one actually looked like a door. Kevin followed her directions and turned the large wheeled handle and pushed in the steel reinforced door.

"Frank built this place for us right after the Cuban Missile Crisis. Things were pretty scary back then, I can tell you." She went on to explain all the features that Frank had added over the years.

The first room was a narrow corridor with shower heads on both sides of the wall. This was the decontamination room. Lockers were on both sides of the wall, the first few and last few feet for the stowage of gear and clothing. A small drying room lay just beyond. Through a lighter weight blast door lay a small anteroom that looked to have mix of different types of radio equipment and a small computer crammed into a built in office center.

"That's the communication desk there. Frank used to do a lot of HAM radio back in the day. There's some more modern equipment there also, but most of it is old Heath Kit stuff that he built himself. He was pretty good with the solder gun in his day." she added proudly.

The communication room opened into the living room and though it was cramped by modern standards it would more than accommodate a families needs should the time arrive. Betty pointed out the restroom facilities, kitchen, food storage rooms and then the sleeping accommodations. Again, cramped, but more than adequate. After completing that portion of the tour the small group arrived back at the communication desk. Betty pulled out a couple books and then tripped another of Frank's hidden latches and the bookshelf popped away from the wall.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“I think this will be of more interest for you boys.” She grinned and led the pair into another series of rooms.

As soon as Kevin stepped inside he recognized the all too familiar odor of machine and gun oil. This was testosterone paradise. The first room was full of tools, all neatly arranged and ready to put to work. There appeared to be a combination of wood and metal working machines laid out in an extremely efficient manner, not an inch was wasted. Frank had stuffed an array of tabletop machines: a drill press, a 10-inch table saw, planer, jointer, and wood lathe along one wall. Against another wall a nice little combination mill/lathe, another drill press, and a couple of machines that he didn't recognize but knew that they somehow dealt with metalworking. There were welders both arc and gas under one of the workbenches. The upper walls were filled with swing out cabinets that just screamed tools. The third wall was filled with bins and storage shelves full of bolts, screws and all sorts of fasteners. A virtual hardware store crammed into one wall. That last wall was divided by a bookshelf. The benches on either side seemed to be devoted to electrical and electronic building and repair. Betty led them through the door hidden behind the bookshelf into the next adjoining room. How many more such hidden rooms Frank had, Kevin could only begin to guess. This was the gunroom, totally dedicated to the maintenance, building and repairing of weapons. Kevin was instantly drawn to the weapons crates that filled one whole wall. Reading the stencils on the old military crates nearly made his heart skip a beat. If the labels were accurate then here were at least two crates each of M1 Garands, M1 Carbines, G-1's (FN FAL), WWII era Mausers and Enfields, Swedish Mausers, SKS and AK's and more. There appeared to be an assortment crates containing demilled weapons as well. Some he had never even heard of. He wondered what the initials STEN stood for? Oh well, if he could get even half of these weapons working they could arm a small army. Kevin felt like a kid at Christmas. Then Betty showed them the walk in gun safe and the reloading room.

“Betty, your Frank was one hell of a survivalist!” Kevin exclaimed as he looked over a collection of arms that would make anyone swoon.

“I always figured he'd grow out of it after things began to cool down, especially after the wall collapsed back in '90 or was it '91, but he insisted that it was better to keep this going and never need it than to need it and not have it.”

Kevin just nodded in agreement.

“I just let him have his hobby. It kept him home and busy.”

“I'll say!” Buck commented. “This must have taken all his spare time!”

“Well, at first it did, but over the years he would putter around down here just a couple of times a month. He called it his blood pressure medicine.” She paused and looked around. “Who would have ever thought that we'd really be needing all of this stuff someday”? She shook her head slowly. “It certainly has become a crazy world out there.”

“That it has Betty, that it has.” Kevin said as he looked around the room. Now he had the tools he needed to wage war.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

The possibility of having to remove Frank's leg weighed heavily on her thoughts as Stephanie preformed the last dressing change of the day. She carefully removed the wet to dry dressings she was using as a form of wound debridement. Soaked in a special sterile solution, they were put on the wound wet where they would dry and adhere to the necrotic or dead tissue. When stripped away during a dressing change, they peeled off taking the dead tissue with the dressing. This is not a pleasant procedure for the patient, to be sure. But one that was vital in the battle against a spreading infection. His temperature had remained relatively high but steady, hovering between 102 and 103 degrees. Stephanie pulled off the last layer of gauze dressing and for the first time was greeted by healthy tissue underneath the gray necrotic waste that came away with the gauze. The bullet wounds were also showing the first signs of beginning to granulate in healthy tissue finally and their drainage was also becoming clear for the first time.

Franks temperature finally broke early the next morning and by daybreak he had come back to the world of the living. He was not out of danger to be sure. It would take many weeks for the slow process of healing to complete its task, but for now he had cleared the first hurdle. He kissed his wife softly from what had almost been his dead bed and kissed the hand of his nurse and physician.

Damian walked through the aftermath of the night's carnage. The cost was heavy on the small community that made up the Fourteenth Street Retreat, the name that they called themselves. Ten of their number had perished and three times that had been seriously injured or wounded. Hardly anyone walked away from that night unscarred. Momma Chin had fallen in the battle, taking on a squad of gangsters that attempted to invade her families flat. Blocking the doorway with her stout rotund form she wielded her large Chinese cleaver with deadly accuracy and hacked down the first three thugs that broke through the door. Even after she had been wounded several times she stood her ground with the tenacity of a mother Grizzly protecting her young and with her dying breath carved huge gashes in her attackers flesh. The testimony to the ferocity of her final stand was the pile of stone cold street vermin stopped dead just inside the doorway. Her vicious last stand afforded her husband the crucial seconds necessary to retrieve the family's shotgun and clear the remaining rabble from the doorway and the connecting passageway as well with a steady stream of double ought buckshot. But for all his effort he had arrived too late to save his wife. He now sat next to her shrouded form in the courtyard sobbing relentlessly. Damian paused and placed his hand on the old man's shoulder. The old Chinaman looked up and, with his bloodshot eyes, silently thanked the young warlord and then returned to his grieving.

Damian continued his survey of the damage and vowed that he would make the stronghold impregnable if he had to lay every stone himself. Plans and ideas started to spin through his weary brain and he moved with a renewed strength and purpose. If it was war they wanted then he would give them war!

Pax Americana Chapter 43 - The Intolerable Acts

When all government . . . in little as in great things . . . shall be drawn to Washington as the center of all power; it will render powerless the checks provided of one government on another; and will become as venal and oppressive as the government from which we separated. - **Thomas Jefferson**, 1821

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The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Today, we need a nation of Minutemen, citizens who are not only prepared to take arms, but citizens who regard the preservation of freedom as the basic purpose of their daily life and who are willing to consciously work and sacrifice for that freedom. - John F. Kennedy

Janice, the secretary for the Director of Homeland Security, glanced up at the young, rail thin, bespeckled civil servant standing quietly waiting his turn in the Directors office. The Director had been in a seriously foul mood all morning and everyone summoned before him today was receiving their fair share of the meat grinder treatment. She thought that the poor guy in front of her didn't have much of an ass to chew on and he already looked like he had been through the grinder at least once this morning. Simpson stood quietly, his knees shaking slightly as he waited outside the Director door. He did not wish to be the deliverer of bad tidings and he knew this information was not going to be well received. Twenty minutes later the Director looked up from the portfolio Simpson had just delivered to him. The look on his face was not good.

"WHAT IN THE SAM HELL ARE YOU TELLING ME, SIMPSON!" The Director bellowed. "How in the FUCK did you lose my Secretary of Transportation. Would you like to tell me that?"

He threw the papers and photographs across his desk hitting Simpson in the chest and sending them flying all around him.

"How in the HELL did you manage to let him out of your sight WITHOUT AN ARMED ESCORT!"

"Sir . . . Sir, I didn't, ah, he ah, he ah . . . just took off without . . . ah . . . really telling any one where he was going."

"HE DIDN'T SAY ANYTHING?"

"Well ah, Sir, just - ah, just that he, ah, was, ah going to do some inspections, ah Sir. That's all." Simpson backed away from the Directors desk as he bent to pick up the scattered papers.

"So your boss goes off . . . BY - HIM - SELF . . . AND YOU JUST LET HIM!"

"Well, ah ah Sir , ah Mister Director, we had, ah um no idea that he was headed up to Pennsylvania . . . Sir?"

"So where is my Secretary of Transportation, Stempson?"

"Ah that's Simpson, Sir--"

"YOUR NAME WILL BE SHITHEAD IF YOU DON'T GIVE ME A STRAIGHT ANSWER!"

"We're not sure, well we think, but um ah um their trying to test, but we don't know yet."

"Don't know what yet . . . SHITHEAD."

"Ah Sir, well the body was pretty badly damaged in the fire. Er, ah, we may not be able to confirm a DNA . . ."

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *A GrayMan*

“Was that his vehicle that you found or not?!”

Simpson stood up with an arm full of papers and hung his head as he did so. “It was Secretary Davis’ vehicle and,” he paused. “We believe the remains found at the scene were those of Mr. Davis . . . But ah er um after all his SUV was hit with an anti-tank rocket and . . .”

The Director slammed his fist down onto his desktop.

“There will be hell to pay for this . . . hell to pay - do you hear me? If you and all those pencil necked geeks around here were just half the man that Brentwood Davis was, then I’ve have something to work with. Instead you BASTARDS just hide behind your desks while YOUR BOSS is out in the field making sure the job gets done right!”

The Director kicked back his chair and started to pace in front of his window. Simpson just stood there numb. He had liked Brentwood, his boss had been a professional and friendly man to work for, very efficient and exacting but fair. Though since he had survived that ambush a few months back he had begun to act a little strange. Nothing too unusual for the normal run of the mill people that worked inside the beltway, but strange none the less. But now there wasn’t even enough of his charred remains to put in a box to send home.

The Director turned and starred at Simpson.

“Are you still fucking here?”

Simpson backed quickly towards the door, fumbled with the handle and nearly fell backwards out into the outer office. He turned and dropped the entire pile of papers and photographs on the secretary’s desk. Janice looked up quite provoked.

“He’ll probably want to look as these later.” He said to her as he back peddled through the outer door into the passageway and away from this office.

The truck bounced through some more heavy ruts and Brentwood banged his head into the solid metal bed of the truck again. He was nearly frozen despite the cold weather gear and the sleeping bag that he was stuffed into. It seemed like days had passed that since he began his trip to freedom hidden in the secret compartment built into the big trucks bed. He watched the blacktop spin past the tiny peep hole that also provided his only access to fresh air and his only relief should that become necessary. Beyond that he was merely cargo being smuggled north.

The truck had changed drivers several times. Passed through too many checkpoints to count and even changed loads twice. But it never wavered in the general direction it was traveling. The last several hours had been rather brutal as the truck was now clearly out in the country and crossing over rougher and rougher roads. Despite the jostling Davis drifted off to sleep again.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

When he awoke the truck was stopped. He quietly pulled forward and looked out the peephole and could see dirt and gravel beneath the truck. They were stopped, for how long he didn't know. His heart started to pound as he heard voices approaching. Suddenly there was someone beneath the truck working the hidden latch mechanism. Brentwood pulled his gear in front of his face in the narrow rectangular box and tried to look like stowed gear. The trapdoor hatch dropped open in front of him and a head poked up through the opening.

"Mr. Davis . . . Mr. Davis, would you like to join us out here or are you planning on staying aboard for the return trip south?"

Davis peeked over the duffle bag. He had no desire to return south. Colonel Melton had insisted that he take this journey to "safety", though Davis wasn't sure if it was for his benefit or that of the Colonel's. Melton had all the information that he could have asked for in his campaign against the oppressive government that now sat in Washington. Whether the Colonel fully trusted that information and the provider was another thing. Either way, Davis thought, he was out of it now.

He crawled out of the sleeping bag and over the rest of his gear. He dropped head first onto the gravel road beneath the truck and crawled over to the side where he attempted to stand up for the first time in several days. His knees were a bit shaky and he pulled himself up against the side of the truck.

He was somewhere out in the sticks to be sure. The air was clean and crisp with the smell of water nearby. But just where he was he had no clue. A motley group of what appeared to be Patriot soldiers, woodsmen, and hunters were earnestly engaged with unloading the crates off the back of the truck. He recognized the face that had just invited him out of the metal box that he had laid in these past several days. He tried to make out the features of the people around him but the bright light after so many days in the semi-dark box caused him to squint and shut his eyes against the glare.

Mickey Davis was the first to step up to Brentwood and offer him his hand.

"Welcome aboard Mr. Davis. I understand you come highly recommended from our patriot brethren down in the Keystone State."

Davis looked around once more as he shook hands.

"Just where am I?" he asked.

"Just our little piece of heaven, Mr. Davis, here in the Upper Peninsula."

"Michigan?"

"Welcome to the Spartan Militia, Mr. Davis."

As each day passed, Frank Richardson's condition slowly improved. The vast dosage of IV antibiotics that Stephanie had pumped through his system around the clock had done their job and allowed his own immune

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

system to slowly but surely begin to fulfill its role as primary role as protector of the body. But he was still a long way from full recovery. Stephanie was very worried about the residual scarring that would be left by the widespread burns to his legs and lower back. Her patient needed extensive skin grafting that simply was not available under the current situation. She poured through the pile of books that Betty had 'borrowed' from the medical clinic and the small village library. As a senior member of the 'Friends of the Community Library' she used her access to the now closed public building and, with the help of the boys (Kevin and Buck), gathered up every medical and alternative healing book she could find. Applying every ounce of nursing experience and her vast array of alternative healing knowledge, Stephanie concocted salves and creams she could apply to the tortured skin as it slowly regenerated. She was trying to keep that scared tissue as elastic and supple as possible. It would be a very long road to recovery, but Mr. Richardson would eventually recover, and she was putting every ounce of her skill and knowledge to work to achieving that goal.

Kevin, Buck and the girls were hard at work down in the bunker. The local Homeland Security Forces had not ventured out beyond the immediate limits of the village in their search for the tardy troopers, but Kevin felt that it would only be a matter of time. While he would much rather be back out on the homestead where he had time and distance separating them from the vultures here in town, until Mr. Richardson could safely make the journey, they would be forced to hole up here on his property.

Kevin was extremely impressed with the underground bunker that Frank had constructed over the years. There were enough commodities for their entire little band to remain secluded from the topside world for several months easily. To that end, he and the kids began to give the hide away a thorough cleansing from top to bottom, inventorying all the stored expendables and making ready the complex for occupation. There was an itch in the back of Kevin's mind that really bothered him and he wanted to insure that they would be ready at the drop of a hat to occupy the hidden living quarters.

In addition to the hospitality preparations that were primarily being carried out by his daughters in the bunker, much to their teenage whining and complaining, he and Buck spent the majority of the daylight hours preparing the Richardson's twenty acres to be as inhospitable as possible to outside aggression.

While the fire had heavily damaged the Richardson's outdoor store, between the basement storeroom that Frank had hidden out in and the storage sheds on the property itself the pair gathered up every trap, snare and tripwire they could find and set about building a rather nasty barrier around the property. They moved their vehicles up to the back corner of the property and heavily camouflaged them there. There was an old goat trail that snaked around back along the ridge and offered a tight but passable escape route should that prove necessary. He was sure that he could get the CJ through the course, but Betty and Franks' pickup would be a tight squeeze. Still, it was better than advancing through hostile territory controlled by overwhelming numbers. He made preparations for that eventuality as well.

"Mr. President," The Director for Homeland Security began. "The current situation has escalated beyond that of the immediate emergency. You must take action now, Sir, to ensure the very survival of this nation."

The heads around the table bobbed up and down in agreement.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“You’ve all read the reports. Between the millions of our citizens that have died as a direct result of the plague, we are now completely certain that we have been directly attacked with a plant virus as well. From our best estimates we have lost at least eighty percent of our farm production capabilities in the grain belt. Some of the far western states seem to have been spared from this plant attack, but they cannot sustain the remaining population’s food needs, Sir.”

“What do you propose, Mr. Director?”

“Well, Sir, this is the time for firm action if we are to save our great nation.” The Homeland Security Director paused and looked about the table. The next few seconds, he felt, would determine if his country would survive this onslaught.

“Drastic times call for drastic actions, Sir.”

“Yes?”

“I and . . .” he looked again at the assembled leaders of the Presidential Cabinet. “the majority of the Cabinet feel it is time to evoke the full power of the PATRIOT Act and all of the Presidential Executive Orders pertaining to the current situation . . . Sir.”

The President slowly looked around the large walnut table and received nods from the vast majority of his cabinet.

“To what end are you gentlemen suggesting I extend the current powers of the Presidency?”

“Sir, to begin with . . .” The Director paused again. “In order to preserve this nation, we must immediately suspend the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.” He let that hang in the air for a moment. “Until such time that we can adequately insure the safety and well being of every citizen and regain control of the situation.”

“But we already have a state of emergency and martial law nation wide, what more do we need?” The President asked as he leaned forward.

“Sir, we must suspend the rights of the individuals to insure the survival of the state. If we don’t take immediate action in this effort we will lose this nation to disease, starvation and anarchy. You already know of the troubles we are having within the decimated cities hit hardest by the plague. Weapon confiscations have ground to a halt due to these damn civilian militias and white supremacist groups that have taken up arms against their own citizens, police and military forces. I have just lost my Secretary of Transportation to a vicious attack while he was out inspecting the emergency food transportation system and routes. Sir, we are under attack from both within and without!”

Heads bobbed up and down and the room was filled with murmurs of agreement around the table.

“I have, as of this morning, recalled all merchant ships under command of U.S. Merchant Marine Captains. All exports are temporarily on hold, especially grain and food shipments.” The President commented.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

More heads bobbed in agreement.

“That is not enough Mr. President. It is more than just recalling our merchant ships. We must mobilize the entire country towards this effort. We must put the people in the fields . . .”

“Are you talking conscription?” The President asked seriously.

“Sir, we must feed our own first! The present levels of food reserves will not last the winter and you can rest assured that we will receive no outside help from the rest of the damned world.”

The President looked down the great table to his Secretary of Agriculture.

“What happened to our grain reserves, Bob?”

“Er, ah, well Mr. President, we have sent a considerable amount to several African Nations during the last crisis there, not to mention the grain sales to China after their last disastrous flood season. And then there’s the ongoing grain exports to Russia that your predecessor established.”

“Do you mean to tell me that we’ve depleted our own reserves to the point that we can’t feed our own people?”

“Well , er, aah no Sir, we can feed our people, but you have to understand the various international agreements that we’re bound to . . .”

“FUCK THE INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENTS, BOB!” The color was rising in the Presidents face. “Can we or can we not . . . feed our own people!”

The Agriculture Secretary pulled nervously at his collar. “Well, ah Mr. President . . . with the ah . . . um current reserves on hand . . . we can um . . . ah probably feed the nation for maybe the next three to four months . . . possibly stretching it to six months if we severely restrict distribution.”

“Severely restrict the distribution . . . how so Bob?”

“Minimum survival rations . . . I ah, have the figures here Mr. President . . .” He shuffled through the stack of papers beside him.

“MINIMUM SURVIVAL RATIONS! Do you gentlemen realize what will happen if we restrict this country to minimum survival rations?”

“Sir . . . Mr. President . . .” The Homeland Security Director interrupted. “Sir, we must initiate your full Emergency Powers and the full power of the PATRIOT Act, if you even hope to maintain order and steer us through these dark times. The procedures are already established, Mr. President . . . you just need to say the word and we can begin to bring this nation out from these desperate hours.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

The president looked into the face of every cabinet member. When he was done he leaned back in his chair and rubbed his eyes. “Gentlemen, I reluctantly agree that this desperate hour calls for desperate measures. But are you certain that it has come to this?”

He slowly rose to his feet and looked once more about the room.

“Gentlemen, have the appropriate papers on my desk by tomorrow morning. General, place the military on full alert, from this moment on Posse Comitatus is fully suspended. Gentlemen I pray you are right about your assessment of our situation. IF you are correct . . . this action today will save our great nation and we shall all be heroes. IF on the other hand you are wrong . . .” He let those words float about the room for a few seconds. “Then we will face the undoing of our nation because I fear the people will not tolerate our actions.”

The room became deathly silent.

“Mr. President, when the people are hungry and starving, it will be to their government that they will turn for their salvation. They won’t be worrying about a piece of paper written over two hundred years ago, they will be demanding food and security and that we will give to them. And you, Sir, will be considered their savior, the man that brought them out of this hour of darkness.”

“I pray and hope you are right.” With that the President walked with a heavy heart from the room. “I hope you are right.” He said as he left the room.

The Director for Homeland Security turned to the General sitting beside him. “Now we can clean up this decrepit country and put things on the right track once and for all . . . don’t you think, General?”

The grizzly old war veteran turned slowly to look at the bureaucrat that sat beside him. “You better pray that your summation of the situation is correct, Mr. Director, or they’ll pin your name up there beside Benedict Arnold in the history books.”

“We’ll write the history books General, and ‘they’ will believe what we tell them to believe.” The Director answered and then rose to leave. “We’ve been tolerant for far too long with the seditious rabble that has been trying to bring down this great nation. It’s time we dealt with them once and for all.”

And with that he left the Cabinet room.

The General watched him leave and mumbled to himself. “Yeah that was tried once before by a swarthy little corporal with a funny mustache . . .” The General walked over and picked up the direct line to the Pentagon War Room.

“Hello Larry . . . get the boys together by the time I get there. The shit is about to hit the fan.”

Desert Doc

Pax Americana Chapter 44 - The Proclamation

Experience should teach us to be most on our guard to protect liberty when the government's purposes are beneficent . . . The greatest dangers to liberty lurk in insidious encroachment by men of zeal, well meaning but without understanding. - Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis

Good intentions will always be pleaded for every assumption of authority. It is hardly too strong to say that the Constitution was made to guard the people against the dangers of good intentions. There are men in all ages who mean to govern well, but they mean to govern. They promise to be good masters, but they mean to be masters. - Daniel Webster

[W]hat country can preserve its liberties, if its rulers are not warned from time to time that [the] people preserve the spirit of resistance? Let them take arms . . . The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time, with the blood of patriots and tyrants. - Thomas Jefferson, letter to Col. William S. Smith, 1787

Samantha burst into the underground workshop as Kevin and Buck were putting the finishing touches on the latest batch of rifles they had reassembled from parts.

“DAD, BUCK, you’ve got to get up stairs and hear this NOW!”

The pair looked at each other and instantly went for their battle gear and rifles.

“NO, WE’RE NOT UNDER ATTACK! IT’S THE RADIO! The President is talking on the radio and Mom sent me down here to get you ASAP!”

Buck set the gear down and made for the communications bench in the outer room.

“What station?” He asked as he flipped on the receiver and started to spin across the channels trying to locate one that was active. Suddenly a voice they all recognized came out of the speakers. The trio stepped back to listen.

“ . . . so, my fellow Americans, due to the circumstances that I have just outlined I am forced to take the following actions to preserve this great nation of ours. Rest assured that as soon as this crisis is over and we are once again safe and secure I will return the reins of representative leadership back to the Congress and the good people of this country.

So by the power vested in me and under emergency executive orders I am suspending all non-essential operations and restrictions of this government for the duration of the ongoing crisis. As such, all Congressional members are to return to their states where their leadership is needed back on the home front seeing to the immediate welfare of their constituents.”

Stephanie, Amanda, and Betty joined the three in the bunker’s radio room.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“All Police, Sheriff, Marshals, Medical, Fire, Emergency and Rescue services are now federalized and report directly to the office of the Director of Homeland Security.

All shipping, commerce, air and ground transportation assets are hereby federalized and will report directly to the Secretary of Transportation, office of Homeland Security.

Any acts of sedition against this government or any representative of this government will be treated as high crimes of treason against the state and will be dealt with sternly and swiftly by appointed regional military tribunals.

The private ownership of all firearms is now strictly forbidden. All personal weapons must be turned into local law enforcement agencies within forty-eight hours. There are no exceptions to this mandate. Possession of any firearm by private citizens after this deadline will be considered an act of treason and adjudicated according to federal laws by the appointed regional military tribunals.

The hoarding of food and all essential commodities is now strictly forbidden. No American household may have in their possession greater than one-week's supply of food and essential commodities on hand for their immediate family. All excess must be turned over to your local FEMA Redistribution Officer.

All citizens will report to your local FEMA offices for registration and work verification and/or assignments beginning in three days at eight a.m. Compliance by all U.S. citizens is mandatory.

All foreign visitors, resident aliens, and illegal aliens are to leave this country within the next forty-eight hours or face immediate imprisonment at hard labor until their expulsion from this country can be effected. There will be no waivers or visitation extensions authorized.

To this end all citizens of the United States of America must have in their possession, at all times, the National Identification Card that will begin issue within the week. Failure to provide identification to any federal employee upon demand will result in immediate imprisonment for not less than sixty days at hard labor and up to one year for the first violation.

The armed forces of the United States will now assume the full responsibility for the security of our national borders. Any attempt to violate the sanctity of our sovereign borders will be dealt with swiftly and soundly.

Homeland Security Forces will be responsible for the security of all major transportation routes within this county and will be further responsible for . . .”

Kevin flipped off the radio and looked about the room.

“What does all this mean, Pop?” Buck asked.

Kevin put his hand on his son's shoulder and let out a long breath.

“It means, son . . . that we now live in a totalitarian state.” He looked up at his daughters, his wife and their new friend. “And we are now subjects without the rule of law or our God given rights.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“But Dad, what about the Constitution . . . the Bill of Rights, what happened to all that?” Amanda asked.

“Well, if I just heard what I think I heard, everything that has been a right in this country for over two hundred years just got flushed down the toilet.”

Samantha looked unbelieving at her father. “But, but . . . but they can’t just do that! It’s against the law, it’s against the all the laws! Isn’t it?”

“Yes, dear, it is, but they’ve done anyway.” Stephanie said in disbelief.

“But, Kevin.” Betty began. “How is this possible? How can the President just do away with all our rights? How can he do that?”

Kevin shook his head slowly and leaned back against the wall.

“They’ve been doing it for a long time, bit by little bit, by little bit. We’ve been duped into believing that it was all for our own good, but this is what they’ve wanted all along. Total control. They were just waiting for something like this current situation to push the people over the edge and now they have it.”

“Come on, Kevin, I can’t believe our government has been planning for this. It’s just too incredible!” Betty exclaimed.

“Well then, Betty, you tell me how they can have National ID cards for the ENTIRE NATION ready in less than one weeks time? How can FEMA be ready in three days to register all Americans and give them their work assignments? Hell, they can’t manage to get to a natural disaster in three days time. Yet there it is! How could the President possibly have written all those executive orders and coordinated everything that is going down? No, Betty, somebody . . . they, them, whomever . . . has been planning this for a very, very long time.”

The room was deadly silent.

“I rest my case.” With that Kevin began to turn back to the work he had left in the armory.

“Now what?” Stephanie looked at her husband questioningly.

“Now we get ready for a very long and very nasty time of it.” He disappeared into the armory.

Buck joined his father and began to wipe down the battle rifle they had just completed. “How bad do you think it’s going to get, Pop?”

Kevin let out another long sigh. “That all depends on how many Americans are still patriots in their heart, Buck.”

“What will we do?”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Kevin looked up at his son and looked him squarely in the eye. He loved Buck in that special way that only a father can feel about his son. He didn't want to think about the road that lay ahead for them. He had prayed that this day would never come, but it had and now they had to deal with it."

"Son . . . we're Americans . . . and, as Americans, we have only one choice." He turned and placed both of his massive hands on the shoulders of his not so small fourteen-year-old son. Looking deep into those green eyes that he got from his mother, Kevin said the only thing that he could say. "We fight!"

Brentwood Davis sat on the examination table naked except for the traditional open backed paper-thin gown that victims of medical examinations are forced to wear. These torturous garments were probably used to keep patients from bolting out the door at the prospect of being poked and probed in very uncomfortable places. Already he felt like he had submitted nearly half his blood, urine and other . . . stuff, to the various tech's that paraded into and out of the examination room. He was becoming a little nervous over these procedures as each medical tech was fully protected by a respirator and bio-suit. He was beginning to feel very contagious.

The room he waited impatiently in was extremely stark and antiseptic. The waiting wouldn't be so bad if he could at least browse through an old issue of Modern Homemaking, National Geographic, or something, but no such distraction was available. There was a light knock on the door, and then the door opened a crack.

A voice from the other side of the door seemed to be giving orders.

"I need those results back on room two right away, room three is ready for quarantine and have security escort room seven back to the bridge after Mickey administers the medications I've prescribed."

A solid looking middle-aged man stepped into Brentwood's room.

"Hello, Mr. Davis." He offered a gloved hand. "I'm Doctor Anders and I'll be conducting your physical examination this afternoon."

"Say Doc, do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"No, go right ahead, what's on your mind, Mr. Davis?"

"Well first off, please, just call me Brentwood, or Brent would also be fine."

Doctor Anders nodded.

"Ah . . . well . . . um, what's with all the precaution. You're the first person I've seen in here that's not in a full bio-suit and even you're wearing a surgical mask?"

"Well Mr. Davis . . . ah excuse me, I mean Brent. You've hit the nail right on the head. This clinic is a screening facility and precaution is our top priority here."

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“What are you protecting the patients from?”

Dr. Anders chuckled. “It’s the other way around Brent. We’re protecting ourselves from the patients. Our job is to see to it that both those of us working here and the rest of the population out here on the peninsula are protected from anything you might be bringing in.”

“Anything I might bring in?” Brentwood felt a little offended with the doctor’s last comment.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll check out just fine, Mr. Davis . . . er . . . Brent, but we’ve stopped a lot of diseased and contaminated refugees from spreading their afflictions into our zone of control.”

“Surely not that many? Why, this isn’t some third world country where . . .”

“Oh you would be surprised, very surprised.” Dr. Anders started to set up his examination equipment and began explaining the current situation over his shoulder as he did so. “We’ve got a few minutes here before I’ve got to get on with this exam so let me explain a few things to you.”

“While it’s true that the U.S. was a leader in sanitation practices, we’ve always been just sitting on the edge of a disaster. Every time we have a major national disaster, earthquake, flood, hurricane or what ever, what is the first thing you hear about sanitation?” Anders looked at Brent.

“Boil your water?”

“Exactly, boil your water.” Anders turned around with an oto-ophthalmoscope and began the examination as he talked.

“We’ve seen amebiasis here, you know it as amoebic dysentery or just dysentery, giardia, cholera, malaria, hepatitis, typhoid fever, hemorrhagic fever, tuberculosis, typhus . . .”

“GOOD GOD, Doc, have we been attacked with all that?”

“No, no, no. That’s just the garbage that is always waiting around in the wings when the normal preventive measures break down. Like in a major disaster or, in our case, a war.”

“So all this precaution is to treat those afflicted with those diseases?”

“I wish we could treat them all.” Anders sighed. “No, Brent, this is to keep those afflicted individuals out of and away from our zone of control. It’s not an easy thing to do, but we have no other choice.”

“And if I don’t pass muster?”

“Certain individuals we make exceptions for. We’ll clean you up if it’s necessary, that is, if we need your knowledge or professional skills. The rest . . .”

“Escorted across the bridge?”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Yes. I’m afraid so.”

“And if they try to sneak back in?”

“I’m afraid the . . . ah . . . treatment for unauthorized entry is rather Draconian. We don’t have many folks attempting to reenter without permission.”

Two hours later Brentwood felt like he had been through the ringer. He’d had physical examinations before. They usually lasted no more than fifteen minutes. This physical was the most thorough he had ever experienced or heard of. He was sure that there was not a hair on this body or a millimeter of skin that had not been gone over . . . TWICE! He had been listened to, pounded on, poked, probed, stuck with needles and violated in more than a dozen ways.

“Well, Brent, I think it’s pretty safe to say that providing your labs come back OK, you’re ready for the next step.”

“And that would be? Geeze, Doc you probably know my body better than I do! You couldn’t have missed anything if I had it!”

“The next step is a two week quarantine period.”

“TWO WEEKS IN QUARANTINE?”

“Yes, two weeks strict quarantine, but believe me you’ll be busy. If you pass that you’ll be moved up to the intermediate level and finally into the general population.”

“Are all these precautions REALLY necessary Doc?”

“Brent, I was in Chicago when it got hit with the Plague. I have no desire to go through that again and neither do the rest of the folks up here. Believe me, it’s totally necessary.”

Jamal carefully peaked out between the shattered timbers to get a view of the work going on around the Castle. He had to be especially careful since the failed attempt to overrun the stone fortress three weeks ago. Now the people of the Castle hunted the scavengers that scampered across the ruins. Their zone of control seemed to be expanding daily. Deadly snipers watched from concealed perches and dropped anyone that even attempted to look in their direction. Where before the inhabitants of the Castle were happy to live and let live, they now simply killed anyone that dared to be found within rifle range.

Jamal now watched through the lens of a stargazing telescope the construction that had been taking place over the last three weeks, and it was impressive. From somewhere the Castle inhabitants seemed to come up with an endless supply of materials that was, each and every day, making it more impossible for any attacker to even reach the outside walls of the fortress. All of the windows from the first through to the fourth floors were now

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

bricked up nearly solid. Where metal shutters had been on the windows of the upper two floors there was now nothing left except a narrow vertical slit in the bricks and concrete that filled every window. The road and sidewalks in front of every building and over where they had crashed the truck through the garden wall were now implanted in large concrete teeth interlaced with strands of barbed wire and interwoven around a porcupine of embedded pipes and iron that angled out towards the attacker. They would never be able to simply ram the wall again and any attempt at a frontal assault against the defenses now in place would be sheer suicide.

Damian surveyed the finishing touches on the southern flank of the castle. Even he was impressed with the lethal maze of barbed wire and obstacles that awaited anyone attempting to force their way across the no man's land they had created. The first layer was a series of barbed wire tangle foot strung from just inches off the blacktop up to two feet above the ground. By varying the height and angle they had made it impossible to go under, through or over the wire. Concrete dragon's teeth combined with a steeply angled shallow ditch that would drop the nose of any vehicle into the solid earth would prevent a repeat of the last attack. The garden wall was reinforced, thicker and now another five feet higher. The ground before it bristled with an angry array of metal punji sticks that made it virtually impossible to walk through. As they rebuilt the wall Old Man Jacobson had Damian add a few surprises for the next attempt against their sanctuary. Some very deadly surprises to be sure.

Damian stood in the roof top garden tended by his grandfather and looked out over the once proud city as the sun was slowly fading behind the western skyline of buildings. If only there was a way for all the survivors to work together instead of constantly fighting over the few remaining scraps he thought to himself. There had to be a way.

Stephanie walked up and placed her arm around her husband as he stood on the Richardson's porch and watched the last rays of the sun descend below the horizon.

"Hon." She began. "How bad do you think it will get?"

He placed his arm around his diminutive wife and pulled her closer to him.

"I don't know dear. But I don't think it's going to be easy for a very long time."

"Do you think we'll have to fight? I mean, us and the kids, do you think that we will really have to fight?"

He didn't answer for several minutes. Taking in a deep breath, he cleared his thoughts and answered her. "I don't see how we can avoid it, Steph. This is not an issue that can be left for others to take care of. This is something that if we, each and every one of us, don't step forward now, we may never again be able to control our own lives. What the President is doing is wrong, I know that to the core of my very being."

"But the children, Kevin, we may lose the children."

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“If we don’t get involved we will lose the children and our grand children as well.” He turned to face her. “Just look at the mess this country’s gotten into over the past few months with just the Homeland Security Forces running amuck. Now imagine every single agency of our government pulling the same thing.”

“But he said that after this crisis is over, things will go back to normal.”

“That would be nice to believe, except that governments never give up *anything*, Steph, and you know that.”

“But maybe, just maybe . . .”

“There are no more maybes, hon. They’ve crossed the Rubicon and either we fight for our freedoms now, while we still can, or we surrender to servitude and slavery for a very, very long time.”

“Is there no other way out of this?”

“Not that I can see.”

They both stood there quietly watching the light fade over the ridgeline.

Stephanie looked up at her husband. “So what is our next step?”

“How soon can Mr. Richardson travel?”

“Not for a while yet. He’s still not entirely out of danger. Maybe in a couple of weeks, why?”

“Then it’s time we go underground.” He thought for a few seconds. “Hmmm, and we need to get a hold of Maggie and see just who will stand with us. Maybe, just maybe if we strike first . . .”

Scavengers crept cautiously through the ruined buildings. The small group scampered quickly across the open spaces and disappeared into the dark shadows to slowly reemerge further down the night shrouded wall. The leader froze and reached out every sense casting about for any hint of danger. The last two groups that had ventured into this section of the town had not come back. The gang was hungry, they were starving and this was the last known reservoir of food in this section of the city. Stronger rival gangs controlled the other nearby sections, but they no longer tolerated any outsiders venturing into their territory. Ever since the failed assault on the Castle life had become especially hard. Suddenly nowhere was safe, not even on home turf. Some how the Castle was striking back and it was striking back with deadly lethal accuracy.

Silent eyes watched the group advance. Slowly one by one they moved closer to the center of the kill zone. Like rats knowing that the cat is nearby they warily advanced, their hunger driving them on harder than their caution. A muffled sound broke the hush of half taken breaths when their leader and point man was suddenly jerked to the ground. His body convulsed and spasmed as his dying brain tried to comprehend the wooden shaft that had just pierced its protective shell.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

The night was suddenly filled with the sound of crashing metal ringing in from every direction. The scavengers broke in a mad panic, each fleeing to save themselves with no thought of the others with them. But they didn't get far as they slammed face first in to walls that hadn't been there a few seconds before. Openings and exits became suddenly filled with metal bars and grates. They were trapped! The alley they had been crossing through was now their prison. Hearts pounded in anticipation. They each looked for someone, something, anything to strike back at, but all that greeted them was silence.

Desert Doc

Pax Americana Chapter 45 - Against the Wall

For target shooting, that's okay. Get a license and go to the range. For defense of the home, that's why we have police departments. - James Brady

Are we at last brought to such humiliating and debasing degradation, that we cannot be trusted with arms for our defense? - Patrick Henry

The strongest reason for the people to retain the right to keep and bear arms is, as a last resort, to protect themselves against tyranny in government. -Thomas Jefferson

“Work crew going out through the wire today.”

That was the scuttlebutt that was being whispered through the barracks! The word was that prisoners were going to be assigned to a work detail that was scheduled to perform some sort of community work project for the next several days. Malcolm didn't want to get his hopes up. If, somehow, his name was on that list, it would be the first time since he had arrived at the relocation camp and been incarcerated over three months ago that he would have an opportunity to breathe free air. It would also be the first opportunity he would have to escape. Immediately following breakfast, during morning formation the selection began. Malcolm waited impatiently hoping that his name would be included on that list. The announcement proceeded slowly. He strained to hear the prison guard's voice. They were almost there.

“A. Daniels, M. Danielson, E. Davidson . . .” M. Danielson THAT WAS IT! He made the roster.

One by one the men filed slowly forward. When the list was finally complete the non-selected detainees were marched off and those whose names had been called stood patiently for the next step of the process to take place. A burly over fed sergeant and an equally indulgent corporal walked along and inspected their prospects for the day. Once the sergeant was satisfied with the individual selected the corporal tossed the “volunteer” a bright yellow jumpsuit.

“Strip and put this on!” The corporal repeated in a dull monotonic rhythm.

The baggy canvas bundle hit Malcolm in the face, but he didn't utter a single word. He just peeled off his dull orange camp coveralls and quickly pulled on the yellow jumpsuit in the chill morning air. He didn't want any-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

one to notice that where academic flab had resided when he arrived, in the short time that he had been imprisoned behind the barbed wire and electrified fencing a much harder and improved form had taken its place. It took several minutes for the selected work crew to complete the change over and then to reassume “the position”, a sloppy version of military parade rest. It was then that the officer leading this foray into the outer world dropped the bombshell.

“All right, you derelicts!” He began. “We’ve got a little community clean up for you over educated leeches to perform. But just so that you don’t get any ideas that escape is possible we’ve got a little incentive plan.”

The officer marched slowly up and down the line of prisoners eyeing each one.

“First off, we are in the middle of nowhere. Even if you should manage to escape the immediate area and avoid the guards, dogs and *everything else*,” he paused for effect, “You would die in the wilderness that surrounds you. Second, your uniforms have micro transponders sewn into them, so as you can well imagine, you can’t go anywhere that we won’t know about. And third . . . we will hang the men you leave behind. After all they are guilty of high treason because they didn’t stop you and by doing so assisted your escape. So I suggest that if you wish to survive this little outing you better make sure that you keep an eye on each other. ”

“Is there any one, ANY ONE, that does not understand what I just said?”

He looked up and down the line. “Good! Now get loaded up in those trucks, you’ve got a full days work ahead of you!”

Malcolm concentrated on taking several long slow breaths in an attempt to calm his pulse and steady his nervous energy.

Six big military trucks stood waiting for the ‘volunteers’ but Malcolm noticed that only the middle three were being loaded with prisoners. The first and last trucks had their canvas covers off and heavily armed guards were already loaded in the back following their every move with M16’s and shotguns at the ready. He noticed several kennel crates were also loaded on each truck as well. With the number of guards and dogs present Malcolm realized that any attempt to escape was going to be extremely difficult, perhaps even suicidal . . . but if he saw an opportunity, his mind was already made up. The problem was how to get away from both the guards and his fellow prisoners.

The convoy lurched forward and slowly started to roll towards the gates. Malcolm tried not to look nervous but rather attempted to assume the dull moronic lassitude of the rest of the prisoners around him, it was not an easy thing to do. He wasn’t sure who he hated worst, the men that had imprisoned him, the men that kept him a prisoner or the fellow prisoners that fully accepted their fate and by doing so complied and gave legitimacy to the current situation.

Kevin awoke at the crack of dawn as he had ever since his days of military service. That was probably why it never bothered him to be up at the crack of dawn and on the job site first thing in the morning. He started the coffee and prepared to make the morning rounds to see that everything was in order as it should be. With his

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

forty-five on his hip, the FN FAL G-1 he had taken a liking to, slung over his shoulder and a hot cup of fresh coffee in hand he casually strolled the inner perimeter of the Richardson's property. Without giving away the location of the various surprises that he and Buck had prepared, he noted the condition of the area and checked the trip wires at a distance.

Kevin always enjoyed this time of the morning, when the new day was just beginning, before the grit of the world dirtied the crispness of the fresh new born day. With that done, he returned to the house and went down into the dungeon, his term of endearment for the underground armory, to begin the work for the day. If all went well he could finish cleaning up the parts on the lathe and clean off the cut out receivers to begin assembling the STEN Submachine guns. Old Frank had picked up a couple of crates of demilitarized STEN's and enough steel tubing to turn the whole shebang into kits and pick up a real nice profit on them. But one thing lead to another and he never got around to dealing with the parts so there they sat for many years until Kevin and Buck discovered them under stacks of "Cruffler" rifles and other gun parts. Kevin decided to see if he could put together a half dozen or so after he discovered a book on the subject in Frank's extensive survival library along with the template for the receiver.

It was just after ten in the morning when Buck popped his head into the armory just as Kevin was finishing up the tack welds on the last two receivers.

"Pop, Maggie's here with some friends, Mom says you need to come on up and join the meeting."

Kevin lifted up his visor and turned off the welder. "Meeting? What meeting?"

"Didn't you ask for Maggie to round up anyone interested in standing with us?"

"Well . . . yes, but I didn't think they'd be here all that quick." Kevin laid down the welding rod and helmet and began to pull off the leather apron. "Tell Mom and Maggie I'll be right up."

The living room was packed with people as Kevin joined the group. He recognized a few faces but most of the people there were new to him. It was hard to miss Maggie in the center of things, trying to usher everyone in and organize the rabble that seemed to keep filing into the room. There was no way, Kevin thought, that they were going to get anything accomplished if they were all packed in here like sardines in a can.

Kevin stepped into the gaggle and using all of his six foot four stature and back forty voice got their attention.

"FOLKS, this room is just not big enough for all of us. If you wouldn't mind filing back out the front door we can move around to the back where we can hold this meeting and have enough air to breath at the same time."

A few chuckles were heard and slowly like the tide going out the room emptied. Kevin took the back way out of the house and grabbed his son by the arm and spoke softly into his ear.

"Buck you grab the binoculars and get up on the roof. You'll still be able to hear what's going on but I want you to keep a eye out on the area immediately around us and in the direction of town." He paused. "Just in case."

"Aww, Dad, I don't want to . . ."

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Kevin gave him THE LOOK.

“OoooKay.” Buck knew better than to whine when his father gave THE LOOK.

“Son, I’m counting on you to keep a sharp eye out for us. This is not a game! Our very lives could rest upon you. Now get up on that roof and keep a sharp watch.” He slapped his son on the backside and sent him on his way.

The crowd had moved around to the rear of the house. Maggie was playing mother hen and getting everyone situated as Kevin arrived. He counted nearly twenty-five folks and still more were just arriving as they began taking up positions around the patio, sitting on benches, hay bales and the few chairs the Richardson’s had out there.

“OK FOLKS, OK, it’s time to settle down so we can get this meeting started.” Maggie began. “Tyler, if you wouldn’t mind, we’d like to get started. Thank you.” She coughed and began. “Now I’m not much for public speaking so I’ll make this brief. You folks know my mind and you know that I don’t take to be told what to do much.”

There were chuckles around the group. They obviously knew Maggie well.

“Well . . . I heard the President’s speech last night and . . . I just couldn’t believe my ears. It’s bad enough the things we’ve had to deal with in the past few months and all. Especially with those Homeland Security bastards that have taken over our town.” She paused to let that sink in. “But we’ve got to draw the line somewhere and this is where I draw it.”

She turned and pulled Kevin into the center of the group next to her.

“This here young man is Kevin Jorgenson. You remember those folks that got stranded here when all hell broke loose last summer. Well, he and his family have a little place back up in the Buckhorn, fine set of kids and a great wife. Stephanie, she’s the one that has been nursing Frank back from the dead. It was the Jorgenson’s that took care of those three bastard Homeland coyotes that have been preying on the village.”

Several heads suddenly turned to inspect Kevin, which made him feel a little bit nervous. The fewer people that knew about that event, he felt, the better. Oh well, so much for that idea.

Maggie continued “So here’s the situation, folks, we can do one of two things. We can do what the President wants and roll over and play dead and just swallow everything that we’re ordered to do like good little citizens. Giving up our freedom for their form of security AND WE’VE ALREADY SEEN THAT! Or . . . we can tell them to go pound sand up their ass.”

More chuckles and a few whoops and a couple of “Go get ’em, Maggie!” came back from the group.

“Now cut that out.” She actually blushed. “OK, I’ve said my piece, but the real reason that I dragged you folks up here was to meet Kevin and hear what he has to say. I think he’s got the situation pegged solid. We’ve talked

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

and it makes good sense to me. The folks around here have been grumbling about doing something since this whole mess started and now . . . well just hear what he has to say.” With that Maggie stepped back and left Kevin in the spotlight alone.

Kevin looked around nervously and cleared his throat, he hated public speaking. “*Well, here goes.*” he thought.

“I’d like to begin by thanking all of you for showing up here today on such short notice. I guess Maggie can be pretty persuasive.” Light chuckles erupted for a few seconds from the gathering. “I wasn’t planning on doing any speaking today, but . . . well I guess the situation demands that we get used to doing things we’ve never done before.”

Heads were nodding in agreement around him.

“I’m not a politician, or much of anything, really. Before all this went down I was just a heavy equipment operator for the county water district back in Pennsylvania. We were out here checking on some property that we bought to someday retire on. Thanks to Frank and Betty taking us under their wing last fall, we made it through the winter in pretty good shape, what with everything going on at the time. But now we’ve got a different problem facing us.”

He saw that he had their attention and continued. “I’ve never really given much thought to politics or what really went on back there in Washington until recently. I did some serious reading over the winter, had plenty of time since there was no TV to dull our minds when we were snowed in up there . . . and well . . . quite frankly I don’t like what we’re being asked to put up with.”

“And what do you expect us to do about it?” Someone from the gathering asked.

“Well that depends on whether you consider yourself a free citizen or a servant to the government.” Kevin answered. “That depends on whether you think that the government of this country is supposed to be of the people, by the people and for the people. That depends on whether you trust someone you’ve never met, who doesn’t know you, who doesn’t feel any obligation to you, to look out for your best interest. I’m not talking about me. I don’t expect you to listen to me. But what about those folks that you’ve elected to be your representatives back in D.C.? Have you seen any evidence of their concern lately? Who is looking out for you and yours here right now? Who can you count on folks? Someone living high on the hog over two thousand miles east of here? Or your friends and neighbors right here, right next to you. My wife and children came out here for a vacation, to perhaps build a place that someday we could retire to. It was part of our dream, part of our American dream. But now circumstances have placed us here as a part of your community. But how can this be a community when how we live is being dictated to us from the other side of the country? Are you going to stand by while someone who has never missed a meal or a paycheck in his entire life is going to march into your pantry and tell you how much food you can have there? Are you going to stand by while the federal government placed its brand on each us with a required National Identification Card? How about your children? Are you going to stand by as the federal government tells you when and where you can work? It’s not like they are asking us . . . they are telling us. When they take away our guns tomorrow who’s going to be protecting us from the goons that are protecting us right now?”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“I’m not giving up a single bullet to anyone . . . that is unless I’m sending one down range at some SOB trying to take my gun!” Yelled a grizzly ol’ desert rat on the right followed with several “You tell ‘em, Vern!”

“That’s my point ladies and gentlemen. We’ve got to draw the line somewhere, and now is that time! The President has suspended the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, He does not have that power. He has sent home the Congress, OUR DIRECT REPRESENTATIVES, and is requiring us to register for work conscription, forcing a National Identification card on us and EVEN TELLING US HOW MUCH FOOD WE CAN HAVE IN OUR HOMES! He does not have that power! Then to make sure that we can’t complain he is removing the very tools that we need to protect our freedoms! IF we give in now, IF we obey this proclamation as we have been told we must, that act of obedience will be an act of treason! It will be treason against everything that our forefathers set down and many good men and women have died for, for over two hundred years. IF we comply with this unconstitutional and illegal directive, then we will be reduced to nothing more than sheep waiting to be led to the slaughter!”

The group suddenly erupted with angry shouts and support. Kevin had hit a nerve and hit it hard.

The five-ton trucks bounced along the road for well over an hour. The prisoners huddled together trying to conserve the slightest amount of body heat. Malcolm could see bits and pieces of scenery from time to time out of the corner of his eye as the back cover flapped in the wind. The terrain looked sparse and barren, desert like. He tried to imagine just how far they could have driven in the couple of days they were on the bus to the camp.

Thirty minutes later the trucks finally rolled to a stop. The sun was bright and Malcolm had to squint to make out the town they stopped in. The place reminded him of one of those apocalyptic “B” rated Hollywood movies. The town appeared to be entirely dead, not a soul in sight other than the yellow clad prisoners and the cammied guards.

The one thing that caught Malcolm’s attention almost immediately was that the guards were wearing their chemical protectant masks and full biological hazard suits. Every single one of them! This did not make him feel very good about the current situation. Then to make it even worse the prisoners found out exactly what their jobs were to be. They were the clean up crew for this dead town. Their job was to remove all the dead bodies from where ever they found them and pile them in the center of the streets to be burned like so much cordwood. In teams that consisted of four prisoners and a single armed guard they began their methodic morbid search of every building. Many of the victims of the plague had died in their beds. The scene encountered again and again as they cleared each house was brutally etched in the minds of every prisoner. Malcolm was even more determined to find away out of this nightmare.

It was well into the afternoon when the second reason for this work detail came to light. During the final swept of a house that yielded an entire family of plague victims, Malcolm leaned against the wall near a downstairs window. It was bad enough dealing with dead adults, but the children really got to him. That was when he overheard the two guards talking. Their voices were difficult to make out as they had to nearly yell through the masks to be heard by each other, but Malcolm could hear well enough.

“So have any of yours shown any signs yet?”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Not yet, yours?”

“Maybe one or two, too early yet to really tell for sure.”

“I don’t know why they have us doing this. They should just burn the whole place down.”

“But then how would they know if the vaccines worked?”

“Besides, as long as they don’t know their being used as guinea pigs, who cares, they’re just fucking prisoners, traitors and crooks. Who gives a shit about them?”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. Well, we better go get the next fire going. Man, they don’t pay me enough for this shit!”

“Fuck, man, aren’t you grabbing a little bonus from these houses?” The one guard showed the other a satchel bag full of jewelry and watches.

“Yeah but if you get caught, then you’ll really end up on the inside with these poor fuckers!”

“Who do you think turned me on to this deal? The Captain himself! Look, most of these bastards will be dead in three days time, sweet, no witnesses. And it’s not like anyone’s going to come here and claim any of this shit. Man, get a clue!”

Malcolm had heard enough. If he was going to die it wasn’t going to be by some insidious unseen bug that slowly filled his lungs up with fluid until it choked the life out of him.

“Those FUCKING BASTARDS!” he muttered to himself. Then in a flash of inspiration he knew what he was going to do.

“KEVIN, THE SECURITY FORCES ARE ON THE MOVE!” Betty called from the back door.

The crowd suddenly got very quiet.

“HOW MANY?” Kevin yelled back.

“MONA SAYS THEY’VE GOT A COUPLE OF BIG TRUCKS AND TWO OF THOSE BIG JEEPS WITH GUNS ON TOP!”

“SHIT! ARE YOU SURE THEY’RE COMING THIS WAY?”

“SO FAR IT LOOKS LIKE IT!”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“HOW LONG UNTIL THEY GET HERE?”

“THEY’RE NOT MOVING VERY FAST BUT THEY’VE JUST PASSED THE SUPER MARKET.”

Kevin turned back to the crowd. “Well ladies and gentlemen you’ve got less than five minutes to make up your mind which side of the line you’re standing on.”

For a few seconds nobody moved or spoke. Then Vern, the desert rat that had spoken earlier got up and began moving towards his truck.

“They want my gun . . . FUCK ’EM, let ’em come and get it!”

With that the group seemed to move as one. Out of trunks and from behind seats and even pulled brazenly from easy rider rifle racks displayed out in the open in a couple of truck back windows came a menagerie of high powered hunting rifles. Within seconds they were back to the man (and women) armed and ready for bear. Kevin looked at perhaps the most motley crew of citizen soldiers that had ever been assembled. Their ages ranged from twelve years old holding a twenty two rifle to over eighty and hefting an old battle hardened M1 Garand. The calibers of the weapons may be different, the skill levels varied, but the one thing that Kevin was sure of was that they could hit their target, and that was all that mattered.

Samantha suddenly materialized beside him and handed Kevin his FN FAL G1 and his web gear. The Free Citizens Mountain Militia was born.

Eight houses later Malcolm found what he was looking for. While the guards had apparently swept the houses clear of any obvious weapons, gun racks and cases along with much of anything that had any value that they could stuff in the haversacks they all carried. It was only a matter of time before Malcolm would find something they missed. An old Ruger twenty-two target pistol. It was one of those that looked like a smaller version of the World War Two German Luger. Malcolm dropped the magazine out and found it was full. He had found it stuffed back under the mattress. It wasn’t much, but it would do the job, especially up close.

Malcolm had been noticing as the day wore on that some of the prisoners seemed more haggard than others. A few were coughing and had begun to sweat more so than should be expected from the work they were performing. He knew that he had to get away and soon if there was to be any chance of his survival. Two houses later he spotted his opportunity and made his move.

He had procured a leather belt at the house he discovered the pistol in and had uncomfortably strapped the gun around his waist under the baggy coveralls. By carefully moving about it didn’t show from the outside. It was in the garage that he was checking that he got the idea. Grabbing an empty liter soda bottle and a roll of duct tape he fashioned his plan.

“BOSS!” Malcolm called his team’s guard. “BOSS WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO HERE?”

The Security guard walked into the garage and looked at Malcolm.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“What the fuck do you want?”

“Well, looks like this person committed suicide in the car, do you want us to bust him out of there and burn him or leave him alone?”

A garden hose was stuck into the tailpipe of the car and then run into the back window that was rolled almost closed and then taped up. All the doors on the vehicle were locked. The guard walked over and peered into the window of the car.

“The Captain wants them all burned, so we . . .”

The two dull pops were barely audible even in the garage. The guard dropped to the floor like a sack of potatoes. Malcolm had been careful to tag the guard in the side of the head so as not to damage the gas mask. Malcolm quickly began to strip the guard's mask off and then his cammies. Though the guard was a few inches shorter than Malcolm they were close enough in size that he was sure that he would pass all but the closest scrutiny until he could get out of the immediate area. He worked feverishly in near panic to exchange clothing. The uniform was a near fit, a little tight in the waist and almost too short but workable. The surprising thing was that the combat boots were actually a size or two too large. Malcolm quickly borrowed the guard's socks and pulled them over his own to help make up the difference and then laced the boots as tight as he could get them. It would have to do for now. He threw on his flak vest and web gear and grabbed the guard's M-16. He was just about to leave when he went back and grabbed the Ruger. It took just a few seconds to pull off the duct tape that held on the soda bottle, its bottom now blown out, and he stuffed the pistol quickly into the cargo pocket of his cammie trousers. Now to get away. He edged towards the side door of the garage and cautiously looked out.

Desert Doc

Pax Americana Chapter 46 - Grass Roots

Before a revolution can take place, the population must lose faith in both the police and the courts. - Robert A. Heinlein

You'll see how truly Bothan I am, Councilor Fey'lya. As power flows are warped and twisted, just remember it is you who made me remember, and made me live up to my heritage. - Asyr (Isards Revenge)

Guard with jealous attention the public liberty. Suspect every one who approaches that jewel. Unfortunately, nothing will preserve it but downright force. Whenever you give up that force, you are inevitably ruined. - Patrick Henry, speech of June 5 1788

The battle had been raging furiously hot and heavy for less than an hour between the Homeland Security Forces and the just formed Free Citizens Mountain Militia. It was a fanatical contest between the paramilitary trained government troops and the free citizens of that small mountain community. Neither had ever been tested in bat-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

tle and, except for the small scattering of aging combat veterans from past wars, this was their first test in the real heat of conflict.

Where the arrogant security troopers had expected placid submission to their presence, they found defiant vengeance and ferocious tenacity. The Militia would not be moved. The Security Forces suddenly found themselves on the receiving end of a deadly chainsaw of extremely accurate high-powered rifle fire. Where the troopers had attempted at every opportunity to avoid their mandatory biannual weapons qualification sessions, the citizens standing their ground this day honed their high-powered skills several times a month in order to reliably put food on the table. The amount, or lack of, training was immediately evident to all.

Kevin drew upon all his prior military experience as he dashed from hasty fighting position to hasty fighting position directing the Free Citizens in their desperate struggle. Vern still lay out in the driveway exposed and bleeding out on the rough gravel. There was nothing that anyone could do for him under the constant barrage of automatic fire coming from the troopers as they blindly sprayed the buildings and vehicles with 5.56 rounds. He thought it a miracle that so few of his own people had been hit or wounded thus far in the battle. He didn't think the Federal boys however were doing as well. So far the militia riflemen had managed to keep any gunner off the heavier fifty caliber machine guns and perhaps even damaged them sufficiently to render them inoperable.

This was turning into a battle of open sighted M-16's in the hands of inexperienced and poorly trained troops against men and women that had hunted as a way of life and their scoped large bore lever and bolt-action rifles in whose hands these few defiant free citizens could place a round in the black at over four hundred yards . . . every time! Huddled down behind the solid stone walls of the Robinson house and outbuildings, behind impromptu barricades and sand bagged fighting positions that Kevin and Buck had prepared just days before, they patiently drew forth their long guns and waited for their enemy to offer them a target. They didn't have to wait very long. The Troopers were out gunned, if not in numbers (which were dwindling rapidly with each returned round from the sniping Militiamen and women), definitely in skill and accuracy.

The first Humvee had pulled broadside off the driveway and was now riddled with bullet holes. The 5-ton truck that had followed it through the gate was pulled over to the opposite side of the gravel driveway and was literally surrounded with the bodies of dead and wounded troopers that attempted to simply march up to the gathering of civilians and bully them as they had many times before. Vern, the old war vet and dried up desert rat had defiantly stood his ground in the middle of the driveway when ordered to immediately disarm himself and surrender. His answer to the officer with the bullhorn was to spit on the ground and flip him off. The Homeland Security officer ordered him a second time and Vern simply stood there, his rifle at port arms. Kevin didn't see where the first shot came from and it didn't matter now. The fact that it narrowly missed Vern and blasted out the windshield of the truck behind him was all it took. With practiced ease born of decades of experience, Vern brought up his old well worn scoped Winchester 30-06 and surgically placed a high velocity 30-caliber hole in the center of the security officer's forehead less than seventy five yards away. The battle was on.

The gaggle of troopers marching up toward the house let loose a flurry of high-powered glorified twenty-two rounds towards Vern catching him several times and dropping him to one knee. Struggling he jerked back the action, expelled the spent round and brought the big gun back into battery. This time, however, knowing that he was fading fast, he just aimed in the general direction of the advancing troopers and let fly another round before he keeled over onto the rough gravel. He saw one of the leading troopers jerk viciously backwards under the impact of that powerful round just before he closed his eyes.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Take that, you bastard.” He mumbled as he slowly drifted off into unconsciousness.

That defiant image burned itself into Kevin’s mind as he immediately took command of the Militia and began the defense. He commenced yelling orders above the din of fire as he brought the big FN around and felt it buck under the punch of each slug as it ripped downrange on its mission to shred both bone and flesh. He danced the muzzle across the front of the advancing troopers and quickly thumped out a wall of hot metal that broke the advance. His fellow citizens promptly joined in the fight and sent several volleys of pinpoint death screaming into the shocked and retreating soldiers and swiftly cleared that immediate threat from view.

To Kevin’s amazement, the only casualty in this first exchange on their side had been Vern. A few seconds of silence descended upon both sides as they began to realize what had just taken place. It was at this moment that Kevin became conscious that his daughter was standing right beside him and had engaged the troopers just as he had, without thinking and with a vengeance.

“Sam, get the hell inside and get your mother, sister, Betty, and Frank down into that bunker!” He ordered!

Sam just looked up at him with a strange confused look on her face.

“GO!” He yelled.

She blinked and suddenly realized where she was and what she had just been ordered to do. She didn’t say a word, didn’t acknowledge her father, just hunkered down and ran at top speed towards the back door, her M-16 at port arms, her eye on the enemy line.

“She’s a real trooper!” He thought with pride and sadness at the same time.

Kevin watched her disappear into the house and then realized his own exposed position. Dropping to one knee behind the short stone wall, he began the defense. The free citizens now fully realized that the debate was over, there was no time left for fence sitting, they were in a fight for their lives and their freedoms and to that end they looked to their new commander who suddenly seemed to be everywhere at once. He spread them out and sent them off towards the different prepared positions. The house was the stronghold, the center of their defense but they could be easily trapped there if they allowed the federal troopers the option of maneuver, which was something that Kevin certainly did not wish to do. To that end he and Buck had created a series of fighting positions that flanked the house and spread out their defensive lines.

The troopers had momentarily retreated back beyond the perimeter of trees outside the fence lines of the Robinson’s property to regroup. With the Captain’s sudden demise, it took several minutes for their Lieutenant to realize that one: he was now in charge; and two: they had stepped into a bag of seriously pissed off bobcats. Nearly a quarter of the troops that he had arrived with were either dead or seriously wounded and out of action, all in less than five minutes. There was no back up immediately available, at least not for many hours and again . . . he was in charge. He stood there unsure of which direction to move, either forward into the battle or retreat. His hesitation at this critical juncture of the battle was all the time Kevin’s people needed to take up their positions.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

The Lieutenant's second mistake was to think that sheer firepower alone could carry the day. When he finally regained his military composure he took the remaining Hummer and attempted to force the center of the defensive line. Maneuvering the transportation vehicle as if it were an armored vehicle, he ordered it to creep forward pounding the house with deadly fifty-caliber rounds in a rolling assault. A squad of troopers huddled behind the gun vehicle in anticipation of reaching the house and breaking through the civilian battle line.

Greg Noland carefully placed the crosshairs just above the fifty's flash and let fly a 225 grain jacketed 300 Weatherby Magnum round that caught the gunner high in the chest and swept him off the roof of the Hummer like a rag doll snapped back by a bungee cord. His second round shattered the windshield and flattened the driver. The Hummer jerked to the side and rolled quickly into the shallow ditch beside the driveway. About half of the troopers suddenly found themselves caught out in the open and immediately turned to retreat back out the gate and behind the cover of the trees while the other half dove into the ditch and behind the now dead Hummer. With the threat of the heavy machine gun gone the defenders let loose a vicious volley that shredded the retreating troopers and severely cut off those huddled behind the Hummer. The Lieutenant had now effectively lost almost half of the soldiers that he had arrived with just fifteen minutes earlier.

He had to think of a way to turn this around and quickly. Suddenly he got a flash of inspiration. He called together the remaining Staff NCO's and laid out his plan. He was about to make the third mistake of the day and it wasn't even noon yet.

Malcolm cautiously looked out the garage door. There was no one in sight. Now he had to decide which direction to go. Well he knew what was behind him and he certainly didn't wish to return to that. Then he remembered something from his sailing days. Never run from a storm because it will certainly catch up eventually, run to the side and skirt it. He took several large breaths and tried to calm his nerves. He needed to cross the back yard and get over the fence quickly, but not too quickly. The first steps were the most difficult. He wanted to race away from there, but knew he had to look like just another one of the guards doing his job. It seemed to take hours to cross the sixty feet of suburban lawn. He looked up and down the fence line and could see no one. Stepping up on the lower crosspiece he quickly jacked up a leg and rolled over the top of the fence. He crouched on the other side and tried to still his pounding heart. He listened carefully and after a few seconds thought better of it. He had to keep moving. In less than ten minutes he had put several blocks of houses behind him and felt the need to get under cover and change out of the dead guard's uniform. He didn't want to take the chance that any kind of sending unit was hidden somewhere in the clothing or gear.

The small town had a haunted feel about it. It was as if everyone had simply walked off and left, like something out of the Twilight Zone. Malcolm kept near the front of the houses as he quickly moved down the street. He was never far from some form of cover. He had no desire to be recaptured and to that end was prepared to fight to the death if necessary. As he moved across the front of yet another house something caught his eye. Through the curtains in the front window he spotted several pairs of deer antlers mounted and hanging on the wall above the fireplace.

"A HUNTER!" The thought suddenly flashed through his mind.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

He moved quietly through the side gate and cautiously worked his way around the house checking every window and door. It was sealed as tight as a drum. But they had a sliding glass door that lead out to the wooden deck in the back, if he was lucky he had a way in. Using the bayonet from the dead trooper he wedged it under the track of the big glass door.

“Now if they haven’t pinned the door.” He muttered to himself.

The blade began to lift the large glass door and he pushed it off and away from the restraining latch. HE WAS IN!

Cynthia watched Angel from the second story bedroom window as he went about his daily routine in the gardens below. He carefully tended each and every plant, inspecting them carefully, nurturing their individual growth. He practically knew each one personally. She marveled at the tenacity with which he carried out this daily inspection. He kept meticulous records of everything he did in the gardens. He justified all this work as necessary to ensure their survival.

“In all plagues there are survivors, both plant and people.” He would tell her. “We’ve (meaning Cynthia and Angel) had already made the first cut, we survived where millions have perished.” He explained to her that he now intended to find or breed all the plant survivors and build from there.

At first she thought that his dream was impossible, but as each week faded into months she began to fully realize his commitment to this monumental task and she began to respect him even more for it. She often wondered how her parents were doing, or even if they were still alive. There was still no way for her to safely travel alone and she was sure that Angel would never abandon his mission here. And she would never ask him to do that. This was his legacy from his mother, somehow if he could keep this going it was like she was still alive or at least part of her was. Cynthia had heard him occasionally late at night when the stillness of the dark cloaked everything in its velvet wrap, his sobs, hushed and near silent. She could feel the loneliness that weighed down on him and admired the determination that he met each day with.

It was strange to her this bond that he had with his mother, a bond that reached beyond the grave. She had never really felt close to her parents. She thought about that now and again as she went about her daily routine. They were always so busy with this or with that. It was always.

“In a minute, honey. Not right now dear. Can that wait a second, Cyn? We’ve got to go now - we’ll talk about then when we get back, OK?”

But it was not OK. To Cynthia, her parents were like store manikins, plastic and hollow, the image of a person but somehow not very real when you got up close to them. She could not imagine a parent that would actually take the time to listen to the questions of a small child or a teenager for that matter. She would listen to Angel describe the things his mother would do or say and felt that somehow she had been cheated when the parents were given out. Sure she had all the toys, all the benefits of well to do upper middle class parents, but not what was really important. Not the little things that really mattered. For the first time in her life, Cynthia had time to really think about these things and about herself. She had gone to the college of her parent’s choice because it

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

was the place to be. Took the classes that were the right ones, in the right degree program, belonged to the right sorority, drove the right make of car and wore the right brand of clothes, but it all had no meaning for her. She was not the least bit interested in any of it. So now what?

The world that she knew had radically changed. Angel called it a hiccup, Cynthia felt like it was much closer to the world convulsing with dry heaves. Either way, she knew that she could never return to that place she had been in just a few short months back. She wasn't too sure just where she was in her own life at the moment, or who she was for that matter. But she had discovered that she liked it where she was, and that she liked who she was with. It was several days later while working with Angel in the garden as they were repotting plants that it finally hit her. She loved working in the soil and she loved working with plants and she loved working with him. She paused and stood up, staring off into space.

At first Angel didn't notice that she was silently standing there looking off into oblivion. Then he caught her still form out of the corner of his eye. He looked at her and then strained his ear to hear what it was that had caught her attention.

"What is it?" He asked in a whisper.

She just stood there looking off into the distance.

"Cynthia . . . what is it?" Again he asked in a slightly louder whisper.

"Cynthia?"

"CYNTHIA?"

"Oh!" Her train of thought suddenly broken she rapidly blinked her eyes and looked at him . . . in a strange sort of way he thought.

"Are you OK?"

"OK?" She answered meekly.

"Yes, are you OK, did you hear something?"

"Oh . . . ah . . . yes, I mean no, I didn't hear anything. I . . . mmm . . . OK. . . ah was . . . just thinking."

He looked at her quizzically.

"And?"

"Ah, I'll tell you about it . . . um . . . later. Now how many more plants do we have left to do?" She returned to work and blissfully ignored his confused expression.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Damian watched as Old Man Jacobson and his grandson Walter cranked the strange contraption aloft over the water tank on the roof. Once they had secured the cables that held it into place Walter yanked on the lanyard that pulled out the restraining safety pin on the turbine blades. Slowly the windmill began to spin, steadily gaining speed in the slight breeze. Jacobson watched the needle on the amp meter dance and finally steady out.

“THE JUICE BE FLOWING WALTER!” The old man called out. “THE JUICE BE FLOWING!”

“If I hadn’t seen it wit me own eyes I wouldn’t be believing it.” Damian commented. “So what did you build dat out of?”

“De outer part is a big truck brake drum, we build da rest out of junkyard parts. Walter he rewind de alternator to make it de generator and wit de magnets in de brake drum we get da juice flowin.”

“Walter you can build more of these?”

“Sure Bro! I got the plans off the Internet before everything went down. Gramps and I can build lots of these if you can get us the parts.”

Damian looked up at the spinning wind turbine blades. “You’ll get what ever you need Walter, what ever you need.”

Desert Doc

Pax Americana Chapter 46 - Sweet Dreams & Nightmares

Far better is it to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered by failure, than to take rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer much, because they live in the gray twilight that knows not victory nor defeat. - Theodore Roosevelt

We will either find a way or make one. - Attributed to Hannibal (247-1893 B.C.), Carthaginian General

Malcolm carefully slid the sliding glass door open and listened patiently for a few minutes before he slipped inside and quietly pulled the door shut behind him. There was an eerie stillness about the house as he slowly reconnoitered the dwelling. The place had the feel as if someone had just left only moments before. There were dishes in the sink waiting to be washed, cups on the countertop near the coffee maker that as he got closer could see small circles of fuzzy mold beginning to form in one of the coffee cups that was still half full. Some sort of dark goo was leaking out the bottom door of the refrigerator; he avoided stepping in it as he made his way into the living room. Cautiously he moved out of the direct line of the large front window. Looking out from the side hidden by the curtain he watched for several minutes and then carefully closed them slowly. He then turned to explore the rest of the house.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Upstairs he found the beds all made and neat, but there was some evidence that a hasty departure had been made as drawers were open and closets looked like they had been pulled apart quickly. The bathrooms were missing the normal toothbrushes, razors and bottles of hair products that one would have found stacked across the sinks or in the cabinets. Who ever had lived here had left in an awful big hurry and took only the barest essentials that they could grab quickly before they departed.

Malcolm found the gun cabinet in the upstairs den, or office. There was computer with stacks of bills and the usual paperwork that collects around the day-to-day functioning of a middle class family piled beside it. The gun cabinet was open and completely bare. Malcolm checked the drawers on the bottom of the cabinet and they too were stripped bare. He continued on through the house. There had been at least three children that lived here judging by the kid's bedrooms, two boys and a younger girl. But they were long gone and Malcolm hoped alive and well somewhere else.

Moving back through the kitchen he carefully avoided passing by any of the open drapes in the room. The last thing he wanted was to be spotted casually by any one that might just happen to be looking in his direction. He needed time to think, time to prepare and plan the next leg of his escape.

Through the laundry room he entered into the garage. It was dark and only lit by the small amount of light coming in through a side window and the small narrow milky windows high up on the garage door, but it was enough. Here too were the signs of a hasty exit, but Malcolm was elated by what he found still there. Camping equipment, a torn backpack, several sleeping bags, some well worn lanterns, tarps, and so on. He was virtually naked in a hostile world, locked in survival mode and needed anything he could get his hands on if he was going to escape from this area post haste. But the biggest prize of all was an old CJ-5 sitting off to the right in the garage. He went over to it and ran his hand across the front fender. Who ever the previous owner had been they had taken good care of this old warhorse. It showed the normal scars and dings you would expect from a jeep that had actually been used. Its tires were worn but more than adequate with deep lugs that could carry a person over hill and dale if necessary. There was no oil dripping underneath onto the concrete. The soft top showed signs of repair but was intact and more than adequate to keep the weather off the driver. It must not have been too old as the plastic windows showed only the slightest signs of aging and none were cracked, as they are prone to do over time. Now if it ran. Malcolm looked around the workbench and then remembered.

Back into the house he went and near the back door he found the key rack. Clearly displayed on a Jeep key fob was a set of keys. He snatched them up and then headed back out to the garage. He stood there for several seconds and then carefully loosened the straps on the gas mask that he was wearing and broke the seal. The air was a bit dusty and smelled of WD 40, old grease and oil, in other words . . . a garage. The air tasted sweet and easily filled his lungs after breathing through the mask. He slid into the driver's seat and laid the M-16 beside him on the passenger's seat and after pushing in the clutch inserted the key and carefully turned it. The panel lights lit up and then with a slight bit more of pressure the engine kicked over. He let it run for a few seconds and then cut it off. His heart was pounding and the smell of the Jeeps exhaust was the sweetest smell he had ever known. The gas gauge showed that he had nearly a half tank of gas on board and he watched the needle slowly drop after he turned everything off. He had his escape vehicle.

The next hour was spent going through every nook and cranny of the garage pulling out anything that Malcolm thought could be of value when he made his run for freedom. In several large metal ammo cans that had been pushed under the work bench Malcolm made a monumental discovery. Here were boxes of ammunition, hun-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

dreds of rounds. He quickly went through the markings and located nearly five hundred rounds of fresh .223 caliber rounds. Alongside that were hundreds of rounds of .30-06, .308, and thousands of rounds of .22 caliber long rifle stacked in neat bricks of 500 in one of the cans. If only that gun cabinet had been full. But regardless of whether he actually had weapons of that caliber or not, Malcolm quickly lifted the heavy cans up and into the back of the Jeep. That was when he heard the first beat of the helicopters blades overhead. He froze instantly and listened, his ears straining to evaluate every vibration that they received. It was coming closer.

Buck spotted the group first from his perch on the rooftop. Using the chimney as cover, he glassed the perimeter inch by inch. He could just see the Homeland Security Officer waving his arms through the trees as he gave instructions to a small group of soldiers. They intermittently looked towards the militia lines through the trees and off to their right. When they started to move Buck had a pretty good idea where they were headed.

“Pop! They’re going to try to come around our left side!”

Kevin looked up suddenly. “Which side?”

“Looks like they’re using the cut in the road to hide behind and then they’ll swing wide and come up on the other side of that thicket of trees.” He looked back over the top of roof ridge again. “Yep, they’re headed that way!”

“Shit!” Kevin muttered to himself. If the troops could command that thicket it would put them within sixty yards of the house and partially flank the left side of the militia line. Kevin looked down the line and ran the numbers. He and Buck had impediments placed near the front of the property and at likely approaches but couldn’t possibly encircle the entire property line. There was neither time nor material available. He looked down the militia line.

Kevin tapped the shoulder of the older gent next to him.

“Those two boys down there.” He motioned to the young football jock looking lads near the garage.

“The Larkin boys?”

“Yeah, the pair that look like football players, can they shoot?”

“Shoot hell, they’ll pop the eye out of a crow at near a hundred yards!”

“Good!” Kevin patted the old man on the shoulder and nodded towards the soldiers beyond the trees. “Keep ‘em honest, friend.”

“Aim, too.” The old man replied and lifted his ’03 Springfield with practiced ease and let fly a .30-06 greeting through the trees.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Kevin high crawled over to the Larkin brothers. “I need a couple of young fellows that can keep up with me and shoot straight . . . are you game?”

The two bushy haired high school seniors looked at each other and then quickly back to Kevin.

“Sure, what do you need?”

“Follow me and get ready to kick some ass!” Kevin popped up and sprinted as low as he could get back towards then behind the house. The boys flagged a couple of other corn fed lads like themselves and the small group let out at breakneck speed behind their new leader. Kevin kept the house between them and the Homeland Security perimeter until he could be assured that their movements would be masked by the grove of trees behind the house. It was Kevin’s plan to beat the Troopers into the thicket and catch them when they left the cut in the road and made for the trees. Caught out in the open he could quickly seal that flank and leave a few shooters behind to hold it down.

His feet pounded the soft ground and kicked through the tall grass. He could feel the burning in his legs and lungs at they barreled through the brush and then sprinted across the last open space before hitting the thicket. The Larkin’s along with four or five of their peers were hot on his heels and nearly caught up with him when they hit the thicket at full throttle. Kevin ducked, bobbed and weaved his way at top speed through the tight tangle of trees. He moved with more power than finesse, his rifle at port arms, branches slapping him in the face, ducking larger limbs. They had to reach the other side first.

They hit the middle of the thicket with a full press and then hit the enemy troopers head on as both groups collided into each other from opposite directions at full speed. Kevin saw the barrel pointed at him and dove to the right as the muzzle flash burned across the left side of his cheek and whipped past his neck. Before he could pull his own trigger he slammed into another trooper and folded the unprepared soldier neatly in half blasting all the wind out of him and nearly snapping his spine in the process. Kevin hit the trooper so hard that he felt like he himself had farted corn dogs. His momentum drove the trooper backwards and into another. Kevin hit the ground, rolled and came up blasting. The FN barked with the authority of hellfire that it carried in the shape of .308 at point blank range. There was no doubt that death was screaming around the thicket. For ten, fifteen, twenty seconds it was total mayhem, absolute elbows and assholes insanity as each side caught by the unexpected pointblank encounter scrambled desperately to stay alive.

Kevin emptied his rifle into several amazed troopers and then began to wield it like a battle-axe as he waded into the fray. Several times he felt something burn into him but it only fed his rage as he the whipped the FN around with the velocity that seemed to crack the very air itself. For the second time in his life he only saw red. Everything was focused on total havoc, the blood of some ancestral berserker burned like fire in his veins; he had become one of the dogs of war. Then . . . suddenly . . . there was silence, as piercing as a sirens wail and almost painful in its intensity. Kevin stood panting, anxious, waiting, a hulk on guard, wanting another target, another victim. The metallic taste of blood was thick in the air and he struggled to breathe it in. Slowly the color began to fade from his vision and the red was replaced with gray and greens, browns and blues, the normal spectrum of the living world. Gradually his sanity descended back upon him and he looked around himself at the carnage he and his militiamen had delivered.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

The Larkin brothers were off to his left. One setting down and leaning back against a tree, wounded but still alive. The other was on his knees, trying to push himself away from the lifeless corpse that only moments before had been some mother's son. A young militiaman that Kevin didn't even know lay dead on the edge of the carnage, his head opened up from the impact of several high velocity rounds. The others in various shape staggered as if thunder struck through the dead and the dying. The world suddenly began to spin around him and Kevin reaching out felt the rough bark of a old tree against his palm and using it as a brace, he heaved the evil that had dwelt within him during the rage of battle out upon the bloodied ground.

"MY GOD, THE PRICE OF FREEDOM!" He thought to himself as his stomach convulsed once more.

Flight Lieutenant Briggs, RAF banked his Tornado reconnaissance aircraft and followed the creeping brown rust colored foliage with his naked eye. You didn't need special camera films or lenses to see this. What ever had been unleashed upon the Yanks was now loose over most of the British Isles and now had a firm footing on the continent as well. And worst of all, it was spreading . . . fast.

Phillip looked up from his vineyards and watched the British plane bank slowly and cross above his valley. They were flying over nearly every day now, both British and French planes. At first he thought it was just another training jaunt, but with the spreading wilt had come the aircraft. As if they were watching the daily progress of this creeping manage. Still the local farmers had heard nothing from the Agricultural Bureau and there was nothing on the news as well, but it was everywhere and it was getting worse. If something wasn't done quickly, Phillip would lose his entire crop of grapes. Not only that, in both his and his father's gardens, everything was turning brown. Yet there was nothing but silence from the world around them. Well, his farmers union was meeting tonight. Tonight they would get some satisfaction or they would blockade the roads with their farm equipment until they did get a response.

Phillip tossed his hoe against the building and began the long walk down the hill to his father's house. Perhaps Poppa would have some advice, or at least a glass of wine to calm the nerves. If something wasn't done soon, he would lose his entire crop. This was not good, not good at all.

Cynthia lay awake looking at the ceiling of her room. The cool evening air blew in through the open window and chilled her exposed cheeks. She snuggled further into the warm thick comforter and floated in that moment between wakefulness and near sleep. Her thoughts drifted on the evening breeze in the half shadows of night. She pondered how her life had taken such an abrupt turn. She had been headed down a road towards a meaningless life that others had picked out for her. Everything prim and proper, upper class, decked with the trivialities that were required of her position or the aspirations of her parents. She was of course expected to marry the proper upwardly mobile young man, have the proper number of children that would attend the proper schools and continue the proper aristocratic line of properly sophisticated arrogant *****s that all her family ultimately became.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

But in the garden just the other day it hit her. Like a skyscraper being dropped on top of her, she suddenly became aware. An epiphany, one of those rare moments in life where everything . . . just for a moment . . . becomes suddenly crystal clear. With her hands in the dirt, there in the green house, beside Angel she was at home. At HOME! This was where she was supposed to be, where she was supposed to stay and with whom she would spend the rest of her life with. She didn't know who she was anymore. She surely wasn't Cynthia Mathews-Saxons of the Baltimore Mathews-Saxons, even though she had never even lived in the state that housed Baltimore, let alone Baltimore itself. They had always been the Baltimore Mathews-Saxons, like that really meant something to anyone. For the first time in her life she actually felt real, like she was someone. She pulled the comforter closer around her neck and rolled over onto her side. As she drifted off to sleep the last thought that passed through her mind was how she was going to convenience Angel that they were going to get married and that it was his idea. She fell asleep with a warm smile on her face.

A series of dark limousines pulled into the underground garage and discharged their passengers into separate elevators with assembly line precision. It was well past the normal operating hours for such meetings, even in Geneva, but the situation was quickly reaching an apex and decisions had to be made. Six men walked into the conference room alone, that was the understanding that none of them would violate. No stray conversations, no stray ears, what was said in that room, stayed in that room until the consensus was reached. The stakes they played were far too high to risk even the slightest miss step, and they knew full and well the penalties for violations of that sacred trust. Retribution was swift, vicious and thorough.

When the last member was seated around the table the eldest member dropped the gavel three times in ceremonial fashion.

"Gentlemen, we are convened."

Desert Doc

Pax Americana - 48 Respite

"Well Lazarus, my name's Mark. I'd say that I was pleased to meet you, but under the circumstances . . ." Mark said to the young man before him.

He grinned to show that his words were a wry joke, then looked around their piece of forest once again. The milky sun's position in the afternoon sky shone through the canopy, dappling the soft humus of the forest floor. A slight breeze ruffled the branches and occasionally peeked under a leaf. The man that the boy had shot lay cooling before them. He turned back to the boy.

"How's the leg?" he asked.

"It hurts." replied the boy. "Did you put the bandage on me? Thank you."

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Yeah, I put it on. I also got a good look at the wound, too. Who shot you?”

“Bad men. Like that one.” He said, pointing at the dead man in front of them.

“I figured that. Listen, we need to find some place to hole up. That town is probably crawling with bad men, scared men, and good men who can’t tell the difference. Your leg looks bad. I’d have liked to gotten you to the hospital, but . . .” He broke off and looked away from the boy for a moment, overcome by a feeling of anger at his helplessness. “But I don’t think I can. I think we’ll both get shot if we try. I’m . . . I’m sorry.”

“Mr. Mark, you are a good man, and I trust you to make this decision. “

“Well, thanks for your trust, but I wish I was a doctor. Or owned a tank.”

“What should we do next?”

“Like I said, we need some place to rest and recuperate. You need to be off that leg for a while. It’s not going to heal right if we keep re-opening it.”

Mark did not add that he wasn’t sure the leg would heal at all, but the kid was awake and thinking coherently, and that was an improvement over six hours ago. They really did need a place to rest.

“Where are we?” asked the lad.

“We’re about five miles from Trinkston. I was taking you to the hospital there when . . . this happened” He gestured at the man who lay before them.

“Trinkston? That is fifty miles from where . . .” Lazarus abruptly stopped speaking.

He thought, and then finished his sentence, “From where I used to live.”

Lazarus thought a while longer as Mark moved to search the body.

“Is that County B?” He asked as he pointed to where Mark’s shot-up Eagle leaned forlornly into the ditch.

“I think it is.” said Mark.

“I think I know a place for us. It is not much, but it is dry and not well traveled. It is nearly ten miles from here.” said Lazarus slowly. “I do not know if I can walk that far.”

“Why walk when we can ride?” grinned Mark as he continued to look for anything of value from the corpse on the ground. “I’ll go get this guy’s four wheeler in a few minutes. My car’s all shot up and won’t move anyway.”

Lazarus remained seated on the ground while Mark worked. One of Lazarus’ rounds had struck the man’s rifle right in the action. It was oddly deformed, and Mark could not work the action. He was able to open the flush magazine and remove the five .270 rounds that nestled there, and shoved them in his pocket. You just never

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

knew when they'd come in handy. Mark's search turned up little else of value, until he rolled the man over. He made a noise of surprise and stood. In his hand, he held a blued revolver. He eyed the young man lying against the bole of a tree, then walked to him.

"You did OK with the Glock, but I'd kinda like to keep that with me. Are you willing to carry a gun of your own?"

"I wish I did not have to, but in the past few days, the world has changed. I must change too. Yes, I am willing to carry a gun to defend myself. Us." The boy said.

"It's a tough choice. But today proves that sometimes you have to take care of yourself. You did good. Let's teach you to do better." Mark sat down beside him. "The pistol you used is an autoloader. It has a magazine of cartridges that feeds into the barrel to be fired whenever the trigger is pulled. It can be a pretty complicated mechanism."

He held forth the revolver. "This is a revolver. It holds six rounds, and is pretty foolproof. If you don't have a lot of experience or practice, this is probably the way to go for you."

Mark showed him the revolver, explaining the cylinder release, loading and unloading, along with the double action trigger pull. He spent several minutes explaining the sights, and Lazarus practiced lining them up and dry firing the pistol. He also practiced dumping empties out of the cylinder and using the speed loaders Mark had found to load the cylinder.

At last Mark was satisfied. "I think you've got it, but it's easy now. When someone's shooting back, it gets a lot tougher. We may find some place to practice, but for now, I think it's best if we keep a low profile. Plus, there're only about twenty rounds for that thing. Sit tight, and I'll go get the four wheeler."

He looked hard at the boy. The entire episode had taken much from him, and he was pale, covered in a sheen of sweat. He had concentrated his sheer will on absorbing Mark's important lessons, but he was still an injured boy. Mark took this in as he checked his M-14 then moved to walk quickly quietly away. He stopped for a moment and looked at the boy.

"There still may be bad guys around here. Be careful, and just make sure it's not me you are shooting at."

Lazarus nodded and shivered as his teeth chattered in the cooling afternoon. He watched Mark fade into the trees, and wrapped his arms tightly around himself. If he could only get warm. He was wearing only his heavy, dark blue shirt, and the cooling fall breeze cut through it with a numbing ease. He looked at the body on the ground. The man that tried to kill them wore a drab army jacket, which now had several bloody holes in it. Lazarus decided that he didn't care: His blood, the blood of the dead . . . It didn't matter. There was a jacket, and he was cold.

He tried not to look at the face as he rolled the unwieldy weight of the dead man this way and that to remove the jacket. The man's inert form resisted the movement, and Lazarus became angry and frustrated with the struggle. He punched the recalcitrant body. It made him feel strange. Bad and ashamed but yet exhilarated. It made his rage grow, instead of diminish. Again, he struck the body. And again. And again. He strangled an inarticulate

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

scream in his throat as he began to strike the body with his clenched fists. Over and over he pummeled the corpse, his pent-up anger and fear pouring from him in a violent stream as tears flowed from his eyes. He choked back screams as he continued to batter the dead man. Anger for the destruction of his way of life, the loss of his faith, and the brutal witness of two women raped nearly to death fueled his rage and despair. The fear of his own possible death - slowly by infection -, or quickly - by another man with a gun - added to his horror and anger. His limited supply of strength was soon spent, and he collapsed into a heap, sobbing and clutching the bloodstained jacket to his chest with the revolver in one hand. He wept in frustration and self-pity.

He soon heard the engine of the four-wheeler becoming louder, and used the backs of his hands to wipe the tears from his face. He snuffed the watery stuff from his nose back in, and wiped his nose on his sleeve. His chest continued to heave from exertion and sobs, and it continued even after Mark rode the four wheeler into the little clearing, stopping close to him.

Mark killed the four-wheeler's engine and looked at Lazarus.

"Hey, are you all right?" He asked.

"No," replied the boy. "I don't feel well at all. Let's get someplace for the night. I'm cold and tired." He told Mark.

"Sure. We need to see if those bastards left me any of my stuff. A lot of it sure could be useful right about now."

"Very well. Where do I sit?"

"Right behind me. I'll go easy." Mark promised. The boy grasped the cargo rack on the rear of the large-tired four-wheeler. As he raised himself to a semi-standing position, favoring the injured leg, he went even more pale and slumped forward across cargo rack. Mark quickly dismounted the machine and rolled him onto his back, then pivoted his hips so he could rest the boy's feet up on the handlebars. He covered the shivering boy with the bloodstained jacket and then knelt beside him.

"Hey, Lazarus! Wake up, buddy! Come on!" Mark said as he gently patted the boy's cheeks. "Geez, I didn't know you were still so sick! Come on, buddy, we gotta get you someplace warm!"

The boy's eyes fluttered and then remained open. He looked around without moving his head, then said, "I am really dizzy."

Mark grinned. "At least you're still with me. I think you sat up too fast. Let's try it slower in a few minutes."

Lazarus closed his eyes and nodded. Mark let out a relieved sigh and looked around. There wasn't much to pick up. He had carried the boy and his rifle across the field, and not much else. There wasn't much that belonged to the dead man, and there wasn't much on the four-wheeler. He hoped the marauders had not had the chance to swipe much from the back of his car. It looked like he was going to need that stuff to get by. To get him and Lazarus by. He started out doing a good deed for the boy, and he had returned the favor by saving Mark's life. An uneven trade, if there ever was one. Mark began to idly pick up some of the 9mm brass casings that lay on the ground.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

It was possible, even probable that the boy would die. The leg wound did not look good. He was still pale and clammy, probably suffering from both blood loss and maybe an infection. He feared that it was too late for him to do anything about it. If he had been a doctor, and had all the right equipment, maybe he could debride the wound and clean out all of the dead tissue. He could maybe give a couple units of typed and cross-matched blood, and start him on some IV antibiotics. Hell, as long as he was fantasizing, why not wish for a hyperbaric chamber? There had to be something he could do, he thought.

He snapped his fingers: He had some antibiotic tablets! During the big anthrax scare, he bought some from an overseas pharmacy! The Cipro was too expensive, so he opted for some generic Erythromycin that the Mexican pharmacist assured him was effective against Anthrax. He didn't know if it would help the kid. There were many different antibiotics for good reasons. Not every antibiotic worked on every bacteria. He had no idea what germ might be infecting the kid's leg. He did know that any antibiotic given by mouth was a lot slower and less well absorbed than anything IV or even a shot into the muscle, plus the dehydration would make the kid's gut upset. He might even puke up the tablets, but once again, he was out of options. The Erythromycin was going to have to do the trick. It might help, and he didn't think it'd hurt, unless the kid was allergic to the stuff. He'd have to check that. His heart sank: He hoped he still had the medication. It was in his pack in the car. Mark also decided that he needed to look closer at the leg wound. He had his doubts about the wound healing unless the dead tissue was removed. He sure wished he could find a real doctor.

The boy sat up slightly. "I'm ready to try again." He said, slowly raising himself to a seated position. Mark walked quickly over and grasped his upper arm gently but firmly, and squinted at Lazarus face. It remained just this side of extremely pale.

"You all right? Not going to pass out again?" queried Mark.

"Not this minute, I don't think." The boy said with a faint smile.

Mark smiled back. "Well okay, then. Let's get this show on the road! I'm gonna take it pretty slowly. The plan is to go across this field to my car, grab what's grab-able, then get out of here. I don't know if those assholes left a sniper out there or what, so we're gonna go pretty fast. This thing has about a full tank of gas. I am gonna park in the ditch and run up to the back of my car. Why don't you stay put and keep a lookout. If you see anything, holler."

"I can do that. We must travel away from Trinkston on County B for a ways. I don't know the road names, but I can tell you where to turn." said Lazarus.

"Any chance you know the way well enough so we can go cross country?"

"I'm sorry, no. But it's not terribly far."

Mark nodded and climbed on the four-wheeler, thumbing the electric start on the big four-wheel drive machine. The engine caught immediately, and settled to a soft rumble. He sat, and rolled cautiously toward the edge of the woods. He stopped briefly at the tree line, glancing about, then depressed the thumb throttle to send the machine rapidly out across the field. He made random cuts and turns, hoping to throw off the aim of anyone at-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

tempting to draw a bead on them. He quickly horsed the machine into the shallow ditch. So far, so good. He heard no shots, and quickly jumped off the four-wheeler, scrambling up the far bank. He bolted to the back of the Eagle, then let out a groan as he saw the damage there.

The bandits had emptied his pack in a violent fashion into the hatchback of the Eagle to paw through when they arrived. He couldn't tell if anything was missing from the mess, merely grabbed his pack and began to cram anything within reach into the pack. It soon became evident that there was indeed some destruction. Rather than choose to open the pack via the drawstring and clasps, they had merely used a knife to slice it open.

In his mind, his back began to itch with the knowledge that there may be a set of crosshairs centering on them.

He frantically rummaged through the pack and found a small package with several lawn-and-leaf sized trash bags inside. He opened up a bag and began stuffing supplies into it. He glanced at Lazarus. The boy stood on the pegs of the four-wheeler and steadied himself by grasping the handlebars. He looked around carefully, staring hard at the surrounding terrain. Mark finished his task and brought the trash bag down into the ditch along with some bungee cords that normally lived in the back of his car. He quickly put the first bag inside the second, then strapped it to the rear cargo rack. He decided to make one more trip to the back of the car for the winter gear he had stored inside. They would need it. He made the trip without hearing a shot, and secured the untouched bucket to the front rack. Lazarus said nothing and continued to look around at the surrounding terrain.

Soon enough, Mark came around to the side of the machine and mounted. He goosed the throttle and the machine leaped out onto the roadway. He accelerated rapidly, the big tires raising a loud howl as they rolled along the pavement. Both he and Lazarus hunched forward in an unconscious effort to make themselves smaller. Mark continued to juke the machine, which became increasingly difficult as their speed increased. Soon, however, they were well beyond the scene of the killing on small gravel roads, and wending their way through hills and coulees. There were few buildings to be seen, but those that were present almost universally had hay wagons or combines or gates blocking the driveways.

At last Lazarus indicated a dilapidated fence in some old, rusted barbed wire. Mark opened the gate easily, as it had no lock, and Lazarus pushed the throttle slightly to urge the machine forward through the gate, then Mark re-closed it behind them. They drove up a hillside, and into the trees, seeing no sign of recent human activity. They bulled their way a short ways through the forest, until Lazarus finally directed them to a small shack abutting a sandstone cliff. The boards comprising the shack were weatherworn and faded and the tin roof was covered in a fine sheet of rust, but it looked sound. Mark dismounted the machine and stretched.

"You're sure no one is here? No one . . . bad, I mean?" Mark asked, helping Lazarus off of the four wheeler.

"I cannot promise you anything, but I am very sure no one will find us here."

Mark helped support the boy as they walked to the door of the shack. Lazarus turned the knob, then pushed the door in with a creak and shuffled inside. Dim light filtered through the dusty panes, revealing a simple room roughly ten feet wide by fifteen feet long. In the middle of the room squatted a round woodstove, and there were some pieces of split wood along the back wall of the shack. A two-tier bunk was in the corner, with no linen upon it, and beside it stood a lonely table, complete with three chairs. The ceiling was low, and cobwebs were strung generously from the rafters.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Lazarus pointed to a large metal-clad box near the door. “There are two lanterns in there, and some wool blankets, if the mice have not chewed through the box yet. I need one of those blankets, as I have to lay down now.”

He swayed on his feet for a moment, then steeled himself while Mark worked the hasp on the box. Mark reached inside and handed him a blanket.

“Thank you.” He said, and shuffled to the lower bunk and collapsed into it, covering himself with the thick woolen blanket.

Mark looked around. “Not much, but I’ll call it home. For now.”

AGreyMan

Pax Americana Chapter 49 - A Short Liberation

It is folly to punish your neighbor by fire when you live next door. - Publilius Syrus

Government is not reason, it is not eloquence, it is force; like fire, a troublesome servant and a fearful master. Never for a moment should it be left to irresponsible action. - George Washington, in a speech on January 7, 1790

There is a silence like no other when the wind subsides and the flakes of snow gently descend scrubbing the chill air of all sound. Brentwood could only hear his own muffled footfalls as they crunched through the crust of last night’s snow. His quarantine was nearly up. Soon he would be brought into the greater family of the resistance. He wasn’t quite sure just how he felt about that. He had never been a political person, a bureaucrat yes, but political . . . well, not very much. He left that quagmire for others to wade into. But the actions of his government, the clandestine actions, had finally forced his hand. At first he did not wish to believe, didn’t think it was possible, but the evidence was too pervasive, too frightening to ignore. The terrorist attacks had somehow triggered a course of events that had been long planned for. Plans that lay hibernating deep within the bowels of the bureaucracy of Washington. Waiting in the silent and dust filled cabinet somewhere for just the right occasion.

What puzzled Brentwood was how passive his countrymen had become. Rather than rising up like the independent culture that we are lead to believe all Americans are, they instead cowered behind their televisions and demanded that others secure their freedoms. He thought back to the Thanksgiving meal just two evenings past. Even though he was still technically under quarantine, Dr. Anders, Nathan as he preferred to be called, had sprung him from his isolation to the “humble feast” as Mickey Davis called it. It was anything but humble.

The cabin was non-specific from the outside, stark, rustic, strong, like most of the buildings he had seen during his limited exposure to the militia compound. But once inside, it was like he had stepped into another world, another time. Mickey greeted him with a hot mug of cider with a large stick of cinnamon jutting out. The fire was warm and inviting and drew Brentwood to warm himself by it cradling the warm mug in his hands. He

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

could not believe the decorations, the food, and the people. The world may be on the brink of disaster but you wouldn't know it from the looks of this cabin. More than twenty people crowded together in the first festive mood he had witnessed since the plague swept through the country. He recognized many of the faces among the gathering. He surmised that the majority of the people here worked in the clinic that he had been screened at. Perhaps their constant exposure to outsiders was why he was allowed to join them tonight.

Brentwood listened to the idle chat and greeted the few people that he had already met in the clinic for about an hour before dinner was finally announced. His jaw nearly hit the floor when the meal was brought out. An enormous golden brown turkey, a honey baked ham, several large lake trout, freshly baked bread and a variety of vegetables, sauces, and hot freshly baked pies cooled on a sideboard near the gathering.

"Dr. Anders?" Brentwood began.

"Nathan, please."

"Ah, er, Nathan . . . how is this possible . . ." Brentwood's voice trailed off, his eyes still fixed on the food.

Mickey leaned over to Brentwood. "All of this . . ." he waved his hand over the table. "Is courtesy of the underground economy and our own community supported farms."

"But, but, there are shortages everywhere, we, I mean the government can't . . . ah . . . hasn't . . ." He stammered.

"Brentwood." Nathan began. "Let me explain. Most of what you see here, the turkey, and most of the vegetables are locally grown. Even some of the fruit is ours while the oranges and grapefruit come from Florida smuggled in and traded for our northern wheat and maple syrup."

"Maple syrup? In Michigan?" Brentwood asked.

"What, you think that New England is the only place where Maple trees grow?" Mickey chided him.

"No, but . . ."

Nathan continued. "We don't need the feds to take care of us. Never did. What we can't do for ourselves we have ways of getting through others. There are many like minded independent folks like us scattered throughout the country."

"Yes I've heard of the underground economy, but I always thought that was a conduit for drugs." Brentwood said as a large slice of turkey breast was plopped down on his plate.

"Sure that is what the government would like you to believe." Mickey said as he was passing out more turkey.

"You are going to find out that the underground economy is considerable larger than people in the government even suspect, perhaps almost as large as the topside economy, Brentwood."

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“You put a tax on something and watch how fast people get going to try to get around it. Even the big boys do it.” Mickey added.

“We are a country full of entrepreneurs, Brentwood. That is our heritage. The Calvinistic ideal of hard work and manifest destiny is alive and kicking even now. Sure, there are many of our fellow citizens that have become fat, dumb and lazy sucking on the government teat. But when the taps are turned off, when government can no longer move due to its own burgeoning weight, choking and asthmatic due to its own red tape and floundering bureaucracy that I’m sure you yourself have seen, the people will learn to take care of themselves.”

“And once they get a taste of their own freedom do you think they will want to fall back under the yoke of an invasive tyrannical government?” Mickey added.

“There are always those individuals that prefer to be taken care of.” Brentwood countered.

“That is true, sad but true.” Nathan conceded. “But not here.” Nathan looked around the table. “If we can all join hands so that we may give thanks for the bounty set before us.”

Malcolm cautiously looked out the garage window staying well back in the shadows to catch a glimpse of the helo racing overhead. It was a Homeland Security job flying low over the rooftops. He backed away from the light and retreated further back into the depths of the garage. He strained his ears to detect the sound of the bird now fading off in the distance. He was still way to close to the point of his escape. But he dare not risk an escape run in broad daylight with helo’s in the air, as that would be sheer suicide. It was still several hours yet until nightfall. He was considering his alternatives when he suddenly became aware of the scrape of a footstep on the concrete walkway just outside the garage door leading out to the backyard. He froze and slowly brought the M- 16 up to his shoulder. He could see the doorknob slowly turn as someone was quietly testing to see if it was locked. He instinctively coiled himself in anticipation. His heart pounded in his ears and he grit his teeth so hard that his jaw ached. He would not go back into that death camp. Not if he had any say in the matter. That’s when he noticed the doggie door move.

Desert Doc

Pax Americana Chapter 50 - Storm front

*When they took the fourth amendment, I was quiet because I didn't deal drugs.
When they took the sixth amendment, I was quiet because I was innocent.
When they took the second amendment, I was quiet because I didn't own a gun.
Now they've taken the first amendment, and I can say nothing about it.*

Confronted with the choice, the American people would choose the policeman's truncheon over the anarchist's bomb. - Spiro T. Agnew

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

This country, with its institutions, belongs to the people who inhabit it. Whenever they shall grow weary of the existing government, they can exercise their constitutional right of amending it or their revolutionary right to dismember it or overthrow it. - Abraham Lincoln, 4 April 1861

“Ian, why don’t you begin.”

“Ah well yes.” He cleared his throat. “The botanical virus is spreading, albeit at a considerably slower rate due the current weather, however we can expect a rather firm foot hold on the continent and by the end of the next farming season much of Western Europe will be affected.”

“Good, and what are the effects of the Plague? Any substantial outbreaks in your region?”

“Not yet, but with a few good topical applications we should be able to see significant movements in that area.”

“What’s the hold up Ian. Surely there’s been more than adequate time since the American outbreak to lend credibility to its spread?”

“Oh yes, considerable credibility, Sir. Just waiting for the atmospheric window of opportunity to present it self. Doesn’t do to progress with any aerial application with the current storm systems rolling across the region. Washes everything right out of the sky and down the gutters. But we are expecting a break with adequate clearing in about a week. Should be able to get in two or three applications before the next storm blows in.”

“And what are your projections.”

“Well Sir, we’re using the new L-series variant which of course you know is much better suited to the genetic targets found in our zone of application. I would say reasonable estimates should at least meet and quite possibly exceed the initial applications in the U.S.”

“That well, hmmm.”

There was a murmur around the table.

“And Africa?”

“Well that is another story all together Sir. Since the initial infection rates were nearly three times that of other regions we can expect this new binary variant once released to . . . shall we say, clean house Sir.”

“Very good, Ian, well done.” He turned to look back down the boardroom table. “Now Jonathan I understand your Yanks have run into a bit of a snag with some . . . armed militias? I would have thought that matter of citizens with personal weapons would have been resolved by now. Your president did declare martial law, did he not?”

“Yes Sir, he did.”

“And?”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Well . . . Sir . . . it’s been ignored.”

“Ignored?”

“Yes Sir, rather strongly ignored I’m afraid.”

“How strongly?”

“Well you remember those two battalions of UN troops we borrowed to assist in the arms round ups?”

“Yes . . .”

“Well . . . Sir . . . we’ve lost them.”

“Lost them? You mean you can’t find them?”

“Well . . . no Sir, I’m afraid we’ve lost them . . . as in rather permanently I’m afraid.”

Malcolm aimed his assault rifle midway up the face of the garage door that led into the backyard. That’s when he noticed the flap of the doggie door move and a small hand push itself through and onto the concrete garage floor to hold up the small curly headed child as it crawled through. Malcolm silently let out his breath and crouched down, his eye still locked on the door. The child wormed its way through the tiny opening and then stood up and barely able to reach and began to work at the doorknob. Click! The door was opened and another older child, a little girl slipped into the garage quietly closing the door behind her. She turned and froze as she locked eyes with Malcolm. For what seemed eons neither moved nor spoke. He slowly lowered the rifle.

“It’s ok, it’s ok . . . I’m hiding too.” He said very quietly the older child, his voice just barely above a whisper.

His senses reached out to perceive every sound, every vibration, and every odor. He wondered if these two were alone and if so, how could that be? Where were their parents? Where was everyone? Just what the hell was going on here!

“Please MMMmmister, we’re just real hungry.” The little girl stammered. The small cabbage patch sibling that had preceded her clung protectively to her leg.

“We didn’t mean to . . .”

“That’s OK, child, I’m a little hungry too.”

Malcolm slowly rose up and took a couple of steps toward the children. They backed away and up against the shelves against the wall.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“It’s OK, I’m just going to get us something to eat . . . is that OK?”

“Momma told me not to talk to strangers.”

“That’s real smart of your Momma to tell you that. My momma told me the same thing too.”

“Your momma told you that? But you’re, but you’re grewed up?”

“It’s still good advice. Now, are you hungry?” He took a step closer but angled slightly away from the pair. He stopped and held out his hand. The little girl looked it.

“My name is Malcolm, and yours is?”

She looked at his hand. “You’re a black man.” She said matter-of-factly.

He squatted down to be at eye level with her. Steadying himself with the AR in his left hand he was just a few feet from them.

“Yes, I’ve noticed that.” He smiled at them. “Are you and your little sister . . .”

“Brother!” She interrupted. “Jesse is my brother.”

“Oh, sorry. Are you and Jesse hungry? I sure am.” He said again offering his right hand out to her. “I’m Malcolm.”

She stood with her arms around her little brother protectively. “My name is Sarah, and like I said this is my little brother Jesse.”

“Good, now that we’ve introduced ourselves, we’re not strangers, little Miss Sarah.” Malcolm stood up slowly. “Now I’ll bet that we can find something to eat in the kitchen.”

She looked towards the open door leading into the house and nodded her head. Malcolm turned and walked slowly into the kitchen.

“It’s kind of untidy in here Sarah, so please pardon the mess. Ahhh, here’s something. Would you and Jesse like some canned peaches. There’s some cereal here but I don’t think we’ll find any milk . . .”

The two children cautiously followed their new friend into the kitchen.

As the big Suburban rolled up the gravel driveway Ruger suddenly popped tall on the front seat beside Sgt Maj. Strothers. The big Rottie knew this place. The familiar odors that whipped in through the window had Ruger filled with anticipation. Strothers, too, looked forward to this visit. It had been a long road to finally reach his niece’s place on the opposite coast from where he started too many long months ago. So much had gone down

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

since he received his retirement papers and headed west from Q-town. It was now an entirely different world far and away from the one he remembered.

The McMillan homestead resembled a fortress, almost medieval in appearance. While most of the obvious signs of the battle that had waged across their property for several days were gone, one didn't have to look very hard to see that some serious shit had hit the fan here. Jeff could tell that all kinds of hell had been turned loose here despite the efforts to patch up the damage and reclaim the peace of this rural valley. The specifics he had yet to learn, but he did know that the battle had nearly claimed the life of his favorite niece and her husband. The word was that Denise had been badly wounded in the jackboot assault and he had heard also that too many good patriots had died here, but despite the best efforts of the new age Gestapo, the militia had held strong and carried the day.

Jeff would have liked to have arrived unannounced and surprised them. But the day of such independent free travel and joyous surprises was long gone. He had entered their free zone the day before and was forced to wait until he received clearance to continue the journey deeper into the federally unoccupied territories.

The unoccupied territories were a scattered patchwork quilt of free zones loosely controlled by local citizen's militias. At best the term "free" was rather sketchy. In many areas the government forces might control the cities, larger towns and major highways during the daylight hours, while the patriot and militia forces ruled the night. After several rather nasty clashes the situation across the country had reached a wary stalemate, with each side waiting for the other to up the ante.

The Suburban finally rolled to a stop just outside the great iron gates. A pair of rather serious looking militiamen standing guard there eyed the crusty old Marine and his overgrown Rottweiler as they both bounded out of the truck. David emerged from the inner courtyard and met the Sgt. Maj. midway with a great bear hug.

"Sgt.Maj. you ol' son-of-a-bitch, you finally made it! Damn it's so good to see you!"

Strothers quickly noted his niece's husband as he approached had lost the softness that civilian life often casts on retired military. Jeff was reminded of the first time he had met David as a newly assigned Corpsman to his battalion. He had that swagger that seemed ingrained to sailors. But the ol' Sgt. Maj. could also recognize the carriage of a warrior; his old Doc was back in the groove again.

"Doc, you ol' pecker checker! What's this I hear you started the war without your Sgt.Maj?"

"Damn Sgt.Maj." David began shaking his head. "You could not imagine the mess we had here." He paused and looked Jeff straight in the eye. "We nearly lost Denise."

"I heard it was touch and go for a while here." The pair continued into the courtyard.

"You don't know the half of it. Hell they blew a hole in the side of my house with a SMAW!"

"A bunker buster!" Jeff said in amazement.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *A Gray Man*

David nodded his head. “It took out one of my best friends and neighbors and nearly claimed Denise. She got messed up pretty bad and it was only by the grace of God and sheer luck that she made it out of the room alive.”

“How bad?”

“Well, the local doc did the best that he could . . . under the circumstances . . .”

“How bad, David?” Strothers stopped and looked his old friend in the eye.

David took in a deep breath and let it out. “She’s lost hearing in her right ear and there is some pretty bad scarring from the burns and shrapnel. But the worst of it . . .”

Jeff gripped his shoulder. David looked up with watery eyes, but doing the best to hold himself together.

“She lost an eye.” He paused. “There just wasn’t anything ol’ Doc Bell could do. The damage was just too great.”

Jeff blew out his breath. “Damn!”

“How’s she taking it, son?”

“Well . . . some days are better than others.”

“She’s a tough ol’ bird Doc. If she’s got just half the spit and vinegar of either her ol’ man or her mother, then she’s got more than enough for a dozen folks. I’m here to tell you, her mother was no light weight in a fight . . . that’s for damn sure.”

“I seem to recall Denise telling a story ‘bout both you and your bother dating her mom at the same time?”

“Shitfire, that gal had us both over a barrel until I came to my senses and joined the Marine Corps! Hell it was safer in combat than marrying that Irish banshee!” They both chuckled and turned to enter the house.

There was a festive mood that filled the entire house. Cynthia had not seen so many people since the before the plague. Walking into the kitchen the rich aromas that filled the air made her mouth water. Momma Sanchez and Bea Howard commanded the activities there like two generals over a field army of madness amid a whirlwind of baking, cooking, tortilla making and banquet preparation. She never imagined that Angel even knew this many people or that this many wonderful people had survived the deadly disease that ripped through the area, but here they were, in her house preparing the Thanksgiving feast.

Astonishment and tears came to Cynthia when they first started to arrive in the early morning hours. She could hardly believe that Angel had arranged all this in less than a week as the result of a passing comment. They had been sitting out in the greenhouse after a long day of work in the gardens. Gardens that had begun as an attempt to just survive had grown into a miniature farming operation. Angel had not only managed to find and breed

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

disease resistance seed, but had done so well that together they put in over twelve hour days tending and harvesting the bounty of their suburban jungle.

Angel and Cynthia had been sharing how their respective families usually spent their holiday season. For Cynthia it was flying to some resort somewhere to spend the holidays with strangers. For Angel it always involved getting all the friends and neighbors together for a madhouse of an event. Everybody either brought or cooked their holiday meal there at his place. The house was full of people, kids running around, talking, drinking . . . a regular block party run amok. But when they all sat down to eat it was his mother that brought them all together. The eldest and youngest members of their extended family said the grace and cut the first slice of meat. The table was set with both traditional and exotic dishes and at that moment on that special day of Thanksgiving they were a family. Cynthia sighed and thought out loud what a warm image that was. She wished that she had spent her holidays that way surrounded with close friends and family. She leaned her head over on Angels shoulder and they sat quietly together as the daylight faded into evening.

And now Angel's house was a mad house. Cynthia had been introduced to so many new people that their names and faces spun around in her head in a windstorm. She had learned the secret to making a golden honey glaze for a ham, real pumpkin pie, fresh Italian bread, white bread, wheat bread, potlickers, tortillas, refried beans, Boston baked beans, vegetables of every description, and the list went on and on. The matronly women that commandeered her kitchen had her stirring this, sampling that as they one and all tried to pass on family recipes and kitchen secrets. She had never had so much attention before in her entire life, and she was loving the insanity of the event.

By mid afternoon the whirlwind suddenly ended as the meal was about to begin. Tables came out of nowhere, sheets of plywood were covered with table clothes and chairs of every description appeared and surrounded the long feast as it was laid out. The chair at the head of the table was the only place setting empty when Angel stood and waited for the room to quiet.

"Ahh . . . I'm not very good that this sort of thing." There was a chuckle that ran around the table. "I want to thank you all for joining us here today and make all this possible." Angel cleared his throat.

"I have left one seat empty . . ." He swallowed hard. "It is for my mother . . . and . . . all those people that we love that could not be here with us today." He bowed his head momentarily and then looked back up at the gathering. "But they are with us in our hearts."

"Mr. Ehler and Senorita Margarita Torres I believe it falls upon you for the Grace."

An elderly gentleman slowly rose from his seat midway down the table and a small little Hispanic girl dressed in her holiday finery was lifted up to stand on the chair beside him. The gathering clasped the hands of their neighbors and together they bowed their heads.

The old voice began. "Dear Lord, thank you for your bounty and the fellowship of this gathering. Protect us with your strength and guide us with your wisdom. These are hard times that we have before us and we need your guidance to see us through. Let us always walk in the path that you have set down before us and forgive us our sins." He leaned over towards little Margarita and quietly whispered to her. "Here's your part."

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“In Jesus’ name we pray . . . AMEN!” She said with gusto.

The gathering chuckled and then sat down to enjoy the bounty placed before them. Like one big family, the mood was alive and merry. Cynthia had never been happier in her entire life than she was at that moment. About midway through the meal Old Man Ehler tapped his glass with a spoon and rose to speak. Once he had everyone’s attention he began.

“I would like to take this moment to thank each and everyone here for making this gathering possible. And I would like to especially thank Angel for coming up with this idea and badgering us all to make this event actually happen.” He raised his glass to Angel. “To Angel MacMurtry-Chavez may you always be under God’s good grace.”

The entire room rose to their feet and joined the salute to their host.

“Now,” Ehler continued, “I believe we should have a word from our host.”

Angel was suddenly embarrassed and shook his head.

“Come on now Angel, you talked plenty to get us all here. Speech, SPEECH, SPEECH!”

The room took up the chorus and finally Angel stood amid the claps and cheers.

“I . . . ah, I . . . ah, don’t know quite what to say.”

“There’s a first!” came from down the table.

Everyone laughed.

“No . . . really. I can’t take credit for this idea.” He turned to Cynthia sitting beside him. “It was really Cynthia’s idea that we should have a Thanksgiving like we used to.”

“TO CYNTHIA!”

“TO CYNTHIA!” resounded down the table.

Now it was her turn to blush. Then the room became really quiet and all eyes focused on the young couple. Angel turned to her and held out his hands into which she placed hers. Then to her surprise he suddenly got down on one knee before her and she felt a shiver race up her spine.

“Cynthia, I have never told you this, but I think you know . . .” The pause hung in the air. “I love you.” The room was deathly still.

“I have never been happier than when we are together and I wish to be together with you for the rest of our lives . . . if you will have me.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Cynthia's eyes welled up with tears; her heart was pounding in her ears and racing with the wind.

"Will you marry me?" He finished.

The very air seemed frozen as every one held their breaths in witness. The steady tick tock of the clock on the wall echoed across the silent room. The seconds seemed to stretch into minutes as she looked into his eyes and saw the deep love and affection there.

A tiny voice, weak and fragile squeaked her reply. "Yes."

The room erupted into cheers and laughter as the young couple embraced for the first time. Their new extended family gathered around them trading handshakes and hugs for several minutes before things began settling back down. The meal progressed until everyone slowly staggered away from the table, looking for someplace to loosen their belts and digest the largest meal they had all probably experienced in a very long time. Cynthia leaned her head on Angel's shoulder and snuggled in his safe embrace. She had finally found a home and a family. Tears keep welling up and she could do nothing to stem the tide, nor did she really want to.

The generals of the kitchen then set about clearing the tables and setting out the deserts. Cynthia could not believe the array of treats and delights that came out of the kitchen one after the other. Then they brought out the coffee, freshly roasted the day before and ground just hours before the meal. The rich aroma filled the room. The evening wore on until, one by one, the guests drifted off on their way home. Several guests threw out their bedrolls and snored happily away on the floor off in the corners of the house. The old men told stories on the back porch and smoked their pipes and finished off the homemade wine. Cynthia joined in the clean up and in no time at all her kitchen was spic and span again.

She had never felt so much love, nor had she been hugged and kissed by so many people at one time. Cynthia could hardly believe the events of the day. It was like she was living in a fairy tale and if so she never wanted to wake up. When she went to bed that night it was with a warm glow and a deep affection that filled her to overflowing and the thought that she was getting married. She cuddled her pillow and drifted off.

Damian entered the Jacobson's workshop that comprised the entire basement of one of the five story walkups. It looked like a cross between an auto parts stockroom and a junkyard repair shop.

"Where had they got all this stuff from?" He wondered.

The shelves were crammed full of everything imaginable. Car parts, household appliances, motors, piles of wires, plumbing fixtures, pipe and God knows what else. Half the stuff he had no idea what it was. The entire basement level was crammed packed full. Boxes of stuff overflowed into the aisles between the metal shelving. This was in stark contrast to the actual working machine shop on the far end of the basement. Damian walked out of the dark storeroom and into a pristine combination wood, metal and electronics shop that would make any handy man's building genes drool uncontrollably.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Both Old Man Jacobson and his grandson Walter were hard at work building a half dozen of the new wind generators when Damian walked into the well-lit shop.

“Now just a little bit more . . . good, dat’s good.” The elder Jacobson was saying to Walter.

Damian stood quietly until the pair looked up.

“Hi Damian, be right wit cha.” Walter looked back to his grandfather who was nodding with satisfaction.

“That should set up right proper, boy.” The Grandfather said.

“So where did you-all get the ide-er for this windmill stuff?” Damian asked.

“The grandson here came across it whilst surfin’ dat Internet a while back. Been bugging me to help him build one.”

“Oh Grandpa, like you don’t get jazzed doing this kind of stuff.”

The old man laughed. “Hee, hee, hee . . . you know that I do, boy. Yep, this here is sheer entertainment for me.”

“So where did you get this, Walter?”

“Oh, I ran across the website of a Scottish guy named Piggott.”

“Piggy?”

“No, Piggott. Yeah, thought his name was a little weird, but his stuff was great. Hugh, I think is his first name. Anyways, he started building wind generators out of all kinds of old parts. I was going to have Grandpa help me to build one for a science project at school before . . . well, before everything sort of . . .”

The excitement was growing in the young mans voice as he began to show Damian around the shop.

“Gramps got a lot of cool old books on how to build stuff, all kinds of stuff, check this out bro.” Walther started to pull out books from the shelf and lay them out on the table.

“Here’s the one we’re using now by Hugh Piggott. It’s called Brakedrum Windmill Plans. Here’s one on how to build something called a Producer Gas plant that can run a car or motor off of wood chips or coal instead of gasoline. Here’s a whole series of books by a guy named Dave Gingery that tells you how to make a charcoal foundry, and a metal lathe, and a shaper, a milling machine, a drill press, a power hacksaw and a whole lotta other stuff!” He said excitedly.

Damian looked back to the elder Jacobson. “Can you really build all this stuff?”

“Sure ‘nuff. We already got most of the stuff we need. The big hold up is power. Gotta have enuff power to run dez machines down here, den me and the boy kin make most any thang you want, Damian.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Damian looked around the shop these two had put together from scratch and believed that they could indeed live up to their claims.

“Make me a list Mista Jacobson, and I’ll see to it you get wut you needz.”

The rain that had been coming down steady for the last several days soaking everything was now turning to snow as Kevin Jorgenson and his son drove out to the checkpoint south of town. There had been no major sign of the Homeland forces since the battle a month ago at the Robinson’s place. A few patrols from time to time ventured to within binocular range but they turned back at the first sign of the militia forces. Each side seemed to be keeping tabs on the other but neither made any attempt to engage in any direct action at the present time. Kevin didn’t like the idea of a stalemate but preferred that to the alternative of directly fighting the better equipped and more numerous federal forces.

The town had been busy since they won their independence getting ready for the hard winter to come. For the first time towns people that had been total strangers for all the years that they had lived in this mountain community began working together. Their first effort was to consolidate what supplies they could salvage from the abandoned houses through out the village. A thorough search of the Security barracks revealed a bonanza of ammunition, weapons, and military supplies as well as pallets of prepackaged military meals known as MREs. Between what they had gathered and the abandoned government supplies they would make it though the winter. But what would happen come spring was constantly on Kevin’s mind. They only had a few months to prepare before they would have to find a way to grow what they could no longer purchase on the open market. There would be no trucks arriving every few days to stock the shelves of the local grocery stores and, with the current standoff, it was highly unlikely that they would be allowed to venture forth to go shopping down in the low-lands. They were totally on their own, a situation they none of them had ever imagined before nor seen in their lifetimes.

The news from Washington was full of veiled threats and hollow promises of peace and returning prosperity. Kevin ignored it for the most part. It reminded him of political whining and more padded lies spewing forth from the cockroaches that resided in the Capitol. He didn’t know what would come of the current events and that did bother him, but he could not see the nation returning to the status quo of the recent past. Too much blood had been spilt for that to happen. He worried about the future for his children and all the children across the country. What was the legacy they were creating now that their descendants would have to live with years into the future? Kevin wondered if that was how the forefathers of this country felt when they broke away from the mother country.

Those thoughts were left hanging in the air as they arrived at the checkpoint. Buck lifted out the vat can of hot turkey and lentil stew and followed his father into the bunker. It wasn’t much of a Thanksgiving meal but it was hot and there was a lot of it. Kevin and Buck took over the watch and manned the machine gun and recoilless rifle while the men on watch took a break and dug into the first hot chow they had received that day.

Kevin was reminded of the pictures of Washington’s soldiers during the winter in Valley Forge. Huddled around small fires, trying to keep from freezing. He knew that Americans came from hardy stock . . . good seed. Per-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

haps what was needed from time to time was a good weeding in the garden of liberty. They had become too complacent with the freedoms their ancestors had fought so hard for. They had become slack in their vigil against the thieves that stalked the rights that every American had been born into, and as a result had to re-earn those rights the hard way. It was not easy what they did now. The price of freedom is never cheap. But it was necessary and right.

Kevin looked back out on the crisply snow white landscape and enjoyed the way it made the world look new and clean.

Brentwood awoke to pain, extreme pain. He had no idea of where he was or why. The last thing he remembered was walking home after the Thanksgiving meal at Doc Anders place. It had been snowing but not too badly and now his head of screaming and he couldn't see out of his left eye.

"He's coming too."

"Brentwood can you hear me?"

He tried to talk and suddenly found his mouth incapable to opening and the new pain in his jaw joined the screaming agony of the left side of his face. Brentwood mumbled something unintelligible and then he suddenly realized that his jaw was wired shut.

"What the hell had happened?" He mumbled.

"Brentwood, just calm down. You've had a nasty fall and banged yourself up pretty bad. You've fractured your jaw and probably blown your zygomatic arch and possibly your orbit as well."

"WHAT?" he mumbled.

"You've broken your jaw and your cheek."

"HOW?"

"The best that we can figure is that you slipped on some ice and went face first into the frozen ground, rather hard I'm afraid. You've been unconscious for nearly three days."

"WILL I LIVE?"

"Well you did have us worried, but I think your coming out of the danger zone if . . . IF you remain quiet and let things heal up. You took quite a nasty knock to the melon and I want you to remain absolutely quiet for several weeks.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

The next several days passed uneventfully. Doctor Anders had finally allowed Brentwood to return to his own cabin but not without warning him sternly that he was to remain there and that Anders would have someone checking on him regularly throughout the day and evening.

The shock came when he looked into the mirror for the first time. The entire left side of his face was one huge black and blue swelling. What ever he had hit sure left a wicked mark. Nearly the entire white of his left eye was blood red and looked like hell. Something had gashed his forehead pretty deep and required a considerable number of stitches to close. His head pounded every time he changed position and his greatest fear was from the waves of nausea that swept across him whenever he exerted himself in the slightest. It would not be a good thing to vomit with his jaw wired shut. To that end he carried a small pair of wire nippers that Doc Anders had tied to a string around his neck at all times. He prayed that he would not have to use them.

It was late at night about a week later when the serene calm of the snowy landscape surround his little cabin suddenly erupted. Brentwood quickly sat up from the noise and equally as quick wished he hadn't. The all too familiar sound of gunfire and explosions filled the night outside his cabin. The front door viciously exploded off its hinges followed by a squad of white clad soldiers racing in to secure the cabin. Brentwood was on his hands and knees beside the bed trying to clear his head from the dizziness that filled it. He heard heavy footsteps coming closer then someone grabbed his shoulder firmly.

"Brentwood Davis?" He was sternly asked. "BRENTWOOD DAVIS!"

He nodded his head slowly and tried to speak. A bright light suddenly blinded him.

"My GOD, what the hell have they done to you?" The soldier exclaimed.

"Quickly - get him bundled up and ready to travel!" the lead soldier barked.

"STRETCHER BEARERS!" The call went out.

Two of the burley soldiers hefted the weak bureaucrat up between them and carried him out into the small living room of the cabin. Before he knew what was happening he was bundled into a sleeping bag and plopped down into a sled looking arrangement. The sound of gunfire seemed closer and the soldiers around him appeared to pick up the pace. As he emerged from the warm cabin the cold air slapped painfully against his bruised flesh and the medic carefully closed the hood of the bag tighter around his face until just his nose was visible.

The white ghosts with weapons slung, one pushing and one pulling the sled then slid him across the snow-covered ground and the trio disappeared quickly into the vast surrounding forest.

Desert Doc

Pax Americana Chapter 51 - Out of the Frying Pan

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

A man has honor if he holds himself to an ideal of conduct though it is inconvenient, unprofitable, or dangerous to do so. - Walter Lippman

Integrity is not a conditional word. It doesn't blow in the wind or change with the weather. It is your inner image of yourself, and if you look in there and see a man who won't cheat, then you know he never will. - Unknown

You need only reflect that one of the best ways to get yourself a reputation as a dangerous citizen these days is to go about repeating the very phrases which our founding fathers used in the great struggle for independence. - Attributed to Charles Austin Beard (1874-1948)

Cocooned in the mummy bag and wrapped up like a papoose in the snow sled, Brentwood's vision was restricted to almost straight up. He watched the snow suddenly appear out of the grey fuzzy sky. He could hear the zip of rounds ripping through the forest around him, but the battle now seemed to be falling further and further behind. The pair of white camouflaged soldiers labored in the cold with their burden, their heavy breathing and the crunch of their skis through the snow fell into a rhythmic beat that lulled Brentwood into a shadowy consciousness.

The next several hours were filled with flashes of reality surrounded with grey mists of unfocused and drifting. He remembered being lifted up and into a loud and vibrating vehicle that suddenly forced gravity to press down on him. Flashes of visions danced around in his head as someone suddenly stuck something sharp into his arm, which then felt a creeping cold slowly advance up to his shoulder. He recognized the bag hanging overhead and realized that he now had an IV flowing its juices into him. The flight seemed to last for hours or maybe days before roughly alighting on the earth again and after further jostling Brentwood now found himself in the back of an ambulance.

When next his vision focused he could tell that he was in a hospital . . . somewhere.

Mickey Davis emerged from the tree line and crunched through the snow to where Dr. Anders was standing some thirty yards into the clearing. Both men were nearly invisible in the falling snow in their white out camouflage with erratic slashes and smudges of black and brown. Even their AR's were cammied to match.

"Did he make it out OK?" Anders asked his medical colleague.

"Yeah Doc. Looks like they got away clean."

"Casualties?"

"We've got a couple of nicks and scratches. One clean leg shot . . . all meat, I've got Nancy prepping him for you."

"And the other side?"

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *A Gray Man*

“Several wounded, but they managed to carry them off. Left two dead behind.” He answered matter of factly.

“See to it they receive full honors.”

“Doc?”

“It’s their masters that I want to see hanging from the nearest tree Mickey, not their minions. Those men were just following orders, right or wrong. We want the men that gave those orders.” He answered sternly.

Mickey gave a strange look at his friend.

“Do you think this was all that smart . . . letting them take back Brentwood? I was just getting to like that bureaucratic paper pusher.”

“I don’t know Mickey, I sure hope so. There are times that information can be more valuable than bullets. We need a contact like him deep within the system. Besides which the injuries that he sustained in that damn fall is beyond anything we can provide at the moment.”

“But will he be our mole . . . or well he spill the beans about us?”

“There is always a chance, but yes I think he’ll be our patriot on the inside. No guarantees though.” The Doc turned and looked back towards the village. “Speaking of moles . . .”

Mickey ejected a partial magazine and snapped in a fresh one, checked the load and turned towards the same direction.

The pair trudged back through the falling snow to complete a very unpleasant task.

The suit knocked on the inner door of the Homeland Directors office and then entered.

“Mr. Director, we have him! The mission was a success!”

The Director looked up from the pile of paperwork spread across his desk and pounded his fist onto the solid walnut top.

“YES! YES! YES! It’s about time something went right around here! What’s Davis’ condition?”

“Looks like they worked him over pretty good, Sir. He’ll be going into surgery . . .” The Young Turk looked at his watch. “Oh . . . he should already be there.”

“Worked him over . . . how bad?”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Well Sir, the initial report from the Radiologist was that they had basically fractured the entire side of his face.”

“My GOD!”

“Yes, Sir. However, the surgeon I spoke with on the phone felt that while it looked bad on X-Rays, she seemed pretty confident that the damage could be repaired.”

“Good - Good - Good, and the casualties from the raid?”

“Four wounded, two KIA, Sir. The extraction went smoothly, only . . .”

“Only what?”

“Well . . . err . . . sir, we’ve lost contact with our mole inside the rebel camp.”

“Oh . . . hmmm. Well we’ve got Brentwood back. I guess sacrifices had to be made.”

“Yes Sir, sacrifices.”

As Brentwood drifted back into consciousness he could hear the hum of the air conditioning system. His head was nearly covered in bandages such that he could only see out of his right eye, which phased in and out of focus. Something or someone was standing by the door. His vision finally cleared and the image of a uniform . . . a uniform and a battle rifle came into view. The face seemed somehow familiar, but he couldn’t remember . . . his thoughts were too fuzzy, and try as he might, he couldn’t focus his thoughts on any one thing.

The Marine standing guard leaned back and with his free hand pressed the nurses call button on the wall.

“Nurse, this is Gunnery Sergeant Talford, the patient in room 313 is awake now, over.”

“Thank you, I’ll send someone right down.” She giggled. “Marine you don’t need to say over . . . over.”

“Force of habit, Ma’am . . . out.”

Brentwood could just make out the name tag on the cammie uniform.

“Talford?” He said to himself.

“Sir?”

“Do I know you . . . I think . . . somehow . . . familiar?”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Malcolm rummaged through the pantry, carefully avoiding the temptation to look in the refrigerator. He didn't want to know what was dripping out past the door seals. The small puddle on the floor in front smelled bad enough as it was. He grabbed several cans of peaches, some applesauce, an unopened pepperoni sausage and several juice boxes and retreated to the garage with the two children following close behind him. On the steps leading into the garage he sat down and began to open the cans up and set everything out.

Sarah and Jesse, still cautious stood several feet away eyeing the tempting meal he was setting out for them.

"Go ahead, kids, get started on the peaches and I'll slice up some of this here pepperoni." He looked up at them. "Come on."

Sarah edged closer and carefully grabbed the peach can with the fork jutting out of it and pulled it back to where Jesse was waiting a few feet away. Together, they hungrily attacked the peaches and the juice boxes.

As Malcolm sliced up the pepperoni he questioned the two small children.

"So Sarah, where's your mommy and daddy?" He pushed the plate of pepperoni slices towards the pair.

Sarah looked at Malcolm and then back again at the plate.

"Your mommy and daddy . . . are they nearby?"

Sarah looked up slowly at Malcolm.

"The black men with guns took them away . . . Jesse and me hid like mommy told us to. We hid real good. They never did find us . . . but . . . but . . . mommy never came back to get us like she promised."

"The black men? Do you mean men whose skin was my color?"

Sarah shook her head. "No . . . the men was white, but they wore army clothes that were black and they had big guns like yours." She pointed at the AR sitting across his lap.

"How long ago did the 'black men' come and take your mommy and daddy away . . . do you remember?"

"It was a long time." She scrunched up her face trying to figure out the question. "More than five days . . . way more than that. Jesse and me have been alone for a really really long time."

He stood up, stepped into the garage several paces, and turned to watch the pair as they cleared the plate.

"Now what in the hell am I going to do?" He wondered standing there.

With the children occupied voraciously consuming the open cans of fruit and applesauce, he quickly set about rearranging the CJ. The old Jeep was a workhorse, not a passenger vehicle, yet somehow he needed to find room for both gear and these two kids. He pulled the gear that he had already stowed in the Jeep and stacked it

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

along side. Then stared at the inside seating arrangement for a while trying to figure out how to stow two young children and all the gear he had located into this get away vehicle.

Just what the hell am I going to do with two kids . . . that aren't even mine? he thought to himself.

He knew it was going to be nearly impossible for him to escape this nightmare now. He turned to watch the kids finish up the last bit of pepperoni. *And now I've got two little ones in tow, with no idea where their parents or even their relatives might be found.* He turned back to the task at hand . . . "THE BACK SEAT!"

Malcolm grabbed the tool kit on the workbench and a tape measure. The back seat of this old CJ was just the right size if he was careful. He removed the passenger seat from the front but left the mounting brackets. Then he lined up the backseat on top of it and was surprised to find that the mounting holes lined up almost perfectly. It took less than an hour to install the back seat up front and create a bench seat on the passenger side. This also cleared out the back of the Jeep to carry even more gear. Thank God for cordless drills, Malcolm thought to himself as he mounted the middle passenger seat belts and then the extra Jerry can holders into the now empty back bed of the Jeep.

The children watched quietly from the garage steps as Malcolm arranged and rearranged the back to stuff in even more gear. He had found a couple of extra sleeping bags and tied them to the roll bar. Every square inch of space was filled with extra food, water, ammo, and camping equipment with room for the two kids as well. He stood back, satisfied.

The light was fading outside as he completed his task and now his thoughts turned to the next phase of his escape. Where to go? Hell he wasn't even sure where he was.

Damian looked out over the white blanket that covered the remains of his city. In his mind the snow somehow had a way of making everything look clean, dormant, waiting for something to happen. The Jacobson's had, by hook or by crook, managed keep the castle in power. He chuckled to himself. Even he had taken to calling their compound the castle. Well, he guessed it was, in a way. The only light that seemed to shine in this city at night came from their compound. There were fires out there beyond the perimeter walls, to be sure, as survivors of the devastation that struck out of the blue struggled to hang on.

He wished he could bring them all inside the protective walls that surrounded him now. He wished there was some way to repair the damage, to heal this broken community. Well, maybe there was, the elders of the castle had probably taken the first steps this afternoon. Damian had been called to an unscheduled meeting in the Great Room. The space had once been a small cafeteria on the first floor of one of the primary buildings that made up one of four main buildings of the castle. Now it served not only as a cafeteria, but as a church on Sundays, a daycare space during the week, and a meeting hall at night. Today the children were absent and the room was filled to capacity as he walked in.

His grandfather and several of the older residents sat behind the large table at the end of the small hall. There were an equal number of elder men and women sitting at the table and Damian felt a shiver go up his spine for a second and he hesitated just for a moment as he looked around the room.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Come on down and join us, son.” The old craggled voice of his Grandfather spoke to him.

Damian walked forward and stood before the elders.

“Grandfather . . . what’s going on here?”

“Civilization.” His Grandfather answered.

Damian cocked his head slightly to the side.

“Whatcha mean, civil-eye-zation?”

“Damian, son, yo’ done a good ting here boy. A real good ting. But itz time we all started ta carry the ball, ‘stead of putting all da biz-ness on you.”

Damian stood silently and listened.

“We been talking, you know howz ol’ folks is.” He gestured to both sides of the table. “An we made up this here council, a council of elders, like they usta have back in de old dayz in the old country.”

Damian looked up and down the eight elderly faces sitting at the table. He recognized each and everyone and had to admit that they were the one’s he constantly sought advice from. They were wise in years, careful in attitude, patient with youth and strong in spirit. He couldn’t think of a better group to lead the community, but was he out of a job, he wondered? Had he been replaced suddenly?

“So where duz that leave me, Grandfather?”

“Right where you is, boy! Right where you is!”

Damian again cocked his head slightly.

“We got eight elders here on dis council, four men and four women . . . and you, boy.”

“Me . . . but . . . I’m not . . .”

“Not what? Youz is da reason dat we even here in da first place boy. If’n not for you we’d all be worm meat by now. No, boy, you sit on the counsel as the Warleader and tie breaker . . . if’n you agree dat is.”

“Warleader and tie breaker?”

“Son, we know’d a good ting when we gots it. You’re quick under pressure, smart where it counts and you got a good head on your shoulders dare. Councils are no good when the shit is hitten the fan, need a Warleader to lead the fight. One man, quick, sharp ‘n’ effective. You done already proved dat. And a tiebreaker. On de odder stuff,

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

when the council can't decide, you break the tie. We trust you, son. You'll make the right decision for the community."

The old man leaned forward. "We already took da vote. You got the job . . . if you'll take it."

Damian looked around the assembled room of nodding heads. He had never been responsible for anything in his entire life and certainly not for the welfare of an entire community, one that was in the midst of war and disease. He felt a sudden weight settling down upon his shoulders. Then he looked back at his Grandfather and all the Grandparents sitting at the table before him. He knew that if he crossed this line he couldn't turn back. But . . . wasn't the hardest part over? They were, in fact, already a community joined together and working together to survive. Nothing would change that. Only now it would be official. He would be "The Warlord" of the castle. They trusted him. No one had ever trusted him before.

"Yes, Grandfather." He looked up and down the table. "Grandfathers and Grandmothers . . . I'll take da job."

Damian looked out over the cold city from the rooftop. He wondered if this was how governments got started in the first place . . . with tribal councils. Elders that determined the day-to-day needs and operations of the village and Warlords that defended the village. He wondered just where this would end up. He wondered if it would work.

He didn't know. But he did know that he would do his best to see that his people did survive the insanity that had fallen on the world. He was a leader now and he would act like one. He would set the example. Suddenly, he felt so unprepared, so limited in abilities. He looked up into the cold night sky. A few stars broke through the cloud cover here and there.

"God, if youz listening to this poor child I needs your help. Deez are good people here. Dey deserve better den me, but me is what dey got. I could use a little help here . . . oh who is I kidding . . . I could use a lot of help here."

Damian felt a wave of warmth pass over him and it sent a shiver down his back. Just then he heard the crunch of snow under foot and turned to see his Grandfather approaching him.

"What you doing boy up here in da cold?"

"Just asking for a little help Grandfather."

"From who?"

"God."

"Dat is good to hear, son. You keep right by the Lord and he'll keep right by you." The old mans hands gripped the young Warlords shoulder.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

"I don't know, Grandfather, we might be asking a lot."

"Don't never hurt to ask, son. Now come inside before you catch your death of cold. I've got a good fire going and some of dat hot cider you like warming up. Besides wit, it's Christmas Eve and Santa don't like gawkers on rooftops when he's going about his business!"

"Grandfather! You don't expect me to believe . . ."

"I ain't expecting nuttin der boy, excepting you getting your sorry cold ass down stairs and in front of dat fire. Or you be getting a lump of coal in yer stockin in da morning! Now GET!"

The old man watched his grandson disappear through the roof access door. Just before he entered the door he turned and looked up to the night sky.

"Lord, dis poor wretched child be askin' for a small favor from you. Lord, please watch out for my Grandson. He's a good man, Lord. But he's fillin' mighty big shoes. Keep your eye on him and help him if you're a mind to."

"GRANDFATHER, YOU COMING?"

"Right behind you boy, right behind you . . . tank you Lord . . . Amen"

Desert Doc

Pax Americana 52 - Into the Fire

America is at that awkward stage. It's too late to work within the system, but too early to shoot the bastards. - Claire Wolfe, 101 Things To Do 'Til the Revolution.

The Democrats seem to basically be nice people, but they have demonstrated time and again that they have the management skills of celery. They're the kind of people who'd stop to help you change a flat, but would somehow manage to set your car on fire. I'd be reluctant to trust them with a Cuisinart, let alone the economy. - Dave Barry

What other governments have / What our government has instead

Kickbacks / Subsidies

Indoctrination centers / Public schools

Propagandists / Government spokespersons

Government censors / Network Standards

Thought control / Political correctness

Dissidents / Crackpots

Refugees / Homeless

Political prisoners / Morals offenders

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The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Forced labor / *Community service*

Black markets / *Organized crime*

Secret police / *Elite anti-terrorism*

Resistance movements / *Terrorist militias*

Invasion and occupation / *Strategic presence*

Waiting periods are only a step. Registration is only a step. The prohibition of firearms is the goal. -

Janet Reno, December 10th, 1993 [Associated Press]

Malcolm had completed the reconfiguration of the Jeep by the time the light finally failed and the darkness of evening closed in. It was strange how dark a place could become when all the lights in the community were out. Not a single streetlight was functioning anywhere in this small town. The abandoned and empty homes stood like silent specters in the ghostly moonlight that filtered through the sparse cloud cover. The house he was now hiding in seemed especially dark and the little ones were becoming quite anxious in this unfamiliar surrounding.

Now what? Malcolm thought to himself. Should he hide out here with the children and wait out the searching troopers or should he attempt to run, possibly putting the two little ones in even more danger? And if he were to run . . . where would he run to? Their parents had obviously been carted off by someone, but to where? And where and how could he locate relatives that they didn't even know the whereabouts of. The more he thought of this situation the more he disliked it. He had gone from the rock to beyond the hard place . . . or so he thought.

The steady "Wop-Wop-Wop" of the Blackhawk helicopter growing louder as it approached the neighborhood overhead unexpectedly interrupted his inner conversation. The hair on the back of his neck abruptly stood up and sent a shiver down his spine. This was not good! He turned to the children and in a whisper bid them to silence. He quickly slinked up to the garage door window and carefully from the corner of the glass scanned the street. There was movement up in at the far end of the block. His eyes strained to discern exactly what was going on. It took only seconds for him to realize that it was now or never as he witnessed the steady progression of several Humvee's slowly moving up the street as two teams of troopers kicked in each front door and entered the empty homes. Homes that were all empty save one . . . this one.

Malcolm made a quick evaluation of his situation. Two little kids, one jeep packed and ready to go, food and water for a week - maybe more, one military M16, four pouches of magazines - three mags each . . . say three hundred and fifty rounds give or take, the Beretta and the little Ruger twenty-two. Against one helo, probably armed, God knows how many Security Troopers, Humvees and what ever else happens to be around. Not the best of Vegas odds in his book.

He looked out the window again. At the rate they were moving down the block they would be here within the next half hour. "SHIT!" he cursed to himself. He just caught a glimpse of one of the dogs he seen when he first arrived in the town. They were using dogs too! There was no way he and the children could possibly hide from his pursuers if they were using dogs. DAMN! He was not about to abandon these two kids . . . but? He quickly moved to the Jeep and opened up the two sleeping bags that lay on top of the gear in the back.

"Sarah, Jesse, come here quick! We have to get out of here!"

Sarah with her little brother in tow joined Malcolm beside the Jeep.

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The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Are the bad men coming?”

Malcolm hesitated and then answered the little girl.

“Yes Sarah, they are coming, but we won’t be here when they arrive.”

Her voice cracked. “They took my mommy and daddy . . . Mr. Malcolm . . . I’m, I’m scared.” Jesse clung to his big sister.

“So am I child, but we won’t let that stop us. Quick, get in here.” Malcolm lifted her up and into the Jeep. “I want you and your little brother to sit down here.”

He placed her on the floor of the passenger side of the Jeep. Then he sat Jesse in with her and wrapped the two sleeping bags around them. He remembered some metal that he had seen earlier and grabbed the sheet of metal and dropped it inside the door frame and wedged it in there between the outside of the passenger seat and the body with the sleeping bags which would double as cushions. The children would be about as low and safe as he could make them under the circumstances. He added more loose blankets until he was sure they would not fly about in what he anticipated was going to be a wild ride. Malcolm then stripped off the soft-top cover and strapped down the frame and windscreen. A spider web bungee cord covered everything in the back and secured all the gear there. He quickly jumped up to the window and checked on the progress of the advancing search team. They were now about half way down the block and quickly approaching. Then he remembered the wine bottles near the back door in the recycling bin!

Gathering up a dozen or so he quickly filled them with gasoline, slopping a goodly amount on the garage floor . . . ’oh well’, ripped strips in the towel hanging near the backdoor and stuffed them into each bottle. He chanced another quick look. They were now two houses closer and had reached just past the middle of the block. He wedged the dozen or so bottles into a plastic milk crate and secured them with the passenger seatbelt. The M-16 was locked and loaded, the pistols were ready and now for the diversion. Grabbing several of the extra Molotov cocktails that he had left near the door he disappeared into the backyard.

Thank God the asshole I took this gear from was a smoker, he said to himself as he pulled the Bic lighter from his shirt pocket and lit the first cocktail. At the back yard fence, he whipped the first of three burning bottles towards the sliding glass door of the house directly behind his hide out. By some miracle of desperation he nailed the large plate glass door on the first try and it shattered from the impact of the liquid filled wine bottle. The second bottle fell short of the second neighbor’s window and shattered against the outside wall. The third bottle arched neatly through the air and crashed through the kitchen window scattering its volatile contents across the room. By the time that Malcolm had dashed back to the shelter of the garage, ducked into the darkness shutting, and locked the door behind him, the interiors of both houses were becoming engulfed in flames.

He stole a glance out the corner garage door window and could see that his efforts had been rewarded. He quickly ducked his head and caught the image of two of the searching Humvees dashing past to investigate the sudden disturbance on the next block. The troopers from across the street that he could see down the block had abandoned their search and were crossing to skip over to the next street. It was now or never. He unlocked the

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

garage door and as quietly as he could he pushed it open. He jumped back into the Jeep, said a brief prayer, and turned the key.

The stocky six-cylinder coughed once and fired up. Tugging on his seatbelt he dropped the clutch and the Jeep lurched out of the garage. The jackrabbit was on the run. He jerked the Jeep right and ran across several lawns before he hit the blacktop five houses down. Instead of following the path of the two Hummers that had just blasted past less than a minute earlier he caught the first left and roared down the empty road away from the arson he had created. The air ripped at his unprotected face as the Jeep fled into the night. He looked quickly about for the helo that was up there somewhere but couldn't find it. After traveling for five or six blocks the residential street opened upon a larger two lane up ahead. Which way to go . . . which way to go? He knew the direction from which he had escaped, that was on the south end of town. He pointed the Jeep in the opposite direction and rounded the corner right into a roadblock!

The troopers standing next to the Humvee seemed dumbfounded as the CJ 5 rounded the corner and sped towards them. Malcolm shifted the Jeep into high gear and grabbed the M16 slung across his chest. Steering with his left hand he pulled the butt of the rifle into his right shoulder and cut loose at the gaping troopers. He did not expect to hit much of anything, but he hoped to at least shake them up and upset any return fire they might attempt. The first trooper jerked under the impact of the first rounds and slid down the side of the vehicle. The second trooper fared better and dove for the cover of the Hummer, totally forgetting about his rifle that was lying across the hood of the vehicle. The Jeep veered to the right around the front of the Hummer and Malcolm locked up the brakes. He continued to fire rounds at the trooper struggling to become one with the blacktop under the Hummer and saw his legs jerk several times as bullets met flesh. He popped off his seatbelt and leaped from the Jeep pumping more rounds into the troopers to make sure they were down for the count.

“What the HELL AM I DOING!?!” Malcolm said aloud as he grabbed the two M- 16's from the hood and stripped the web gear from the dead troopers. His heart pounding in his ears he raced back to the Jeep and jammed the rifles behind the passenger seat and threw the web gear on top of them. With shaking hands he lit a Molotov cocktail and whipped it into the blacktop beneath the Hummer creating a nasty fondue in the process. Then with gears grinding he jammed it into first and the Jeep jerked forward and continued his exodus. He stuck to the main boulevard, praying for guidance in his flight to freedom. He constantly scanned the road behind him in the rearview mirror and the sky above.

Over the wind and the whine of the engine Malcolm yelled to the two children buried in the protective blankets and sleeping bags. “ARE YOU KIDS OK IN THERE?”

Sarah's hand pulled the blankets down and exposed her face. He could see the fear there and tried to reassure her yet could not hear her response over the noise of the engine and the wind. But there was no time for further conversation as he caught a blur of movement in the rearview mirror . . . the race was on. The powerful Hummer roared out onto the main street and launched into pursuit of the fleeing CJ5!

The pair jockeyed for position on the blacktop but just as the Hummer was about to come along side Malcolm locked up the brakes and jerked the Jeep to the right passing behind and off down an alleyway. Weaving down the dark alley he momentarily lost his pursuer, but now they knew his approximate location. The Jeep emerged back onto a parallel road and Malcolm kicked it back into gear.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

He was now locked into a deadly cat and mouse game that could cost him not only his life, but the two lives of the little orphans that had been thrust into his care, if he could not escape. But Malcolm was determined that he would escape and like a mad man he cut down alleys, reversed direction time and again, always moving north and west away from the bright fire now burning on the southern edge of town.

Angry hornets buzzed by his head and he suddenly realized the Hummer was back on his tail but this time it had its teeth bared. But hitting a moving vehicle from a moving vehicle is not the easiest thing to do despite everything you've ever seen in the movies or TV. Malcolm kept the Jeep moving, cutting across parking lots, yards, anything that could upset the aim of or slow down the enemy breathing down his neck.

Something "THAWACKED!" into the dashboard, sending sparks into the brisk wind cutting across the hood of the speeding CJ. Malcolm pushed in the cigarette lighter and jerked the Jeep right, then left, then right across a lawn, through a hedge and down another alley. The Jeep bounded out back onto the highway just as the cigarette lighter popped out ready for use. Grabbing it, he pushed it against one of the gasoline soaked rags, an insane maneuver in a fleeing vehicle under fire. There is nothing like ripping through the night riding on a petrol bomb with bullets flying all around you. But desperate times call for desperate measures. The first wick caught fire and soon another wick was lit as well. The fast breeze racing across the bottles swept the flames into the next one.

He ran the Jeep down the middle of the road headed out of town. The Hummer pulled in behind him lining up for the kill when Malcolm tossed the first gasoline bomb into the air. The Hummer swerved madly as the bottle broke twenty or so feet in front of it spraying the flaming liquid fingers out attempting to grasp its target. It was now Malcolm who was maneuvering to position himself directly in front of the pursuer as he tossed one Molotov cocktail after another at the enemy behind him. He was getting the range at about the same time the passenger seat top started to melt. The sixth wine bottle arched majestically through the air and nailed the hood of the Hummer engulfing it in flames and obscuring the vision of the driver, who jinked when he should have jived. The Hummer hit the curb, tilted, and slammed into the turn signal switching box which spun it sideways and then smack into the turn signal pole which it clipped neatly off at the foot, but not before crushing the two troopers inside into catfish bait.

Malcolm locked up the Jeep and skidded and bounced to a stop forty yards beyond. Unlatching the milk crate of now burning tiki torches, he kicked the volatile bombs out of the Jeep, pulled away from the burning mass and grabbed a blanket to smother the passenger seat back that had begun to burn.

"You two alright down there?"

"Ahhh, ahhh, yeah?" The sudden stillness of the night crashed in upon him. His heart was still racing a thousand miles an hour. "Are we safe yet?"

"Almost, honey, almost."

He looked back and could see the Humvee's contents spewed across the intersection where it now laid on its side, mortally wounded and partially impaled by the bent and twisted remains of the light pole. The cocktail's fire was still working on the hood and would soon engulf the vehicle. A shape caught his eye in the pale moon-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

light that now cast its silvery shadow across the landscape. He turned the Jeep around and rolled into the debris field.

“I’ll be right back, Sarah.”

He quickly inspected the now smoldering Hummer, its occupants beyond help from this world. Then, backing away, he crossed over to the item that had caught his attention in the first place. Slinging his M-16, he reached down and picked up the M-60 machine gun. One bipod was damaged and the barrel looked a little worse for wear. But if he could get it working he would finally have the edge that he needed to survive this game. He hefted the big gun into the back of the Jeep and quickly scanned the remaining debris and the back of the Hummer, grabbing anything that looked valuable to his escape.

The CJ finally reached the edge of town and Malcolm drove down the highway for another twenty or thirty miles before turning off a side road to get into the bush and recuperate from the insanity of this day. He finally pulled into a hillock of thick brush and trees. It was after midnight when he completed snapping the soft-top back up and secured the interior of the Jeep to provide some shelter from the night. Spreading out the blankets and sleeping bags he made make shift beds for the two little ones. He was surprised how quickly they nodded off and slept the bliss of innocence.

Malcolm said a little prayer of thanks. He had not communicated such thoughts in a very long time, but could not ignore his good fortune at the expense of others. He checked on his wards once more before setting down in the moonlight to give a cursory cleaning to his weapon. In the morning he would inspect the ’60 and everything he had acquired this evening. He ran this new inventory through his head as he finished swabbing out the barrel. He had begun the day a prisoner armed with nothing but nerve and desperation. By sheer dumb-ass luck and the grace of God he had expanded his assets to include a Ruger .22, three M-16’s, a Beretta nine-millimeter, one badly dinged M-60, an extra barrel for it, and several hundred rounds for each weapon. He had the means of shelter, food, water, transportation and two young wards that depended upon him for their survival but most important of all he was free once again.

He shook his head and chuckled to himself. “I’ve got to find an easier place to shop!”

Two pairs of eyes watched the troopers from the tree line. Eyes that missed nothing. Eyes that watched with hawkish intent. Eyes that silently took in every movement, every nuance . . . studying . . . learning . . . waiting. Less than one hundred yards away, a company of Homeland Security troopers went about their business setting up their new command center, from which they would control this small town and the surrounding countryside.

No longer was there any hesitancy in their purpose. The President’s recent instructions were explicit and unquestionable. His commands were now gospel, to be followed without question. They, the Homeland Security Force, would be the cornerstone of the President’s efforts to take back the nation, to rid it of all dissension and sedition and provide security for all loyal and obedient American citizens. There would be no more tolerance for un-American conduct. You would conform by choice or by coercion. The manner didn’t matter so long as you presented yourself as a model citizen and didn’t question or complain. Such un-American activities could no longer be tolerated.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

The two pairs of eyes retreated back into the dark of the surrounding forest. Like wraiths the pair of dark forest dwellers moved swiftly and silently through the underbrush. Legs pounding in rhythm with the internal back beat that would have worn out a rock and roll drummer during a premier solo. Leaping over large fallen trees as if in near flight. Their passage was barely noticed by even the permanent residents of the forest, it was so quick.

The shadows were moving quickly in a great arc through the forest skirting the small suburban sprawl on the leading edge of town that was ever threatening to intrude upon the domain of the massive trees and thick underbrush of this ancient land. Their feet pounded through the failing light in a beat of defiant primal rhythm that kept pace with their thoughts as they raced on. The attack was on and the intended victims didn't even know that they had already lost the battle.

The light was quickly fading as the shadowy pair neared their intended first victims. Their blood was pumping hot and heavy in their veins as they suddenly went to ground. They became the forest, one with the vines and ferns that littered the forest floor. Their breath was quick and humid filled with the moist carbon dioxide that was being pumped out of muscles that seemed hewn from the very rock deep beneath the massive trees.

The eyes in the forest once again focused on the enemy . . . and waited . . . and waited . . . and waited.

A squad of troopers casually cruised along the trail up ahead. The troopers were on patrol, the first line of defense for the main body of the security forces that the pair had been observing for the last several days. The troopers had become complacent through boredom. They failed to take their responsibilities seriously in this backwater community long tamed by their strict occupation. The citizens had finally conceded their inalienable rights to these heavy-handed representatives of a distant government, at least those that had missed the initial exodus into the surrounding wild lands or had not been packed off to the security re-education camps for showing any signs of dissension. Unwilling and now unable to defend themselves and/or stand up for their rights . . . they now had none.

The troopers strolled along smoking and joking, talking to each other, laughing, neither watching nor even paying any attention to the darkness that was about to close in upon them.

Just a little further

The forest wraith closest to the trail slowly reached out its hand and grabbed what appeared to be a thin vine snaking along the ground. Slowly the small vine was drawn taut. They watched . . . waiting . . . waiting. The second wraith rose to a low crouch coiling himself in anticipation. Muscles prepared to spring, the heart began pumping its enriched elixir to needed limbs, limbs that would within seconds spring into action. Wicked and deadly action. The troopers never heard the metallic release at the end of the vine. Both wraiths were now moving, quickly through the underbrush. Past the giant ferns, over the fallen limbs that lined the forest floor they gathered speed. The heavy pendulum was moving down from high in the canopy overhead, midway now through its arc gathering speed as it descended from the dark. The shadows neared their targets at increasing speed; they were becoming a blur in the darkness.

The lead trooper heard something, ahead, above, something? One of the tail end troopers thought he heard something also, but off to the side, perhaps a deer?

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Then the trap struck viciously. A large log bristling with sharpened spikes achieved its terminal velocity just before reaching the forest floor and wickedly impaled the first three troopers and swept them from the trail and off into the darkness. A microsecond behind the disappearance of the point elements of the patrol the wraiths burst from the forest undergrowth running at full speed they slammed into the staggering and confused survivors.

The lead wraith opened fire at point blank range with a grizzly old 1911 into the face of the first trooper as he slashed his machete through the soft throat of the trooper standing beside him. Spinning around in a dance of death he brought his machete's back slash whipping viciously through the dark air, severing the remaining tissue and bone, separating the gagging and sputtering trooper's head clean off as the second wraith hit the patrol with equal vengeance. Two more troopers disappeared in his wake as he caved in the face of another with a savage horizontal buttstroke that would have made even the most battle hardened DI cringe. The next victim's throat was ripped out by a wicked bayonet slash before the wraith sent two controlled bursts into the remaining members of the patrol. Behind him the big .45 boomed twice more and the ambush was over.

Like evil incarnate the twin wraiths stood surveying their carnage. Where just seconds before had been a patrol of the living breathing elite of the New World Order, there were now ten very dead troopers. In grizzly fashion they collected the ten heads and stuffed them in a duffle bag. They had a greeting to prepare for the new commander of the Security Forces in town. Hell had just arrived and troopers were on the menu. The pair pulled back into the shadows and disappeared.

Early the next morning, Major Eric Dressler awoke to ten pairs of cold eyes. Ten heads lined up in perfect military formation rested on the chart table of his personal command tent, staring at him with their lifeless eyes. His screams served as reveille for the entire camp.

Miles away, two warriors previously cloaked in forest greens and browns completed their clean up from the ghoulish nights work beside a crystal clear forest stream. Using a handful of fine sand, Todd Curry, former Cadet 2nd Class, scrubbed the dried blood from his skin. Sequoia, a one time pacifist, tree hugger and ardent vegetarian, heated water for a hot cup of tea. They would enjoy the hot liquid warmth, eat and rest for the rest of the day. Tonight, there was much work to be done. A cancer was in the town below that had been slowly spreading. That threat would end in the coming evenings. The enemy of freedom had been located and identified. They would learn to fear the darkness. They would learn to fear the night. **They would learn fear.** For wraiths now stalked the land of the living and for two shadowy young innocents the metamorphosis was complete . . . **They had become war.**

Pax Americana 53 - The Chair is Against the Wall . . .

War is just when it is necessary; arms are permissible when there is no hope except in arms. -
Machiavelli, The Prince

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

If once the people become inattentive to the public affairs, you and I, and Congress and Assemblies, Judges and Governors, shall all become wolves. It seems to be the law of our general nature, in spite of individual exceptions. - Thomas Jefferson

A military operation involves deception. Even though you are competent, appear to be incompetent. Though effective, appear to be ineffective. - Sun-Tzu, The Art of War.

There was an explosion and suddenly his world was spinning around inside a box. Smoke and fire began to fill the space. Brentwood was trapped. Choking from the smoke that was quickly filling up the passenger compartment and water that was bubbling in from below he struggled blindly on all fours searching for an exit. Dead bodies and gear kept getting in the way and the flames licked at his clothes. Sudden he found the window and pushed it open into the dark water, but he was still trapped . . . caught by something unseen holding his legs, he was stuck half in and half out of the vehicle and underwater. He couldn't breath. His lungs were burning as he struggled and clawed at the water's surface just beyond his reach. He was suddenly jolted by a scream that ripped through the very fragment of the water he was suffocating in.

Brentwood awoke in a cold sweat gulping for air and clawing at the covers and sheet that had become wrapped around his legs. His heart was pounding in his ears and every muscle and fiber of his entire body ached and burned. He sat on the edge of the bed panting and terrified.

His bedroom door suddenly burst open and a heavily armed Marine crouched to the side of the doorframe giving the room a quick once over.

"Mr. Davis, are you all right?"

"Ahh . . . yes . . . ah . . . I guess so." He answered through wired jaws.

Brentwood sat there panting and forcing fresh air into his lungs for a few more seconds as the guard made a cursory check of the room. After assuring himself that all was secure he returned to his station by the door.

"Just another nightmare, Sergeant . . . damn."

"The ambush, Sir?"

"Yes . . . I'm afraid it was." Brentwood got up and moved shakily past the Marine. "That damn thing just keeps haunting me."

"Well, Sir, you have been through a lot lately." The Marine said matter of factly.

Brentwood shook his head slowly and that did nothing to improve his headache as he walked into his kitchen and began to prepare himself a cup of tea to calm his nerves. Between the nightmares, the reconstructive surgery, the post surgical pain, the anguish of worrying if his bosses knew of his "almost" defection and then worrying if the militia thought of him now as a traitor, he wondered if he would ever have another restful nights sleep again.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

He sat in the semi-darkness of his living room and sipped the warm liquid through aching teeth. His ever-present bodyguard hovered just out of sight . . . always there, always near and always heavily armed. Brentwood wondered if he would ever again have a normal life. Then he thought about it and wondered if anyone would ever have a normal life. He would have laughed at the irony of it all, if not for his wired jaw and the pain caused by any but the slightest movements of his facial muscles.

The surgery had gone well and he was expected to recover with little residual damage from the fall . . . er . . . “the torture” he had endured at the hands of the rebel militia. It wasn’t his lie - it was “their” assumption, but it would do for now. That he was also suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder was understandable, considering what he had been through over the last six months or so. The Director himself had visited Brentwood in the recovery room and assured him; now that he was safe extra precautions would be taken to guarantee that he stayed that way.

But Brentwood wasn’t convinced that the ever-present guard was there to protect him as much as to keep an eye on him. About the only place that he was allowed to go and not be accompanied by his bodyguard was the bathroom, and he had to insist on that. For now his job was to recover. It had been just under six weeks since his “rescue” from the clutches of the “enemy” and he was scheduled to have all the wiring in his jaw removed in the next few days. After that, he didn’t have a clue what would be expected of him. Back to the office, probably, but to do what? Nothing seemed to have changed the couple of times that he visited his work. The folks there were, of course, happy to see him, except perhaps his junior deputy, the understudy that now was being returned to his old responsibilities. He would bear keeping an eye on. But Brentwood was used to the old corporate/bureaucratic backbiting climbing the ladder game. He was in fact a master of staying out of the bureaucratic line of fire. It was in the real life that he had failed miserably in staying out of the line of fire.

There was a team of Marines that provided Brentwood twenty-four hour security that was lead by the Gunnery Sergeant that he had met in the recovery room, Gunnery Sergeant Talford. Brentwood was sure that he had met the surely Marine somewhere before but couldn’t put the face to the place. But something was nagging at his thoughts just beyond the veil of recognition. He knew this Marine . . . but from where?

Malcolm awoke with the first grey of dawn in the eastern sky and rolled over beneath the tarp he had wrapped himself up in under the Jeep. Scanning the perimeter from every side, he achingly crawled out into the cold morning air. Checking the charge on his M-16, he then pulled on the web gear and checked on the two little ones sleeping in the back of the Jeep on top of all the gear.

“Oh, to be a kid again.” He muttered to himself, as he looked at the sleeping children there.

He then made a brief recon around the hillock that he had pulled into late last night. Frost hung on everything and the air had a wintry bite to it. Patches of snow lingered in the shadows and Malcolm carefully proceeded checking out their location in the light of the new day. His eyes ever watchful, his weapon ever ready, he moved quietly and smoothly taking it all in.

Thirty minutes later, he returned to the Jeep. The kids were still asleep. He had no idea of exactly where they were. The rolling hills and scattered trees and fields told him that he was probably somewhere in the Midwest,

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

but that was a guess at best. The lack of a blanket of snow at this time of the year indicated that he was at least below the regular snow line. But beyond that he was lost.

He quietly tried to extract the small Coleman single burner stove from the back of the CJ without waking the children and failed. Sarah flashed her big eyes at him as he retrieved the stove almost beneath her.

“Go back to sleep little one. I’ll have something hot for us in a minute or two.”

“Mr. Malcolm . . .” She said stretching. “Are we safe now?”

“For now, child.” He reassured her. “For now we’re safe. Now you just stay warm until I get some water heated.”

Malcolm stood there for a second sizing up the situation. He considered their present location as adequate for now. They were well hidden from both the main highway, that was several hilltops away, and the secondary road he had used to find this location. The trees were a concern due to the lack of overhead cover the bare branches provided at this time of the year, but that could be dealt with. If he only had himself to consider he could easily hole up here for a while and catch his breath, but he didn’t have only himself to consider. During his recon he had seen the roof of an old barn off in the distance. It looked in pretty bad shape but it was still standing and would at least cut some of the wind off them and provide them cover from anyone flying overhead.

He fixed a quick breakfast for himself and the kids. It wasn’t much, instant oatmeal, but it was hot and quickly warmed them all up. For the next hour he went about the business of camouflaging the Jeep with one of the large military surplus canvas tarps he had found in the garage. Then he added a layer or two of squaw wood, clumps of dry grass, and a few shovels full of dark dirt to break up the bulk and shape of the covered vehicle. He stepped back a bit and was pleased with the results. It would be difficult to distinguish it from the surrounding ground. He hoped it would be enough.

Bundling up the children inside the Jeep to keep them warm, he made sure that they understood that they were to stay there until he returned, which could be an hour or more. As an added precaution, he pulled the wire to the horn so that the children wouldn’t accidentally inform the world of their whereabouts and headed out.

It took well over an hour for Malcolm to work his way through the thick woods to a vantage point that overlooked the old barn. It appeared to be abandoned and in pretty poor shape, but it was a standing shelter and would provide just the sort of cover they needed. Careful to take a different way back to the Jeep, it took nearly as long to reach it as the first leg out to check out the barn. It was upon returning to camp that Malcolm nearly had a heart attack. The children were gone!

In a panic he quickly scanned about looking for any trace of their whereabouts. He analyzed every footprint on the ground looking for evidence of their passage. He saw only the images of his own boots and then . . . there! Two sets of little feet going off into the bush. He quickly took up their pursuit and ran through the brush hot on their trail. Less than a hundred yards from the jeep he found them. Tossing rocks and sticks into a tiny creek that cut across the foot of the hill they were on. His eyes, cat-like surveyed the surrounding woods and open fields looking for any possible threat.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Sarah! Jesse! GET BACK UP HERE . . . NOW!” He barked at them through gritted teeth.

The pair jumped, startled by his sudden arrival. He waved them to him, keeping his eyes and his rifle pointed out ever on the defense. The kids hesitated at first and then ran to him as he called to them again.

“Come one kids, I’ve found us a safe place to go! COME ON NOW!”

He herded the pair back up to the Jeep and began to tear down the camouflage covering. As gently as he could he scolded the pair, but he felt that he had to get across the danger of failing to obey his orders. He realized that he probably raised his voice a little and spoke a little harshly. He could tell by the size of their eyes and their fearful, nearly teary-eyed expressions that he at least put the fear of the boogey men, or the Jack Booted Thugs as he thought of them, into their little minds. He didn’t like being harsh with children but felt there was no choice in this matter. Their very lives were at stake, not to mention his own. He finished the scolding with a warm hug for the pair and made sure they understood that he was trying to protect them.

“You both need to do exactly what I tell you so we can find your family . . . do you understand?”

“My mommy and daddy?”

“Yes . . . if we can, Sarah, but first we have to get away from the bad men. They won’t let us find your mommy and daddy if they catch us.”

God, *what a situation!* he thought to himself. *How in the hell am I going to locate any one in this mess?*

The barn proved to be more than adequate for their needs. Old and leaning slightly to one side, missing boards and shingles, and one door hung from only a single hinge; it was never the less perfect for their needs. It looked to Malcolm that it had been a long time since anyone had used it or at least it had not been visited on a regular basis. There was even a make shift workbench and a few shelves built against one wall. He backed the Jeep in and began unloading its contents. He really hadn’t taken the time to properly inventory all his acquisitions and now could spread them out and sort through the mess. Using several of the tarps and bales of old hay, he constructed a small sheltered space in one corner of the barn. The combination of tarps and hay bales made for a surprisingly warm little room for them.

After taking a mental inventory, Malcolm then set about working on the weapons he now possessed. The first priority was cleaning and reloading everything. He fumbled about at first breaking down the M-16’s and the Beretta’s but became more proficient with each effort. The M-60 was a bit of a challenge, but he managed to complete that task with the small instruction booklet that was stashed in the extra barrel bag he had grabbed off the overturned Hummer. The primary barrel on the machine gun was trashed. Looking down the barrel he could tell that there was a slight bend in it. Fortunately the replacement barrel was straight as an arrow and mated with the receiver without a hitch. Thank God for quick change barrels! Malcolm thanked the gods of war.

The receiver was scratched and deeply scored from its summersault and subsequent trip across the blacktop from the wrecked Hummer, but Malcolm was not interested in cosmetics, just function. He wasn’t exactly sure just how he was going to mount the gun on the Jeep, but now he had some serious firepower.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

The rest of the day was spent going over all the gear and repacking the Jeep as efficiently as possible. He did not want to take the chance of being caught flatfooted again. The kids, for the most part, entertained themselves as they explored the barn. They discovered a mouse nest exposed when Malcolm constructed their hay bale shelter. The pink babies fascinated the children and he had to warn them not to touch them or the mother would abandon them and they would die. Sarah looked at him in horror.

“She wouldn’t come back for them?”

“No, not if they had your smell on them.” He answered and carefully placed a new bale on top to protect them from little fingers.

“But our mommy would come to get us if she could.”

“Well Sarah, people are different from animals.” *Sometimes*, he thought to himself.

“Mr. Malcolm, do you think our mommy is looking for us now?”

“I’m sure she would try if she could.”

“Can she find us here?” she said, looking around.

“Sarah, I think the bad men have your parents and won’t let them come to look for you. I’m sure if your mommy and daddy could get away they would find you.”

“But you got away Mr. Malcolm . . . so . . . my mommy and daddy can get away too . . . right?”

“Well . . .” He thought for a moment. “Yeah . . . they can probably get away too, but it’s very hard and sometimes you have to wait a long time for the chance.”

He tried to reassure her. “I think the best idea is to go to one of your uncles and let your mommy and daddy find you there. Do you know where any of your uncles or aunts lives?”

“My uncle Jack. I like him, he lives in the woods and has a pony that he lets me ride him when we go visiting.”

Their conversation seemed to last forever as Malcolm tried carefully to draw out every ounce of information the little seven-year old girl had to offer. It was like trying to blindly construct a jigsaw having no clue as to what the design should end up looking like.

By dinnertime Malcolm had at least a vague idea of where her uncle Jack lived. If what she was telling him could be trusted. The next problem was to find out just where they were right now and then figure out a way for a heavily armed fugitive with two small children to travel across several states and find a needle in a haystack. Piece of cake for an educated man with a Ph.D in history, right?

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

He had only one thing to say after he tucked the pair into their sleeping bags and later finally hit the sack himself. It was one word that just said it all.

“SHIT.”

It felt strange to be able to move his jaw again. For the first time in a long time Brentwood actually felt good. His face still ached and was sore as hell, and it would be some time before all the healing process was completed, but that damned claustrophobic feeling of this teeth being wired together was finally gone. On top of that today was a special day.

He had practically begged and pleaded with his warden, as he referred to his senior Marine bodyguard, Gunnery Sergeant Talford, to be trained in combat arms. Brentwood had made a promise to himself that he would never again be naked and defenseless. He finally realized that his security was his responsibility and no one else's. It had taken some effort to push through the required paperwork and gain permission for a concealed carry permit, but not even the Director of Homeland Security could find fault in his request. He felt that it was unnecessary with the bodyguards that kept close tabs on him twenty-four-seven. But Brentwood insisted, pleaded, and eventually got his way.

The Gunny even agreed to train the bespectacled bureaucrat provided that he could get the authorization, never for an instant figuring that it would be possible under the current restraints. However, much to his surprise, somehow Brentwood did acquire the proper documents and was now one of the few Americans outside the military and law enforcement communities that could legally carry a firearm. And true to his word the Gunnery Sergeant drove his client down to the FBI ranges at the Marine base at Quantico.

What was even more surprising was how intensely Brentwood took to his new obsession. The Gunny had taught some sharp recruits during his career, but couldn't remember anyone that was such an apt student. Brentwood was like a sponge, absorbing everything and missing nothing. He was serious, dedicated, and unlike so many of the bureaucratic paper pushers that lived and worked within the beltway that Talford had come in contact with in the past, Brentwood was not the least bit pretentious.

Two weeks later Brentwood had just completed his third string of fire, and he and the Gunnery Sergeant walked out to change out targets. As he stapled up a clean target Talford said something that nearly knocked him for a loop.

“Doc Anders would be very proud of you today, Mr. Davis.”

Brentwood froze at the mention of the militia physician name. He slowly turned his head and stared at the Marine grinning back at him. His thoughts flashed back to the evening before his accident . . . there at the dinner in Anders cabin. That face, the gunny's had been there in the back of his mind since the recovery room after his rescue. Gunnery Sergeant Talford . . . he had first met him at that dinner party, there in militia country!

“HOLY SHIT!”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Well maybe not quite holy, but I’ll take responsibility for the shit part.” Talford replied.

Brentwood almost lost his balance. “How . . . could, how . . . when . . . you?!”

“I was assigned to make sure when you got home that no one would take advantage of your condition, Mr. Davis, and to keep you safe.” The Gunny picked up the staple gun and completed tacking up the target. “You’re a valuable man, Mr. Davis, if, that is . . . you are still a patriot?”

It was now the Gunny’s turn to size up the person standing opposite of him.

Brentwood took in a breath and stood up. “Gunny . . . I’ve always been a patriot.” He said matter of factly. “Just not a very good one.”

“We’ll see about that, Mr. Davis . . .” Talford patted him on the shoulder and the pair began their walk back to the shooting line. “We’ll see about that.”

Brentwood had just joined the Patriot movement and the American gun culture, lock stock and barrel.

Geneva, Switzerland

A pair of well-dressed executive looking gentleman quietly sipped their coffees in a private booth that looked out over the lake. The meeting had not been overly long, they rarely were. Most of it was mere formality, the details having been resolved by their minions well before the representatives of the Consortium sat down at the table. Occasionally though there were issues that were addressed only at such meetings and the topic of the subdued conversation over coffees rested on just such an issue.

Jonathan raised his cup almost to his lips and paused. “I am still having difficulty with the direction of this decision.”

“I can empathize with your concerns, but surely you see that this is the only viable option under the present circumstances?”

Jonathan brought his cup back to the table. “But Ian, you have no idea the kind of repercussions this action will create.”

“I’m sure the board has worked out all the angles before even suggesting such a recourse.”

Jonathan leaned forward and lowered his voice to barely above a whisper. “But you don’t understand this will not subdue them . . . instead it will enrage them!”

“Surely you can’t suggest that they would not welcome the stability and protection of UN peacekeeping forces in such a crisis situation?” Ian took another sip and shook his head. “No, my friend, the days of the American

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

cowboys and their cavalry riding in at the last minute to save the day are well over. You Americans don't even make movies of such things anymore."

Ian looked out the window at the wintry landscape. "No, my friend. We will be the cavalry riding in to save the day and your countrymen will welcome us."

Jonathan shook his head and stared at his cup. "But to take down the President . . ."

"Oh, come, good fellow, don't think of it like that. We're merely restructuring the global corporate landscape. Think of it as a sort of house keeping exercise."

Ian leaned forward. "Look, Jonathan, we've disarmed every major first world country over the last twenty years. One more shouldn't be all that difficult under the present conditions."

As Jonathan sat back and slowly sipped the last of his cappuccino, the first thought to cross his mind was a comment attributed to Admiral Isoroko Yamamoto following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor when he said **'I fear that all we have done is awakened a sleeping giant.'**

The pair finished their coffees a few minutes later and left the little shop headed back to their respective offices. Jonathan waved his driver on and chose instead to walk back the short distance through the light snow fall. He liked the sound of his footsteps crunching in the snow. He liked snow for that matter. It had a way of making the world appear so clean. He realized, of course, that all it did was merely cover up any of the ugliness that might lie beneath. But, for the time being, the world appeared white and virginal. Which was anything but how he felt. He knew that this action was necessary in the natural flow of things. But he still did not like the idea of culling the herd in this fashion. He hoped that the Consortium really knew what the hell they were doing. They were playing a very big gambit and this was not a game of liar's poker.

He arrived in his office a few minutes later feeling a little bit better. The brisk winter air had cleared his head and he was ready for the task ahead. He had a lot of work to do. Planning an assassination was not a task to be taken lightly.

Desert Doc

Pax Americana Chapter 54 - Into the Night

Max glanced back at the Toyota truck hidden under the cut boughs and branches. It wasn't a very good camouflage, but it was going to have to be enough. Their pell-mell flight after Andy had given the word over the radio had brought them here to Johnson's Riding Stables. Actually, they were laying low in the large wooded lot across from the stables. Very little was moving aside from the horses in their paddock, which looked well cared for. Max knew the son of the owners; a man named Willy Johnson, who worked at the stables and lived alone several miles away. Max suspected he was the one caring for the horses. The elder Johnson was not a well man in the best of situations, and now with the power out, the Plague abounding, and the stress of the occupation and quarantine, Max was certain that the old man had succumbed to his myriad illnesses.

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The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

He, Lisa and Darcy sat under the pines, dressed in their BDU camouflage clothing. They were seated in a loose triangle facing outward, with their AK-47s cradled on their laps. The forest had begun to darken along with the sky, and long grey shadows lay about. Darcy sat with the earbud of the radio in place, listening intently for any sound from Andy. Max was listening almost as intently. No sound had come from the earpiece in some time, and if Max was concerned, then Darcy was scared. Max was impressed with Darcy's resolve, as she did not key the mic to ask Andy for his status, nor stand up and begin pacing, or even suggest that they go looking for him. They had a plan, and she stuck to it. Her lips pressed together in a firm line, as she frequently twisted the knob on her radio to monitor the several back-up frequencies that they had agreed upon.

As the minutes rolled past, the shadows became longer, the sky darker, until finally it was black under the forests canopy. Max glanced at his watch nervously. Andy was overdue by only an hour, but it felt like an eternity. He dared not use the radio, as the soldiers in town would have discovered that there was no attack, and would suspect it was a diversion. They would be sniffing for any sign of things out of the ordinary, and Max didn't know the sophistication of their radio direction finding equipment. It would be a terrible thing to have come this far only to be foiled by their own lack of patience. The plan called for them to be under cover by now, as they felt certain that the helicopters would be up looking for them with FLIR. He glanced again at Darcy, and saw the worry etched in her face. Lisa was also doing well, though her frequent looks at Darcy showed her concern as well. They froze as they heard rotors in the distance, but they were far off and did not come closer. He hoped they hadn't found Andy.

He heard another, different noise, and alerted the others with a hushed "Ssst."

The noise became louder, and resolved itself into the "Clop-clop-clop" of horses' hooves. In the near blackness lone rider soon came into view, illuminated by an old railroad-style kerosene lantern. His long duster coat was pulled tightly around him, and a cowboy hat sat upon his head. The man's head was bent low, as if deep in thought. The man turned into the driveway of the house, and finally dismounted the horse near the barn. Before disappearing into the barn, he gave his mount a few long strokes to the neck, and the buzz of quiet speech not heard floated to the hidden listeners. Soon, soft yellow light began to show through the windows of the barn and horses walked unbidden to the rear of the building. The rear door opened and, with the soft light that spilled forth, the man could be faintly seen carrying a bale of hay into the corral, dodging horses who tried to steal mouthfuls of hay before the man set the bale in a rack and cut the twine with his pocket knife. He then moved to an old-fashioned well pump, and began to jack the handle up and down. After ten minutes of this, the pumping stopped, and the man walked back into the barn. He soon re-emerged with a five gallon bucket full of what Max assumed was grain, and poured it in a line in a low trough. The grain seemed quite popular with the horses, as they shouldered one another out of the way to get to the trough.

This had been one of the many weak points in Max and Andy's plan. They had suspected that the Johnson's would not be around, but here was their son. His help could be invaluable, but if he was to be uncooperative, it could spell the doom of their plan. He didn't think he could contemplate shooting the man, and even hog-tying him could be a death sentence. Even as he watched the man set to his tasks, he strained his ears for the sound of rotor blades. They needed to get under cover. He didn't know if the forest canopy would be sufficient to hide them from the a helicopter's sensors, and if Andy had been captured, they needed to keep on the move.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Max made another “Ssst” and got the girls up. There was a three walled pole barn that the stables kept some of their hay in a hundred yards or so into the pasture. It was half empty of hay because of the Brown, and Andy figured it would be good enough concealment from the air. Max pulled a Russian “second generation” night vision monocular and put it to his non-dominant eye while squeezing the other shut. He pressed the switch to turn the scope on, and peered through the lens. He scanned quickly around the pasture, and although the image was poor without the supplemental infrared light, he saw nothing of a threatening nature. He took the scope from his eye and led the girls forward. They made their way quietly away from the main group of stable buildings, and when they had crossed far beyond the pole shed parallel to the road, they crossed the road and went over the board fence into the pasture. They made their way with caution to the pole shed. They climbed the dry bales to the center of the pile and, as quietly as they could, began to settle themselves in to wait.

Max didn’t think much. He simply looked through the viewer at the barn and surrounding pasture. Aside from the figure in the barn and the horses, the grainy image showed nothing moved. The only way to increase the range of the old, obsolete night vision scope was to activate the infrared light source. While this increased the range of the viewer, it also stood out like a sore thumb to anyone else with a night vision viewer. It was like using a flashlight in a field at night: sure, you could see better using the flashlight, but if anyone else was in the field, they could see you using the flashlight long before you could see them. Max didn’t dare to use the illuminator.

The point of no return was fast approaching. If Andy didn’t show soon, they would have to leave without him. He hated the thought of leaving Andy behind. Fingers of guilt gripped Max’s hearth as he thought of the danger that Andy had faced while Max stayed behind “with the womenfolk.” But Andy’s arguments for this plan had been sound, and they had gotten this far.

Work the solution, not the problem, he told himself. *One step at a time.*

So far, the next step was a troublesome one. They needed the man in the barn to help them or to get out of the way. So far, they had lost nothing by waiting, but the time for action was rapidly approaching. The surveillance flights would be reaching this area soon. They needed to not be here. Max pulled the viewer from his eye and sank back behind the bales of hay, letting a sigh escape. He closed his eyes and rubbed them. He needed to make a decision. He checked his watch: It was time to go. He bent low to where Darcy and Lisa lay, watching outward from the small building. He whispered, “I’m going to talk to Willy. I know him a little. If he can help us, it’ll make things a lot easier. We have to get going. We can’t wait for Andy any longer.”

Max imagined Darcy’s face falling, showing despair, but she swallowed and whispered in agreement. “You keep an eye out for Andy and . . . anyone else. I’ll be back soon.”

Max handed the night scope to Lisa, and then crawled over the bales to the pasture below. He walked out of the pasture onto the road, and then walked down the driveway toward the barn. He stopped some yards away from the barn.

As he grew near, he said in a loud voice, “Hello, Willy. Are you home? It’s Deputy Max Jeager, “

A silence ensued before Willy Johnson appeared in the doorway, holding a revolver low in his hand. He was a large man with a barrel chest and thickly muscled arms. His hair was going a little grey, though he was only in

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

his early forties. Max knew him as a man who had a good reputation in town; A High School football star who decided to stay on the farm with his father and help to run things. Uneducated, but not dumb by any stretch. Mostly a quiet man, who had never married, though he dated often.

“Max? What do you want? What are you doing here?” He said.

Max walked forward into the dim lantern light, his AK-47 slung on his back. He made a strange sight, dressed in woodland camouflage and carrying such a wicked-looking rifle. Max put on a friendly, but serious face; his arms subtly out from his hips, palms empty and outward. Max had learned from his many law enforcement classes the strange but powerful effect of nonverbal communication, or “body language.” His posture was designed to show Willy that he was not a threat. He hoped this would offset the martial appearance that his clothing and weapon presented.

“I don’t have time to beat around the bush, Willy.” Max said. “I’m getting out of here. I think there’s more chance of getting killed staying under the “protection” of the quarantine than out there. They are going house to house and picking up people deemed threats to public safety, and I’m afraid that means me: I had a little difficulty following the orders of my superiors.”

“I know you Max. You’re a good man.” said Willy, holstering his revolver and motioning Max forward. “You enforce the spirit of the laws, not their letter. You use common sense while you take care of this community. If you think that’s the way it is, then I got to respect that. What do you want from me? How can I help?”

“I need horses. Three or four of them. Darcy, Lisa and Andy were coming along. Andy’s late, but we can’t wait any longer. We’re leaving anyway.”

“You ever ride horses before?”

“A few times. I was a Boy Scout.”

“How about the others?”

“They’ve ridden before, but I don’t know how much.”

“Well,” Said Willy, stroking the stubble that lay upon his chin, “I’m running out of feed for them all anyway. Don’t have time to exercise ‘em much either. You might’s well take ‘em, long as you’ll take care of ‘em.”

Max was struck by a sudden thought. “Willy, come with us. You’ll be a great help with the horses. You have a farmer’s skills and common sense.”

“There’s nothing for me out there. Everything I got is right here. Dad’s awful sick, and he needs me. The horses need me. And frankly Max, I don’t think that things are as bad here as you say. Sure, I hate the way we got a curfew, the way we can’t get in the car and drive to where we want. But I think they got our best interests at heart.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“I think they got you fooled, Willy, but I respect your opinion. And I thank you for your help despite what you think.”

“Let’s get you set up.” said Willy.

Max stiffened: His earpiece had made two distinct crackles. Two more meant that it was Andy, and he was close. In the time it took to think about it, the earpiece made two more crackles. Andy was here, and he was safe. He knew the girls heard it too. A wide grin split his face, but Willy had already turned to get the horses ready. He trusted the girls would signal Andy, and indeed soon there was a whistle outside. The horses lifted their heads and twitched their ears. That, Willy noticed.

“Something’s going on.” Willy spoke.

“It’s Andy. He made it.” Said Max as he turned his ear toward Willy and tapped the radio earpiece.

“Good. You’ll need four horses then,” Willy replied as he turned back to the tack.

“Willy, I need to step out for a minute. I’ll be back with Andy to help.” Max said as he broke into a run toward the door.

“Sure.”

Max ran into the paddock, the long-suffering horses eyeing him with only mild interest as he ran by them to the pole shed where the girls and Andy waited. They had seen him drawing near with the night scope, and with no small disregard for light and sound discipline, had shouted “Andy, over here.”

The two friends met in the pasture before Andy could make it to where the girls were set up.

“Jesus, I thought they got you!” said Max, slapping Andy hard on the back.

“They still might. Any recon flights out here yet?” asked Andy. “Let’s get under cover.”

They walked quickly to the pole shed, with Andy telling of his mostly uneventful, but still nerve wracking trip on foot to the Johnson’s Stables. A brief and tearful reunion with Darcy was ended by Andy himself. “Look guys, we aren’t out of here yet. Let’s hold it together and stick with the plan. Is that Old Man Johnson in there?”

Max sobered quickly and told Andy of the elder Mr. Johnson’s condition and of Willy’s assistance but reluctance to accompany them. That was a relief in some ways: There were hardly supplies for the four of them at the retreat as it stood, much less throwing another person into the mix.

“Let’s get in there and help Willy. Gals, will you continue to keep watch out here? The hard part is still yet to come.” Said Andy softly, as he clapped his arm around Max’s shoulder and walked toward the stables.

Inside, Willy had led four horses into the stable and had begun saddling them. Max and Andy watched closely what Willy was doing, then grabbed the remaining two saddles laying there and began to saddle the horses.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Willy finished his work, then murmured soft corrections to the two men as they worked. He began to tell them how to take care of the horses, what to do for them, and what never to do. Max and Andy listened intently, knowing that their lives could depend on these creatures and thus Willy's instructions to care for them. As they were completing the task, and the time to leave grew close, Max brought the girls into the stable, and they began to load the horses with Willy's help.

Finally, it was time to leave.

"Willy, I don't know how to say 'Thanks' enough." said Max, shaking hands with the man then pulling a box that was vacuum sealed in three bags from his backpack. "I hope this is a start. It's .38 Special ammunition for your revolver. I wish it was .357 Magnum, but it's all I have. It's not much now, but if I'm right, you're gonna need it before too long."

"Max, I hope you're wrong, but just in case, I'm going to put these little fellas someplace safe." He said, shaking the box. His face sobered as he said, "Be careful, folks. You'd best be getting along."

The four nodded and led the horses into the night. Max and Andy had not lightly chosen this means of escape. Though the horses were not as tractable as a car or a four wheeler, they were mostly self-healing, quiet, fuel was everywhere, and if times got tough, you could even eat 'em. They also had another advantage that Max hoped they didn't need: They were big thermal signatures. The patrol pilots would have gotten used to seeing the horses in the fields. Their large heat traces would not arouse suspicion. If the helicopters were not too close, the four could hide behind the horses and remain undetected during a cursory examination. If the FLIR equipped patrol got suspicious and flew close to investigate, well, it would be four AK-47s against a Blackhawk. Even the Somalians had had better odds. Max silently prayed that their luck would hold another hour.

AGreyMan

Pax Americana Chapter 55 - House Calls

Mark exhaled heavily and leaned on the handle of the maul. He removed his hat and wiped his brow with the back of his mitten. He had already removed his jacket, but until now his hands still were cold. The weather had turned viciously cold, and they were quickly going through the small stock of wood that was in the cabin. There were downed trees scattered throughout the area near the little hut, and Mark was busily converting them into pieces of burnable length for the stove.

Lazarus was still sleeping inside. They had arrived late yesterday evening, and he had been sleeping since then. The leg looked no worse, but not much better either. Mark had convinced him to swallow one of the erythromycin tablets, but it was too early to tell if it was helping or not. It was late morning now, and Mark had had to get out of the little cabin and look around before he started chopping wood. There were no other homes or farmhouses in sight. He had not wanted to awaken Lazarus to ask him how he knew of this place, but he suspected it was perhaps a hunting shack. A shed out back held a large metal tub and many small buckets, though they were covered with thick a layer of dust. It may have been a maple syrup rendering cabin at one time.

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The cold wind began to bite again and Mark picked up the maul and resumed his attack on the logs. At the end of three hours, there was a respectable pile of wood to be stacked under the eaves of the cabin. Mark decided to take a short break, check on Lazarus and maybe find something to eat. He walked up to the cabin door and quietly opened it. Lazarus was still sleeping, taking deep, slow breaths. The blankets that covered him rose and fell in a reassuring pattern. Mark made a small grunt of satisfaction and turned to check the fire. It burned with sparse flame, giving off its life-giving heat as the wood burned down to coals. The cabin held the faint and comforting smell of wood smoke, and was lit through the small, grimy windows in the front of the cabin. Mark had found a small oil lamp and a jug of what smelled like to be kerosene. He lit the lamp last night with a brand from the fire, and the single lamp provided enough weak light to illuminate most of the cabin. He wanted to husband the kerosene as much as possible, so he kept it lit only long enough to prepare his bedroll.

Now he turned to the garbage bag that held the contents of his pack, and began to rummage through it, looking for some jerky or perhaps some of the fruit snacks that he was certain he had replaced since the last attack of his sweet tooth. He came across his tiny Motorola radio. A FRS/GMRS radio, it was small, compact, and used rechargeable AA batteries as a power source. Out of idle curiosity, he popped the ear bud into his ear, and set the unit to “scan.” He clipped the unit to his belt and resumed his search for food. Lazarus did not stir as Mark unwrapped a granola bar and bit into it. Mark stood and walked about the small cabin peering into corners and moving items on the sparse shelves. The large box beside the door held several small treasures. Mark was uncertain of both the desperation of their current situation, and the condition of the cabins true owners. He had a small amount of food on hand, but it would not last longer than a week, especially if Lazarus’ appetite returned. Mark put his coat, hat and mittens on and stepped out into the cold again.

He walked to the open shed where the huge blackened metal tub lay, and began to poke about. The room held some treasures, if he and Lazarus were forced to remain there. An old-fashioned pitcher pump hung from its handle on the wall. There were a several sections of pipe, and a “sand point” there as well. It looked as if someone had been preparing to sink a well at one time. His biggest find was several finely rusted traps. They hung from a nail on short pieces of chain. Mark didn’t know a whole lot about traps, just what he’d read in “American Survival Guide” and from a few of the civilian survival tapes he watched. He had never even seen one in person, but he knew that it was a terrific find. Traps worked twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. They didn’t care if it was cold, wet, raining or snowing. They stayed at their post and waited. They worked and worked and worked. Mark grabbed them off the wall and despite the fine scale of rust, they looked to be in decent condition. There was a small tag on one that read “Duke Connibear 110.” Mark looked them over and tried to see how they worked.

He dropped the trap that he was holding onto his foot as he started when the ear bud suddenly squawked. “Team one to base.”

Mark stood and pressed the ear bud tighter into his ear, straining to hear the exchange. “Base, go ahead.”

“Looks all clear. I don’t know where the smoke came from, but it’s not here now.” Mark glanced up at the chimney of the cabin. There was a faint, transparent wisp of white smoke rising from the chimney. Could they mean this smoke?

“10-4. Finish the sweep and return. FYI no military patrols in the area per scouts and LPs.”

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No military patrols? thought Mark. *So, at least these guys aren't military.*

“Roger. No other survivors noted this sweep. These ration packs are getting heavy!”

Mark didn't know what to think. Are these friends or foes? Should he try to contact them? Could they help even if they wanted to? They sounded organized and numerous. Any group like that had power. But once again, were they friendly? He wasn't sure he could risk contact, but he knew that Lazarus was bad off. Blood loss, exhaustion and possible infection were combining to spell possible doom for the boy. Mark pondered the previous conversation. “Ration packs” and “Survivors.” It sounded like they were helping those who remained. That was too good to believe it was true. Lazarus had been shot. Mark had been shot at, twice. Everyone was now suspect, but the possibility of help for Lazarus was a strong impetus to ask for help. Should he risk it?

The earbud crackled again: “Team One, check your comms. We have been in the clear: Switch to encryption!”

“Wait!” Shouted Mark into the mic before he could consciously make a decision. “Uhh, I have a boy here who has been shot. Do you have a medic?”

A long pause ensued. Mark hoped that he had made the correct snap decision.

“This is ‘base.’ Please identify yourself and a description of your needs.”

“I have a fifteen or so year old boy, who has a gunshot wound to the left lower leg. I think he's lost some blood. I gave him two liters of saline but he's still not doing well. The wound doesn't look bad, and I cleaned it, but . . . I think he has a fever.”

“Who shot him?”

“I don't know. I just found him.”

“How many in your party?”

“There are just the two of us, and brother, it ain't no party.”

“Roger that. I think we can have our medic take a look. I'll warn you, that any aggression or deception on your part may result in the use of force. Do you understand?”

“I understand.”

“Where are you located?”

“Umm, I'm not exactly sure. Can I contact you in five minutes? I have to get my GPS”

“We'll stand by. What's your name?”

“Mark.”

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Mark ran into the cabin, and while rummaging hurriedly through his garbage bag, over his shoulder, he said, “Well Lazarus, I hope that your trust in me wasn’t misplaced. I took a gamble, and if it pays off, it’ll pay off big. If I lose, it could be the end of us.”

Lazarus made no reply, and Mark found his GPS unit and went back outside. He went back outside to the place he was standing when he first heard the voice on the radio.

“Mark to Base.” he intoned into the microphone.

“Go ahead, Mark. This is Base.” came the reply.

“OK, here are my coordinates.” Mark proceeded to list off the numbers that the GPS provided him.

“Stand by one, Mark.” came the voice, which seemed friendly enough.

“Standing by.”

“Mark, we can get our medic and team there in about four hours.”

“Fantastic. Is there anything I need to do?”

“Just don’t even think of harming the team.”

“No sir. I will not fire unless fired upon.”

“Fair enough, Mark.”

Thus began the longest four hours that Mark had ever experienced. He busied himself by insuring that the Glock was readily accessible in his holster. He hoped it wouldn’t come to that. He checked on Lazarus, who lay sleeping, though he had moved in his sleep and murmured some words that Mark could not make out. His fever did not seem to be worsening, and although he was hot, he was not extremely hot.

He also did his best to clean the tiny cabin, thinking that they - should they prove to be true to their word - may need some relatively clean space to work on Lazarus’ wound. He made certain the fire was properly stoked, and cleaned the globe on the oil lantern and lit it. He made a good-faith effort to clean the small windows that let in the milky daylight. He then paced the floor, looking out the window frequently. As the end of the wait grew near, Mark went outside to wait. It had begun to snow, and despite his anxiety, he marveled at the tiny flakes falling in slow motion from above.

Soon the sounds of footsteps came to him from several sides, as his eye caught multiple movements. There were at least three people coming out of the trees from three different directions. With a pounding heart, he held his hands out away from his sides. For their part, though the approaching people held rifles, they did not point them directly at Mark. The distance closed between them. Mark could see that one member of the party was a woman, and two were men. They all carried FN-FAL rifles and wore large camouflage backpacks. They each

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had a small boom microphone in front of their lips, and a bulge in their stocking caps indicated the earpiece. The woman was young, looking about twenty or so. The men ranged in age from mid-twenties to late forties.

The man in his late forties stepped forward. "Mark?"

"That's me." he said.

"My name is Dale. Is there anyone here beside you and the boy?" he asked.

"No. There's no one."

"Do you mind if we check the cabin?" Dale asked. It was a friendly tone, but his narrowed eyes made it plain that it was not a question.

"You may. There's no one but Lazarus - the wounded boy - in there."

"Does he know we are coming?"

"No, he's been sleeping a lot. I don't think he's unconscious, at least not completely."

"He sounds serious. Let's hurry this along. Please stand here with me while Kate and Luke check it out."

"Very well." said Mark.

Luke and Kate circled outside the cabin and each ducked under the windows as they passed. They reached the door, and got set. They nodded to each other and pushed the door open rapidly. They rushed into the cabin in a crouch, and disappeared into the gloom. Seconds later Kate emerged and made the "OK" sign with her thumb and forefinger.

Dale touched the push-to-talk switch on his radio. "John?"

Mark heard the earpiece crackle.

"Good." said Dale. "Can you stay out for a while? If you get too cold, call in and we'll relieve you. Mark's cabin looks nice and warm." He looked at Mark and gave a merry wink. "Let's get to your boy."

As they entered the cabin, Luke was opening his pack that he had set on the table. He withdrew a small pack and set it on the table. Kate opened her pack and did the same thing. Dale leaned his FAL against the wall and opened his pack as well, pulling out his smaller pack and opening it up, withdrawing a few items. He walked over and pulled a chair up by the bed. He looked at Mark. "What did you say his name was?" Dale asked.

"He told me his name was 'Lazarus.'" replied Mark.

"Let's hope so, Mark." he said as he turned to Lazarus.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Lazarus. Lazarus!” He called. The boy groaned and rolled over. His eyes opened a little, then suddenly widened as he saw the others in the room. His eyes met Mark’s.

“It’s OK, Lazarus. They’re here to help.” said Mark.

Lazarus relaxed a little then looked at Dale. Dale smiled down at him and spoke in a soft, reassuring voice.

“How are you doing, partner?”

“My leg hurts.”

“I bet it does! Can I have a look?”

Lazarus made no reply, but moved to uncover his leg.

“Hang on, pal. I’ll do it for you. You just relax.” said Dale.

Dale gently removed the blanket and began to unwrap the bandages that swathed the leg. He pulled a small flashlight from the little pack and played it on both sides of the wound. It didn’t look terribly bad to Mark’s eyes. He prodded a little here and there, and checked the pulse in his foot. He felt the toes and blanched the toe nail beds.

Dale looked at Lazarus and Mark. “Well, the good news is that it doesn’t need to come off.” He said with a grin. Lazarus smiled back at him. “The bad news” He continued, “Is that the wound needs to be cleaned out, and you need antibiotics.”

“I had some erythromycin tablets that I gave him. I don’t know if they cover the right germs or not.” said Mark.

“They aren’t the best, but they’re better than nothing. How many has he had?” asked Dale

“Just two tablets. Plus a little Tylenol. Last time I gave him some was this morning at about six.”

“Good. OK, let’s get set. Lazarus, we need to get these pants off you. I’m sure Kate will turn around and not peek. Then I’m going to numb you up and clean up that hole in your hide.”

Kate did indeed turn around while Dale and Mark helped him take off the pants. Then Dale withdrew a small headlamp from the kit and placed it on his forehead. Its multiple white LEDs gave off a surprising amount of light. Dale next pulled several towels from some wrappings and placed them under Lazarus’ leg. As he worked, he glanced at Mark. “So, you gave him two liters? Are you an EMT or something?”

“No, I was a Combat Lifesaver in the Army Reserves.”

“How long were you in the Reserves?”

“I was active duty Marines for a few years, and I’ve been in the Reserves for a couple years.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“What did you do in the Marines?”

“Sir, all Marines are riflemen!”

“I know that, son.” Dale said with a grin. “I meant what was your assigned duty.”

“Infantry, sir.”

“Good outfit, the Marines.”

“Yes, sir. The best.”

“I imagine the Navy will contest that, Mark.”

“They did a few times sir, but most of the swabbies came around to our way of thinking after a few run-ins.”

“I expect they might.”

Mark said nothing, but smiled.

“Kate, can you get a set of vitals for me?” Dale asked, glancing her way, “Then spike and prime a bag for me, please? Thanks.”

“Sure.” She replied, leaning her FAL against the wall next to Dale’s, then proceeded to retrieve the BP cuff, stethoscope, and thermometer from a bag that someone - Mark lost track of who - had pulled from their pack. She smiled at Lazarus and put the cuff around his arm and proceeded to get his blood pressure, temperature and pulse rate. Dale started setting up some of his equipment, and Kate reported the findings: “BP is one oh two over fifty-eight. Pulse is one thirty. ‘Rs’ are 22, and temp is only 99.4.”

“Not bad, Mr. Lazarus, not too bad at all. I was expecting worse. At first blush, at least, it looks like mostly blood loss, and not infection. But I think that’s a matter of time. If we let that leg go much longer, it’s going to get bad. You may get the bacteria from the infected wound into the bloodstream. That would most probably kill you. So . . .” He looked up at Lazarus earnestly, “I need to open up that wound a little and clean out all of the dead tissue. That gives the bacteria no place to hide. Plus I am going to remove any bits of leaves, rock and dirt that may be a source of germs. Then I’m going to wash the heck out of that wound to get every last bit of junk out of there. Then I’m going to put a bandage on there with some drains coming out. That will let any fluids that accumulate an easy way out, and won’t interfere with healing. Now, I am going to numb that whole lower leg. It’ll hurt a little when I do it, but then you won’t feel a thing. OK?”

Lazarus looked at Mark, who nodded. “Very well.” was Lazarus’ only reply.

“Good. Now I am going to start an IV line on you. I am not going to replace the blood you lost, just the fluid, understand? I’m not adding any cells that carry oxygen or fight infection. I am just replacing the water part of

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

your blood. It'll make you feel a little better. Plus, I can give you some antibiotics right into your bloodstream. That WILL kill germs. Any questions?"

"Yes. I have two questions. The first is, how long will it be before I am healed?"

"You may never be exactly like you were. But if everything goes well, you should be back to normal in a few weeks. What's the other question?" asked Dale.

"What does it cost?" Lazarus' eyes bore into Dale's.

"For right now, nothing. We formed our group to help others. Someday, we may ask a favor of you. Maybe tomorrow, maybe never. You are obligated to perform the favor. Do you accept these conditions?"

"I do."

"Good. You seem a fine lad: I'd hate to lose you." With that, Dale started the IV line in Lazarus' arm. He was smooth and quick, and although the needle was large, Lazarus felt minimum discomfort.

"I'm going to give you something to relax you. It won't render you unconscious, but it might make you sleepy."

Dale squirted a fluid into the IV line and Lazarus felt his eyes get heavy. Dale then withdrew a syringe from his kit and filled it with a clear liquid from a separate, larger bottle.

"I am going to numb your lower leg now, Lazarus. I need to get this numbing medication to the nerves that run to that part of your leg. I need you to roll over, or at least get onto your side. The nerves are in the back part or the leg, behind the knee." Dale said, laying a hand on his patient's shoulder.

Lazarus nodded and rolled onto his stomach.

He painted the back of Lazarus' leg with a brownish liquid after cleaning it with regular water from his canteen and a clean cloth. Dale attached a needle that was about two and a half inches long and very thin to the syringe.

"This is going to hurt for a little while - probably no more than sixty seconds. Then your leg pain will be gone. Are you ready?"

The boy nodded again into the pillow. Dale plunged the needle into the back of Lazarus' leg, and began injecting the liquid, moving the needle, injecting a little more, moving the needle, and injecting a little more. At first Lazarus seemed tense, then after nearly a minute, he relaxed noticeably.

"Better?" asked Dale.

Lazarus again nodded.

"Does this hurt?" asked Dale, as he prodded the wound with a gloved finger.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“No.”

“How about this?” as he poked the other side of the wound.

“No.”

“Great! Let’s get started. Kate, glove up and help me, can you?” said Dale as he pulled on a pair of gloves. He draped some towels over the leg and set to work.

Over the next hour or so, Dale and Kate opened the wound and used instruments to cut away dead tissue. They irrigated the wound with a syringe and some water from a canteen marked “sterile.” Finally they placed a small drain in each side of the wound. They placed some bandaging loosely covering the wounds, and then wrapped it with some gauze bandage. Lazarus had actually fallen asleep again.

“OK, I think that does it. No guarantees, but considering that all the nearest hospitals have burned down and the roads aren’t safe . . . Anyway, I’ll give him a dose of antibiotics through the IV before we go. Mark, do you feel comfortable watching that IV? He’s going to need a couple more doses of antibiotics through the IV, then go on oral antibiotics. Hey Kate, how about another set of vitals, please?”

Kate set to her task.

“Show me once, and I can do it. But I’m out of normal saline.”

“We’ve got you covered.”

“I don’t know how to thank you. You probably saved his life.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. He’s not out of the woods yet, but I think he’ll be OK. We will be back in a few days to check on him. I’ll leave bandaging supplies and the antibiotics. If anything changes, you can get a hold of us the same way you did initially.”

Mark had thousands of questions for him now that Lazarus was cared for. “Where did you guys come from? What’s happening out there?”

“We are a group of friends who believe in self-reliance. Some - like me, believe as a hobby, some - like John, who you have not met - believe as a part of their religion. Some believe as a matter of political principle. Whatever our reasons, it’s paying off now. As to why we are out here, giving away supplies and skills? Well, we think of it as an investment. We help our neighbors, so our neighbors will want to help us, should the need arise.”

“Lazarus and I are in your debt.” said Mark.

“That’s the best kind of debt: A debt of honor. It means that we will have men of honor eager to fulfill that debt in time of need. As for what’s going on out there, well, it’s getting ugly. Troops have been called out, and there is fighting going on. Cities are burning. The Brown has killed off most of the crops, which is OK, because the

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Plague has killed off a good chunk of the people. Some places worse than others. People are so scared they're making their own problems. Riots, stuff like that. People are afraid to go to work, so things don't get done, so people get mad, so they riot and steal and such, and the whole thing gets worse and worse."

"What am I going to do? I am halfway from my house to my Mom's house." asked Mark, soberly.

"I dunno, Mark. I wouldn't try to travel, at least on the roads."

"I got a hard lesson in that already." Mark proceeded to tell Dale all that had transpired since leaving his apartment. "Lazarus hasn't been able to tell me what's happened to him. Something happened to him, not just the gunshot wound. He's, well, spooky sometimes. I don't doubt he is a good kid, and he saved my life once already, but . . ."

"Just be a friend to him. That's what he needs, whether the antibiotics work or not."

"Yeah."

"I would like to invite you to our place, but I can't, for several reasons. I'll talk to the others, though. Maybe some kind of arrangement can be worked out. Until then, though, we have a couple ration packs to leave with you. We are supposed to give out one per person, but I think we can spare a little extra. It's not a whole lot, but it's better than nothing . . . Probably better than you have. Couple pounds of dried beans, couple pounds of rice, some vitamin tablets, hard candy, some bullion, stuff like that."

"I just can't thank you enough. Everything you have done . . . I just can't thank you enough!" said Mark. The generosity of his visitor was nearly overwhelming. After days of being shot at, killing at least three men, being cold and worrying about Lazarus, the safety that he found - even if temporary - was a grand relief. The flood of emotion that he had needed to contain threatened to wash over him. He turned from Dale for a moment and blinked back the tears that welled in his eyes. He turned back to Dale.

"Whenever you need a favor, please let me know. I'll monitor the same frequency we met on at ten AM and four PM. I am guessing you have the power to monitor continuously?" Mark asked.

"Yes, but whether we can or will answer is another question altogether. We aren't the sheriffs. We aren't the Welfare Agency. We do what we can, but don't be too disappointed if we are unable or unwilling to help. The little bit that I have talked with you, you seem like a good young man. The fact that you have taken Lazarus in and defended him with your life speaks well of you. You have military experience, and your equipment shows that you are also a practitioner of self reliance. There may be room for you with us. I don't know and I can't say yet. We'll have to wait and see." Dale spoke as he packed his supplies. Kate and the other man did likewise.

They put on their packs and headed toward the door. Dale turned and extended his hand to Mark.

"Nice to have met you and Lazarus. Like I said, I'll be back to check on him in a few days. I may have some news for you then, I may not." said Dale, his breath making plumes of white in the cold. "Take care."

Kate smiled at him and Luke waved as the trio turned to walk away into the gathering gloom.

Pax Americana Chapter 56 - Left Behind

Panic sweeps my men when they are facing the American Marines. - A captured North Korean Major

There is only one tactical principle which is not subject to change. It is to use the means at hand to inflict the maximum amount of wound, death, and destruction on the enemy in the minimum amount of time. - General George S. Patton, Jr.

Marines are about the most peculiar breed of human beings I have ever witnessed. They treat their service as if it was some kind of cult, plastering their emblem on almost everything they own, making themselves up to look like insane fanatics with haircuts to ungentlemanly lengths, worshipping their Commandant almost as if he was a god, and making weird animal noises like a band of savages. They'll fight like rabid dogs at the drop of a hat just for the sake of a little action, and are the cockiest SOB's I have ever known. Most have the foulest mouths and drink well beyond man's normal limits, but their high spirits and sense of brotherhood set them apart and, generally speaking, of the United States Marines I've come in contact with, are the most professional soldiers and the finest men I have had the pleasure to meet. - An Anonymous Canadian Citizen

Zipper listened intently to the static on the headset. Something was wrong, incredibly wrong but he couldn't put his finger on just what was spinning around in the back of his mind. His team had been in the bush for the past three weeks working with local troops chasing Muslim guerrillas in and out of the triple canopy jungle and across ridgeline after ridgeline after ridgeline.

"Well?" Staff Sergeant Larkin asked his FCT (Fire Control Team, pronounced as "FICT") team radioman.

The wiry radioman looked up puzzled at his team leader. "Still nothing on the airways."

"Damn."

"No you don't understand Staff Sergeant. THERE'S NOTHING ON THE AIRWAYS!"

"I got that Zip, nothing on the airways."

Lance Corporal Zimmerman pulled off the headset and stood up, drew himself closer to his SSgt and lowered his voice. "Trev . . . there's nothing, nadda, zip!"

"There is never absolutely nothing floating through the air. I've spun the dial, I can't pick up anyone . . . ANY-WHERE!"

"Are you trying to tell me that no body is talking anywhere?" The big staff sergeant looked around thinking.

"We've got an entire battle group out there, a carrier, amphib, half the Philippine army is out in the field on this one. How can we be picking up nothing?"

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. There ain’t anyone talking anywhere!”

“Are you sure your radio hasn’t crapped out?”

“Staff Sergeant I’ve gone over every inch of this thing. It’s working perfectly only . . .” He paused. “I’ve even switched the crystals. I’ve tried every combination of military frequencies we have open to us. I can’t pick up anything.”

“So what does that mean.”

“Either we’re in a total radio blackout, which I doubt for an operation of this size, or the fleet is just not there.”

SSgt Larkin just stood there angry and confused. Something was not adding up. Three days ago they had missed receiving their scheduled supply drop. That in and of itself was not all that unusual, rear echelon pogue often screwed up such things. After all, it was no concern of theirs whether or not a half a dozen or so grunts stuck in the middle of a friggin’ jungle got their ration of MREs and potable water, so long as those same limp dicks received their nightly ration of ice cream. But something was seriously not adding up.

His FCT team had been working with U.S. Army Rangers during the first leg of this sweep. Through out the operation there had been problems coordinating the massive anti-terrorist effort with the local indigenous troops. To remedy that glitch his Marine Fire Control Team had been dropped in to provide liaison between Philippine Army and Marines, U.S. Ranger elements, Navy fire support, as well as both U.S. and Philippine air strike units.

They had been in the field for three weeks, bouncing between different units as the combined U.S. and Philippine troops fought a running gun battle with the terrorist guerrillas. It had been a slow going, cat and mouse game slogging through the dense jungle and scattered villages, but they had been making some progress. Then a week ago the ANGLICO FCT team had stepped off to link up with yet another indigenous unit. After two days of coordinating naval gunfire and air support there, they took off again to team up with still another unit and then somehow missed their rendezvous. Larkin’s seven man team had been at the right place at the right time, but nobody showed. The day before yesterday around noon they suddenly lost all radio contact. That had not really concerned him at first, but the continued vacuum that he found himself in was beginning to initiate a warning bell deep inside the hard core professional young Marine. For the last forty-eight hours they had had no contact with the outside world. They had seen no one, heard no one, and could contact no one. Staff Sergeant Larkin did not like this, not at all.

“Sergeant Stevens, on me.” The Staff Sergeant called.

His stocky 249-gunner quick stepped up to the top of the hill where his team leader and radioman were.

“Yes, Staff Sergeant.”

“Get everyone packed up and ready to roll in one-five mikes.”

“Aye-Aye. Any idea where the little fuckers are?”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“We’ll discuss that when everyone is ready. Get going, Sergeant.”

Fifteen minutes later with his team assembled SSgt Larkin broke the news to them.

“Alright, gents, gather ‘round.” He said as he laid out the map. “We’re here . . . this is where our units were two days ago, but Zipper hasn’t been able to raise anyone since then.”

“Did ja break yer fricken toy Zip?”

“It’s not fuckin’ broken, smartass!”

“Knock it off, this is serious shit!” Larkin barked.

“Staff Sergeant, what is going on?” Doc Nabors, the team’s Navy Corpsman, asked seriously.

“I don’t know, Doc.” He answered looking around the group. “Something’s wrong and we’re getting the hell out of here.”

“But the mission?” PFC Daniels asked.

Zipper jumped in. “There ain’t no fucking mission, man. We’re out here on our lonesome with our asses hanging out in the wind.”

“CAN IT ASSHOLES!” Larkin was now getting pissed. He felt like he knew these men like brothers, but his patience was wearing thin. Alarm bells were going off in the back of his mind and he wanted to get moving.”

“Look Marines . . . and Doc.” Someone slapped the Corpsman on the shoulder. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this situation. Something is just not right.” He paused to let that sink in.

“So we’re headed back to forward command as quick as we can. If we link up with friendly units on the way, so much the better.” Heads were nodding back at him. “But remember that we’re deep in Indian country.”

All heads suddenly turned to Lance Corporal Yahzee, a Navaho of the Folding Arms People from the Towering House Clan.

“No offense, Tony.”

“None taken, Staff Sergeant. These gooks would shoot me just as quick as anyone else here.” He paused. “If they could see me that is.”

The group chuckled. Lance Corporal Anthony “Tony” Yahzee had been raised in the old ways deep within tribal lands and was the best tracker and bush bunny Larkin had ever seen. If Yahzee didn’t want you to see him . . . then you didn’t see him. At times it could be very spooky to suddenly have him materialize out of the bush right in front of your face. That and when Yahzee was walking point absolutely nothing escaped his gaze. The joke

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

was that he could track a gnat's ass walking across a sheet of glass. Larkin had tried to get his quiet Navaho to teach his tricks of the trade to the rest of the team, but try as he might, Yahzee would just throw up his hands in disgust.

"You whites are blind!" He would shout in frustration as he walked away to disappear into the foliage.

A comment that didn't go down well with Lance Corporal Ernesto Caesar Chavez, but then Caesar had never been away from black top and street lights until he left the Los Angeles barrio and joined the Corps. In the bush he was just as blind as the "Anglo's" that so frustrated their "token Indian".

With practiced precision, the team took up their assigned positions and began the long march out. They covered ten hard going kilometers that first day. Skirting the scattered villages and ever on the outlook for both friendlies and "Indians." Two days later, exhausted and nearly out of rations and water, the group finally pulled into the area that had been the primary outpost base camp for the operation. It was empty!

Yahzee reported back after nearly an hour of observing the vacant camp up close and personal.

"Anything?" SSgt Larkin asked.

"Nada skipper! Those doggies pulled out lock stock and barrel. Left some tentage, found a pallet of rations, some empty jerry cans and a lot of trash, but there's no sign of anyone. They've been gone for . . . about a week from what I can guess. But there's something odd, Staff Sergeant."

"What's that?"

"Just all the stuff they left behind is still there."

"So."

"Have you ever known locals NOT to strip our trash clean? I mean nobody's been here for a week. That is weird. Isn't there a village just a few clicks east of here?"

"Yeah . . . you're right Yahzee, that is really weird." The Marine pondered for a moment. "Let's go check out the village and see if we can get some answers."

Less than an hour later they had just topped the ridge when they heard the sound of gunfire off to the north.

Larkin turned to his radioman, who just shook his head. With quick hand signals the seven man team immediately went into alert mode and began moving in the direction of the firefight taking place just up the valley from them. Whatever was going on seemed to be extremely one sided and was moving towards them, quickly.

The big Marine suddenly signaled for the team to freeze and gave the hand signal for a hasty ambush. As if operating from a single mind the seven members quickly and silently moved into position and waited. Something or someone was running hard towards them with a lot of something's or someone's hard on their heels. The

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

running exchange of gunfire soon gave Larkin a hint to the players in the rapidly developing drama. Someone with a pistol was returning sporadic fire against a larger group armed with assault rifles.

“Psst, pass the word. Nobody fires until I open up.” Larkin whispered.

Quickly, the word went down the line. Just then Larkin caught a glimpse, a flash of blond hair bouncing through the underbrush. American? he thought, just before she emerged from the tree line, paused to look back and then turned to dash across the shallow stream between the hidden Marines and her pursuers. The rustle of brush was not fifty yards behind the fleeing blond. She crossed the stream and started up the far bank when the first pursuer cleared the tree line and brought up his weapon on the fleeing woman.

“M-A-R-I-N-E-S! Larkin bellowed and opened up as more Muslim guerrillas suddenly popped out of the tree line. The M-4 bucked against his shoulder and his SS-109 rounds ripped across the short distance meeting flesh with a sickening “THWAP - THWAP - THWAP!”.

Exposed and unable to curb their forward momentum the first wave of guerrillas suddenly found themselves trapped between the firestorm ragging to their front and their comrade’s blind pursuit from behind pushing them into the open killing ground.

BOOM - cha-shink - BOOM! - cha-shink - BOOM!.. blasted off to Larkin’s right as their Doc added to the Marine firepower, emptying his pump shotgun as quickly as he could. Screams erupted from the other side of the stream and suddenly the Staff Sergeant realized that his Corpsman’s shotgun was loaded up with flechette rounds and was shredding the jungle as well as the pursuing terrorists with the tiny steel darts.

“**BLOOP - BLOOP . . . BOOOOM - BOOOOM!**” filled the air as two members of his FCT team cut loose with 40mm grenades at point blank range. The rip of Steven’s 249 erupted from the far right flank. The guerrilla’s were now caught in a deadly crossfire of death, the trap door was beginning to close in on them and they fought desperately to escape. Several of the frantic pursuers actually attempted to break the ambush in classic textbook fashion by assaulting the center of the line. They raced forward firing blindly screaming at the top of their lungs until their air was cut viciously short. Just as they reached the far bank of the stream and started up the small slope two horrendous explosions launched hundreds of tiny steel pellets at near supersonic velocities tearing through their soft flesh.

Larkin grinned as he realized that their newest recruit, PFC Daniels, had had the foresight to place two claymore antipersonnel mines in front of his position. The five terrorists disappeared in the blast that cleared a path of death and destruction back across the killing ground. The stream was now filled with their fragments as it became saturated with their blood.

The Marines pressed on their attack with deadly professionalism. Empty magazines fell onto the jungle floor as fresh mags were slapped in their place. With trained precision, precise fire control and deadly accuracy, very few rounds missed their marks. As each new terrorist appeared they were met with at least two burning rounds at chest height. None escaped the onslaught.

The jungle was filled with more explosions as grenades shattered bone and ripped apart flesh. A herd of angry flaming bees zipped through the air searching for soft flesh. Time jerked about them as they engaged fully in the

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

blood lust of the moment. Then suddenly the jungle fell silent. The sound of battle echoed through the forest and the minds of the living and as the Marines ceased their deadly fire and the stillness of the moment crashed in upon them.

Larkin looked around partially stunned. It had only lasted a moment but it had been a very intense moment. The silence was suddenly broken with the call: “Corpsman UP!” meaning only one thing, a Marine was down.

The Staff Sergeant kept his eyes towards the enemy and quickly moved towards the call yelling as he did. “Flankers out! Get eyes on target!”

Two Marines, Yahzee and Zipper, dashed back across the stream and disappeared into the bush. Larkin arrived to see his Doc hovering over one of his team members lying on the ground. There was no sound coming from the down Marine and he didn’t like the implication of that. Doc rocked back on his heels and looked up at his team leader. He didn’t need to say anything. Larkin knew what that meant and then caught a glimpse of the dead Marine. He had been hit several times, but the wound to his head had finished him off for sure. PFC Daniels had been the newest and youngest member assigned to SSgt Larkin’s team. From the flatlands of Kansas originally, he had worked hard to become a part of the team.

“SHIT!” Sgt Stevens exclaimed as he ran up, the barrel of his M-249 still smoking from the firefight.

“So where is the bitch that started all this shit . . . man!” LCpl Chavez snarled.

“THE BITCH IS RIGHT BEHIND YOU MARINE!”

Every head turned to see where that came from. Standing just ten feet from them still with her Beretta in hand stood an exhausted Army Ranger. She walked over and looked down at the dead Marine for several seconds before saying anything else.

“My entire medical team was attacked last night . . .” Her voice trailed off.

“So where are the others?” Chavez asked.

“There are no others.” She answered in a dead tone.

“Chavez, you can be such a fuckhead!” Sgt. Stevens growled at him.

“Who’s in charge here?” She asked looking around.

“The Staff Sergeant.” Chavez pointed.

“Staff Sergeant?” She turned to face Larkin.

He stepped forward and put out his hand. “Staff Sergeant Trevor Larkin, 1st ANGLICO, USMC.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

She grasped his firm handshake and returned it equally. “Staff Sergeant Katherine Stacy, Medical Specialist, Army Rangers.” There was an odd silence. “Call me Cat or Doc, either will do.”

“Roger Staff Sergeant Stacy.” Larkin replied. “Now can you tell just what the fuck is going on here?”

Just then a shot rang out off in the direction that Yahzee and Zipper had taken, then another.

Sgt Stevens looked up; he had been listening in on the squad radio. “Clean up, Staff Sergeant . . . they’re headed back. We’re secure for now.”

Larkin nodded. “Get ‘em back and let’s put some distance between us and this place.” Turning back to the Army Staff Sergeant. “Can you roll?”

“Marine I have no intention of sticking around here any longer than I absolutely have too. I’ll make it!”

Larkin turned back to his team and nodded down to Daniels. “Strip him of all essentials, weapon and 782 gear to the Staff Sergeant and Stevens you and Chavez rig a single pole litter and bring Daniels.”

“You’re going to carry a dead man out of here?” Stacy seriously asked Larkin.

With an angry look on his face Larkin answered her. “Marines don’t leave Marines behind.”

“He’s dead.”

“Dead or alive, it doesn’t matter. We all go home!”

They spent the rest of the day silently as the group slowly worked their way back through the jungle to the abandoned base camp. Just as evening was starting to descend they reentered the camp. His team was beat. They were low on food, water, ammunition and now a man short. Larkin didn’t hold the Ranger responsible for Daniels loss. That kind of shit happens in combat. What bothered him the most was not knowing what the hell was going on around him. This area had been totally secure. The guerrillas had been chased out for some time. What had caused the Rangers to leave in such a hurry? Where was the fleet? Where was their air support? Where the hell was everyone?

That night they buried Private First Class Daniels, United States Marine Corps in the center of the base camp and pulled an Air Force aluminum pallet over the top of his grave to protect it. Zipper took down the GPS coordinates and the team retreated back into the jungle.

The next morning Larkin assembled his team.

“All right gents . . . lady. Here’s the situation as I see it. As far as we can tell we’re on our own. SSgt Stacy here has informed me that her group lost Com’s about the same day as we did. They were out performing some Civ-Hum (Civilian Humanitarian) duties way out in the sticks when things got squirrely. On the way back they ran smack dab into those guerrilla’s we spanked. She was the only one of her team to survive.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

For better than an hour the group discussed their options. They performed a quick inventory of just what they had, rearranged loads and made preparation for the next day. By general consensus they all agreed that their best option at the moment lay in making their way to the coast and trying to hook up with any friendly forces they could locate there. The area they were now in was Indian country or would soon be again. That meant that they had several days of hard travel ahead of them. Travel through unfamiliar territory with potential hostiles in every corner.

As the rest of the group made their final preparations before stepping off Larkin looked out at the jungle and muttered under his breath. “Just what the fuck is going on? And where the hell is everyone?”

A hundred different scenarios ran through his mind and ninety-nine percent of them were bad.

Desert Doc

Chapter 57 - Retribution

If you can find a path with no obstacles, it probably doesn't lead anywhere. - Frank A. Clark

Our sense of revenge is as exact as our mathematical faculty, and until both terms of the equations are satisfied we can not get over the sense of something left undone. - Inazo Nitobe, Bushido

Now I recall the Recon Marines, ragged, filthy cammie shirted young men in green paint who move silent like the fog with deadly purpose in their eyes. Swift, Silent, Deadly. I smile. - GYSGT Correll, USMC, Retired, Recon Marine

Yahzee had been on point for the better part of the morning. Slowly and meticulously working his way through the unfamiliar territory, leading his fellow Marines and the Army Ranger Medic to the ocean and hopefully back to friendly forces. His eyes darted left and right like the tongue of a snake - he missed nothing. He had seen old sign left behind by several local patrols but nothing fresh. It was nearly noon above the triple canopy umbrella while on the forest floor below they walked in a perpetual primal twilight, when the Navaho suddenly froze. The entire team immediately followed suit and looked to their flank. SSgt Larkin cautiously moved forward his eyes trying to peer through the thick green wall that surrounded them. Every member of his team was coiled ready to strike.

When he reached Yahzee he followed his gaze and could see that he was pointing at a boot print on the jungle floor.

In a whisper that was barely audible just inches away his point man explained.

“See the broken lug.” referring to the footprint that was different from the others.

Larkin nodded.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Same sign yesterday at ambush, but got away.” Yahzee pointed to the mishmash of footprints on the narrow trail that lay in front of them.

“That one there . . . and over there are carrying a heavy load, maybe carrying someone.” He paused and pointed to still more sign.

“There and there, not local, GI issue boots like the Ranger is wearing. See the scuff there . . . someone being half carried or dragged.” He pinched some dark soil between his fingers and sniffed it. “Blood, pretty fresh . . . someone’s bleeding, not much but steady by the looks of it.” He pointed down the trail.

“What do you think this means?”

“Well . . . I’m just a dumb injin, boss, but my guess is that we’ve got a group of locals moving fast, eight . . . maybe ten . . . with wounded . . . and prisoners . . . maybe.” Yahzee held up his other hand and displayed a single strand of long medium brown hair. “This ain’t local.”

“Any of them nearby?” Larkin asked.

Yazhee raised his head, snorted and sniffed the air and slowly shook his head.

“Don’t tell me you can smell them?” The Staff Sergeant asked in amazement.

“No Staff Sergeant, just clearing my nose.” He gave his team leader a ‘maybe I can’ smile. “They passed this way in the last couple of hours, but I don’t think this trail is used very much . . . from the look of it. At least since the last rain.”

Staff Sergeant Larkin pondered the possibilities for a few seconds. Maybe the Ranger was wrong and there had been survivors. He turned to his point man.

“Okay, Cochise, recon that trail and see what you can get from it. We’ll be 100 meters back off the trail from here. You’ve got one hour.”

“Cochise was a Chiracahua Apache, kemo sabe, not Navaho. He would need two hours. I will be back in less.”

Yazhee slipped off his large Alice ruck and stripped down to just his minimal survival/combat gear and then disappeared down the trail into the jungle.

The team moved back the way they had come and then off into virgin jungle where they made a hasty camp and rested, waiting for Yazhee to return.

“What’s going on?” SSgt Stacy asked Larkin.

“Yazhee spotted some unfinished business and is checking it out.” He answered flatly.

“So we just wait here?”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Larkin leaned back against his pack and pulled down his bush hat to cover his eyes.

“Yes.” was all he said before he drifted off to sleep.

Buck stuck his head into the machine shop and yelled over the racket made by the buffing wheel. Kevin shut off the machine, laid down the partially finished FN receiver and turned to his son lifting off his hearing protection as he did.

“Dad, Mr. Richardson wants you to come in to the radio room pronto!”

The healing process had been slow going for the old man. But thanks to his stubborn constitution and Stephanie’s careful nursing he was finally able to get out bed and move around. Not a person to lay about licking his wounds, he quickly joined in where ever he could. Still weak and unable to stand for long periods of time he spent a lot of his time in his radio room monitoring his shortwave equipment. Lately Buck had taken an interest and Richardson was more than happy to pass along the vast knowledge on the subject. Buck was like a sponge and working with the old man to build and modify new equipment to improve their capabilities. Kevin joined the pair as Mr. Richardson flicked the speakers on so everyone could hear.

“What’s up?” Kevin asked, wiping his hands on a shop towel.

“Buck and I have been monitoring some of the overseas radio stations over the past couple of days and there seems to be some surprising events taking place.”

Kevin pulled up a chair and sat there listening to the garbled voices trying to break through the static on the speaker.

Richardson turned to Kevin. "Seems that we had a rather large contingent of forces over in the Philippines chasing Muslim Gorillas around some island there."

“Yeah, I remember something about that back when we still had regular news coming in. We’ve got folks spread all over the place across the globe chasing down Al Qaida. So?”

“Well, from the sound of it, they’ve suddenly pulled out and are headed home.”

“Home?”

“Home . . . as in back to the States.”

“Do we know that for sure? Are you getting military frequencies on that thing?”

“No way, Pop, those channels are all encrypted. But we are getting some talk between local hams and some civilian ships at sea. It’s not only our military but ALL US FLAGGED ships are being ordered home.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Kevin thought about that for a few seconds. “Ordered home? What do you suppose that means, Frank?”

The old man turned slowly in his chair and looked at Kevin. “I don’t know, son, but I don’t like the sound of it.”

“Neither do I.” Kevin slowly got up and put back his chair. “Keep listening and see what you can come up with. It’s been too quiet around these parts for the last couple of months. If the President is pulling back all our overseas military forces then he may be planning something to deal with little renegade areas like ours.”

“You don’t think he’s planning on sending in our own military . . . here . . . do you?” Buck asked his father.

“The resistance is getting stronger and stronger every day. We’re just one small part of it Buck.”

“But if he’d only just let us be, we’d be fine. Everything would go back to normal . . . soon.”

“Son.” Kevin reached out and placed his big hand on his son’s shoulder. “Nothing is ever going to be the same. We already crossed that bridge and there is no going back.”

Buck gave his father a troubled look. ‘But . . .’

Mr. Richardson slowly spun his chair around to face the pair. “Your father is right young man. We’ve crossed the Rubicon when we stood up for our rights as free Americans under the Constitution. We can’t back down now . . . we’ll have to ride this horse to the end of the race and hope to hell he doesn’t throw a shoe in the process.”

The squad radio in SSgt Larkin’s ears keyed twice, two long - two short. Larkin immediately opened his eyes and keyed the response. Yazhee was coming in. A few minutes later he melted out of the foliage and squatted down beside his team leader.

“Did you find anything?” Larkin asked looking at his watch. It had been over three hours since he had sent the Navaho off to recon the trail.

The camouflaged Native American held out his hand and dropped three dog tags onto the ground in front of him. Three bloody dog tags. SSgt Katherine Stacy slowly reached out her hand and picked the first one up. With her thumb she rubbed off the dirt and congealed blood and read the name on it. Suddenly she gasped for breath and began to sob. She picked up the other two tags and rubbed them until she could read the names and clinched them in her fist as she closed her eyes to the welling up of tears. The Marines around her just stood there as silent witnesses to the grief stricken soldier.

Larkin caught Yahzee’s attention and motioned him to the side with a quick jerk of his head. The pair stepped back into the jungle and gave some space to the mourning SSgt. Facing out into the dense green Yahzee gave his debrief to the team leader. He described how he had followed the trail for better than an hour and was about to turn around when he smelled their cooking fires. It was as he was working his way around the perimeter that

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

he came across the first of the U.S. soldiers. His description of their condition was enough to turn a strong man's stomach, but the worse was yet to come. The third dog tag he had recovered was from the last survivor. She had been repeatedly raped, sodomized and tortured nearly to death. Then to add insult to injury they placed tourniquets around her limbs and slowly sawed them off. Yahzee had found her still breathing, barely alive. Her glazed eyes focused for a few seconds and recognized his insignia. With silent lips she begged him to end it for her. The debrief ended there.

For several minutes the pair stood silently, not moving and barely breathing, as the anger welled up from the fiery depths. Larkin turned to his comrade and grabbed his shoulder. The pair locked eyes and the Staff Sergeant slowly nodded his acknowledgement.

"Payback . . ." Larkin whispered.

". . . is a bitch." Yahzee responded.

Larkin walked back into the center of his team with a malicious purpose that all the men immediately picked up. "Strip for combat."

The Marines looked at their leader questioningly at first and then caught the meaning of his gaze. They started to drop their rucks and rearrange their gear for hot - hard - and nasty. Larkin walked over to the sobbing SSgt on the ground. He touched her shoulder.

"Yahzee found the bastards that did this . . . we're going hunting. You stay here and watch the gear until we return."

The look that Staff Sergeant Katherine Stacy, Medical Specialist, U.S. Army Rangers, gave Larkin could have burned a hole through the sun.

"Like hell I'm sitting here Staff Sergeant. Those were my friends, my friends . . ."

She sobbed. "I won't be left behind, simple because . . . because . . . because I'm a girl."

"It's not like that Cat, we don't know you. You don't know us. We work as team and you are an unknown."

"I will not be left behind, Marine! You lead and I'll follow, but I will not be left behind!"

The other Marines stopped and watched the scene unfolding before them. Larkin was right in that she wasn't part of the team, that would make her a liability, but at the same time they didn't see the Ranger being left out of the fight.

Cat turned and started stripping her gear down to the bare essentials. She knew her equipment and was ready in the blink of an eye. Larkin just stood there watching her silently. Throwing on her gear on she spun around and was ready to go. Larkin slowly looked over at his men and took their silent vote. It was unanimous . . . she was in.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Doc . . . she’s with you. Staff Sergeant, if the Doc says shit, don’t even think to ask what color or how high . . . got it?”

“Affirmative.” She responded stoically.

It took several hours for the team to work their way into position. The hour was late, after midnight when the camp finally settled in for the night. The perimeter guards had switched forty-five minutes earlier and were becoming lulled into their duties. The men they replaced on watch could be heard snoring or softly breathing in deep sleep. As insidious as a moon lit fog . . . death began to drift in among them, stalking them.

Yahzee let the rover walk past him before he stepped from the shadows, his hand was a blur as he sunk his machete deep into the back of the guerillas neck severing the second and third vertebra and slicing cleanly through his spinal cord. The Marine caught his victim as he collapsed and pulled him quietly back into the shadows of the underbrush. The squad radio keyed once.

Zipper inched his way up to the second guard and could smell the rice and fish sauce from his breath as he plunged his K-Bar upward into his kidney. Covering the guerillas mouth to stifle any scream with his other hand he continued to push the blade tip up into the diaphragm puncturing it before withdrawing it from the shocked mans body and then opening his windpipe and carotid artery. The squad radio keyed twice.

The third guard, bored with his post, lit a cigarette and took his first and last pull on the cancerous weed. Cancer would be the least of his concerns in the next few seconds. Something flew past his face and knocked the ash from the end of the cigarette dangling in his mouth. Before the threat could register in his mind the thin piano wire garrote snapped close around his neck. With arms that could easily push four hundred pounds of barbells repeated throughout a work out and pull two hundred and twenty five pounds of rock hard Marine up to the chin up bar twenty times as fast as you could count, the wire dug through flesh, it constricted until it met bone, hesitated and then crushed its way through. His head hit the soft undergrowth and rolled a few feet away. Three guards were down with one to go. The squad radio keyed for the third time.

SSgt Stacy followed the Navy Corpsman as he worked his way around the perimeter rigging “surprises” that he pulled from his bag of “devious deeds and dastardly devices”. She had seen a lot of training on setting up booby traps but had never witnessed someone that could rig one so fast.

The last guard was actually performing his guard duties as it should be done. SSgt Larkin watched for an opening knowing the others would be finishing up soon. He backed off a few feet and reached back for the pouch attached to the side of his camelback water carrier. With practiced motions he kept his eyes on the guard and quickly assembled the compound bow. This operation took less than a minute and then he moved back into position. Larkin was an avid bow hunter between missions and had honed his skills to a fine edge. The bow was a slightly shorter version of his full size Bear and designed for just this sort of duty. He nocked the first arrow and held a second at the ready.

The guard slowly scanned the jungle in front of him. He was using his peripheral vision to pick up any movements. This was one serious soldier. Larkin’s aim had to be perfect the first time. He lowered the night vision goggles, closed his left eye then turned them on. The jungle came alive as a grainy green glow. Larkin could see the guard’s eye, his target. He pulled back the arrow and could feel the cams silently turnover and lock. Seconds

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

seem to bleed into hours as the guard slowly moved about always scanning the jungle before him. Larkin took a slow breath and exhaled, then another. He needed that last second clarity of vision. He could feel his heart beat pounding in his ear as he drew in another breath. His vision sharpened just slightly and he marked his target. The guard was turning back as Larkin released. The arrow jumped the twenty yards distance between them. His aim had been slightly high as the arrow point caught the upper edge of the left eye's orbit, but the effect was not much different at this angle. It pierced through the guard's weak gelatinous eye, splitting thin bone behind the socket and drove into the soft brain tissue. Spasms pulsed through the dying body as a second projectile slammed through the right temple. The guard slumped to the ground. The squad radio keyed for the forth time.

Several minutes passed before the fifth and sixth key was added. They were ready and hell fire was about to arrive.

Seven hand grenades silently arched through the air and landed with heavy thuds on the hard packed earth of the camp. The seconds ticked away as the fuses burned down to the explosive concoction within. Several of the guerillas stirred at the muffled noise, but none rose to check it out when suddenly the night exploded all around them. Tiny shards of hot metal reached out and met soft flesh. They jumped up in total confusion and began firing wildly in all directions hitting several of their own people in the process. It was sheer pandemonium as over thirty rudely awakened guerillas scrambled to get to their fighting positions after being caught totally off guard.

After several minutes of sporadic fire without any return fire the guerillas stood gazing into the darkness amid the smoldering remains of their camp and the screams and moans of their wounded. What the hell had just happened? They stood around in shock, uncertain, unsure of what to do next. The smoke slowly drifted away and they stood staring into the darkness and then the night opened up on them.

From nearly every direction the forest spit forth hot metal out of the inky velvet that seemed guided by some hideous evil as retribution rained in on them. The Marine's fire discipline was unrelenting as they crisscrossed the compound with cool calm and methodical precision pounding away until nothing moved and nothing breathed.

Two days later when the supply train walked into the guerrilla camp they were met with a vision right out of Dante's Inferno. The faces of their comrades stared silently back at them from their position spiked on short poles around the camp. In the center of the forehead of the guerrilla whose boot had the broken lug was nailed the Eagle Globe and Anchor collar device.

Larkin stood on the hilltop overlooking the bay. He glassed the area carefully but there wasn't a single sign of any of the U.S. military presence that had occupied this area just a few weeks ago. No ships, no tents, nothing.

"Well, Staff Sergeant . . . what now?" Zipper asked.

"It's gonna be a long walk home." Sgt Stevens added.

"Yeah . . . right, how are we going to do that?" asked LCpl Chavez. "We gonna walk on water?"

"If that's what the Staff Sergeant wants, then that's what he gets." replied Doc Nabors.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Larkin turned back to his team. “For now gents, we walk.” He paused. “But I’ve got an idea.”

Larkin crouched down in front of them. “Doc, didn’t you say you know how to sail?”

“Whoa, that was a long time ago and in a very little boat.” The Corpsman responded. “You’re talking about crossing the biggest ocean on this planet! That’s a little different from sailing a dinky little sabot across a duck pond, Staff Sergeant.”

“It’s just a matter of scale Doc.” Larkin answered. “Just a matter of scale.”

Desert Doc

Pax Americana Chapter 58 - Gopher Snakes

Eli stared out the front window into the darkness, seeing nothing but the darkness within. It had been many days since his son Jacob had gone. After Jacob had run and the savages had set off after him, Eli had taken the two girls with him quickly and quietly back to the farm. The girls had been wooden, strange. The ordeal they had undergone was horror. Nothing in the realm of modern, middle class life had prepared the girls for the abuse that occurred. They were numb with shock, pain and disbelief, and Eli led them by the hand through the forest to his house. Mary had taken the girls in and had comforted them, fed them and treated their physical wounds. Eli had told her nothing about what had happened to Jacob, and Mary had been too stunned with the strays he had brought home to ask.

The girls had been a vexing problem. Over and above the problems that they presented by being “English” and therefore lazy, spoiled complainers, their ordeal had left them prone to fits of crying, catatonia, and bouts of screaming. Mary had been so very patient with them, and they were showing signs of improvement. They helped Mary and his own children in the kitchen, and if they did not help much, neither did they hinder. Their poor appetites did not make too large of a dent on the Yoder’s food supply, at least for now.

Eli stood at the window most every night. After Jacob had run, he had expected him to return later that night. Every moment that Jacob did not return was agonizing.

Winter was coming quickly, and the addition of two more mouths to feed may soon present problems. In the time since the incident, the girls had been able to tell him a little of what happened. They were cousins, children of Mr. Thompson’s children. They lived not terribly far away - by car - nearly a hundred and fifty miles, and when the Brown and the Plague had started, their parents had fled to the only “safe” place that they knew: Mom and Dad’s house. Things went from bad to worse quickly, there.

The girls were Cassie, age seventeen and Amanda, age fifteen. Cassie was tall, nearly six feet, and had brownish-blond hair and brown eyes. Amanda was shorter, at five feet three inches, brown hair and eyes and was slightly pudgy. Of the two, Amanda was the one who complained more, about the food, the lack of TV, the “funny clothes” and various other small insults to her well-being. She was, however, the one who seemed to be

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

recovering from the trauma of her experience the fastest. She had fewer bouts of tearful catatonia, fewer episodes of screaming, and fewer nightmares.

Eli had left most of their care to Mary, and had instead divided himself between preparing for winter and looking for Jacob. He went into the woods to scout for firewood, and also to look for signs of Jacob. He feared that the men had caught him, and had killed him, leaving his body for the animals. He had searched around the Thompson's farm but had found no bodies that were Jacob. He had worked hard to bury the members of the Thompson family that he did find - each in a grave shallower than he would have liked - but could not find any of the marauder's corpses. He suspected that they had taken the bodies with them. Perhaps there was honor among thieves.

The next Sunday after the attack on the Thompson's, he had taken his family by horse buggy to church, quietly insisting that the two girls come along. Through perhaps some feeling of gratitude, or simply because they were curious, the girls had assented. They had fidgeted and whispered through the three-hour service, but it went better than Eli or Mary had hoped. After the service, the elders had met upstairs. Eli was not an elder, but was invited to attend. Many elders sat around a large table, while some were seated in chairs. Bishop Samuel Hochstadter began with a prayer, and then began to speak.

"We know that hard times are upon us again. There has been much talk of the crops and their lack of progress"

This drew a chuckle from the elders. They liked dry humor the best.

"Though we have not been affected as greatly by the plague that affects the country, there is a new threat to us. Eli, will you please tell us what happened?"

Eli did not know that he would be called on to speak, and his mouth became dry as he stood.

"Elders." He said looking around the room, then began to recount the events that had transpired. Some of the Elders had known of what happened, some were hearing the story for the first time, murmuring in incredulity, but they all paid rapt attention to what he had to say.

When he finished, he remained standing, knowing that there would be questions.

"Thank you, Eli. You have shown great compassion taking in the two English girls. Did you recognize any of the men who did this thing?"

"No, Elder, I did not. It was dark, and most of them were not that close to me. The two that were close to me did not say their names."

Another Elder posed a question. "You say that they seemed interested in food?"

"Yes, Elder." Eli replied. "The ones close to me - who seemed to be the leaders said that they 'need to take places to eat.' I received the impression that the Thompson's were not the first home they attacked. They seemed wicked, wicked men."

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“What did they gain then, by burning the Thompson’s house?”

“Nothing, Elder.” Said Eli, and then thought again. “Possibly they did it for revenge. The Thompson’s had slain several of the men.”

“What do you think has become of Jacob?” Asked yet another Elder.

“I believe he is dead, Elder. I just have yet to find his body.” He took a deep breath and continued. “I know he is cast into the Lake of Fire far from our Lord’s sight because of his actions, but he was a good son and I love him still.”

“I know that you do, Eli.” Said Bishop Hochstadter. “And I hope he can be given a proper burial when he is found. But we must discuss the matter at hand. How did these men arrive at the Thompson house?”

“I don’t know that, Elder. I presume in cars or tucks, but I cannot be certain.”

“Did you say that they had not eaten in several days?”

“Yes, Elder, they said that they really needed to ‘take’ the Thompson’s place, because they hadn’t eaten in two days.”

“Would you suppose that they would try this horrible attack again in another place?”

“Elder, it would be foolish to think that they would not. There’s something else that we may wish to consider. Mr. Thompson - before the attack happened - told me of other attacks of this sort in the area. He also said that it was a matter of time before these . . . bandits start to look for our farms especially. He said that when they learn that we will not fight, and store more food than the English, they would come for us.”

The room was silent. Whether or not the Elders had considered this previously, Eli did not know. Many of them nodded thoughtfully, stroking their grizzled beards. Some glanced at each other, others eyed their shoes in contemplation.

Eli said, “I have taken measures to avoid notice. I have blocked our drive with large hay bales. I have covered our windows with paper and cardboard, so no light escapes. It may not help us at all, but it may be enough to hide us from the bandits.”

The others nodded thoughtfully again, and the silence continued.

Finally, Bishop Hochstadter spoke. “There have been attacks on some of our people in other parts of the county. We had thought that it was part of the chaos going on, but now it seems that these are perhaps attacks targeting us.”

“Perhaps. What can we do about it?” said another Elder from the back.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“We can send someone to the Sheriff, for one. For another, I think Eli has the right idea: Do not invite attack. Keep your heads low. Do not attract attention. Thirdly of course, is to pray. Any other ideas?”

“I have one.” Said an Elder seated at the table. “I have an English neighbor. He needs food, and I have some. I will ask him to watch out for us, and we will give him food.”

“You would ask him to kill for you?” asked a disbelieving Elder Hochstadter.

“I said nothing of killing. Anyway, what would you ask the Sheriff to do? Would he not do this if he must, too? If he could not drive them away? What of the taxes we pay? What does that money go to? Not entirely for feeding the poor, I suspect.”

“Elder Schwarzwald!” shouted Bishop Hochstadter as he shot to his feet, his face darkening. “I will not tolerate your impertinence or blasphemy! We must remain true to God and not to emotion. I will brook no more talk of killing.”

The accused Elder said nothing as he pressed his lips firmly in a line and crossed his arms upon his chest.

“Now.” said the Bishop as he sat, the color of his face returning somewhat to normal. “We need practical suggestions to this problem. Solutions that hold God in our hearts.”

Another Elder spoke. “God forbids violence against another, but neither does He ask us to be lambs to the slaughter. We must devise ways to make it difficult to get us. Ways to trick, to deceive, to hide and to run. Consider our own Gopher snake, brethren. God has created this wonderful creature and I believe it may serve as an example to us. The gopher snake’s bite is not poisonous, and it hides from danger when it can, but our Almighty Creator has given this creature a wonderful gift: It looks very similar to a deadly poisonous rattlesnake. It even vibrates its tail in the ground debris to make a rattle. It is a mimic, brothers. Perhaps we could follow its example. Few English know what we look like. I mean us as individuals.”

He stood and glanced around the room at the other Elders. “With your permission Bishop, Elders.”

The Bishop looked dubious, as did one or two of the Elders, but the Bishop sighed and nodded his assent.

“What if,” he began, “What if we were to disguise ourselves? Perhaps something as simple as not wearing our hats. I suggest even constructing and carrying replica wooden weapons. This would do two things. First, no matter the circumstances, none of us would be tempted to shoot. Second, they could not be used against us. We may also consider banding together in closer proximity. Several families could present an intimidating front, all ‘carrying rifles’. It would appear to the bandits a heavily armed camp. We would need to be discrete about other of our things, such as the buggies and horses and the like, but it could work to keep us from being attacked.

Brethren, I know this is unlike anything we have done in the past. But we should not let fear dictate our actions: We should let God dictate our actions. I do not believe any of what I have proposed is against God’s instructions. We are being apart as our Lord commands, nor shall we harm anyone.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

There was silence after the Elder had spoken. Many were nodding in unspoken agreement, while others looked askance at him. The Bishop made no indication of his thoughts. Instead, he slowly lowered his head to his hands. Another sigh heaved his shoulders, then he looked up and around at the assembled Elders.

“Brethren, we have come to difficult times. These times will test us.” He looked at each one in turn. “We must pray. Pray and study the word of God. It is in Him that we must place our trust.”

The assembled Elders murmured their agreement. These words were close to their hearts. They heard them several times a week and formed a mantra: A comforting rote of words that touched their souls.

But the Bishop was not finished. “But we must also look to our own affairs. Elder Olkjer is - God help us - right. We must work to become even more separate than before. Let us consider other ideas.”

A general murmur arose in the small room. Elder Olkjer spoke again after a few moments. “Bishop. Elders. I suggest that we call a meeting of the heads of the families. We need to explain our positions, and convince them to band together. They are also a clever people. They may have other ideas that we here have not had come to us.”

Another murmur of assent rose, and Elder turned to Elder to discuss the situation. Not all were convinced of the need or Godliness of these latest decisions, but the Bishop had directed them. Snatches of conversation continued as the meeting broke up.

“Brother, what of a wall . . . ”

“What if we were to make our home look burned and deserted?”

Eli rode home with his family after the meeting and thought hard about his plans. His farm was already concealed from casual observation; he merely needed to make it more so. That was the rub: If he blocked the long driveway with more than offset hay bales, it would prevent him from using it, too. He supposed he could take the buggy through a path in the woods, provided the path was not obvious. He had the feeling that they would not be traveling overmuch anyway.

The other family that Eli had invited to join them was due to arrive in the morning. There was much to be done in that time. Mary and the girls would move the bedrooms around, while Eli rearranged the shed and barn to accommodate the extra horses and buggy. Daniel Schug, the father of the other family was a craftsman - a machinist and had some tools that were portable that he was bringing. His large lathes and milling machines could not be moved of course without a huge effort. Additionally, unlike the English machines that were driven by electricity, Daniel's ran off an intricate belt system from a central shaft down the center of his shop building. The shaft was in turn powered by a diesel engine outside. It would have taken weeks in the best of times to move everything to the Yoder's farm and make it operational.

The next few days were a flurry of activity. The Schug family consisted of the two adults, a fifteen-year-old boy David, a fourteen-year-old girl Sarah, and twin nine year- old girls Maria and Margaret. They were all ex-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

tremely helpful and cheerful, and soon the house was full to the brim, but mostly happy. Daniel was a wonder, even without his large machines. He was quick to fix anything on the farm that he noticed needed repair, and the work was done quickly and well. He and Eli - with the help of David and even Sarah - had done their best to bar the driveway by felling trees across it, and bringing wheelbarrow after wheelbarrow of leaves from distant parts of the wood to spread upon the driveway. It had taken great effort to cover the portion of the driveway that could be seen from the county road until it rounded the gentle hill, which hid the rest of the farm. Some of this was a wasted effort, as the wind picked up some of the leaves and blew them away. Sarah had hit upon the idea of laying down boughs and branches to hold the leaves down, and this had helped moderate the effects of the wind. All in all, however a survey from the road showed that their efforts had done much to minimize the appearance of a home and driveway.

Daniel had also suggested transplanting some of the thorn bushes that grew in patches in the woods to the fence line and especially the driveway. They also began work on their "rifles." They consisted of wooden laths and other pieces of wood painted black. Daniel had handled a wicked-looking black rifle that one of his customers had brought into his shop for some machine work. He had done the work as the man had requested, machining quite easily as that part of the rifle had been made of aluminum.

At the end of the four days that the Schugs has been with them, it began to snow heavily. Winter had finally come, and it promised to be a brutal one.

Pax Americana 59 - Valley Forge

We've arranged a civilization in which most crucial elements profoundly depend on science and technology. We have also arranged things so that almost no one understands science and technology. This is a prescription for disaster. We might get away with it for a while, but sooner or later this combustible mixture of ignorance and power is going to blow up in our faces. - Carl Sagan

The Earth is degenerating today. Bribery and corruption abound. Children no longer obey their parents, every man wants to write a book, and it is evident that the end of the world is fast approaching. - [Assyrian tablet, c. 2800 BC]

There is no education like adversity. - Disraeli

Brentwood looked out the window of his Maryland home. There had been a heavy snowfall the night before adding another six inches to the foot and a half already on the ground. He wondered how many Americans were suffering during this most recent cold snap while he stood there safe and snug in his custom executive estate. His external wounds had healed, his jaw still twinged from time to time but he could live with that. Through the diligent work of his ever-present bodyguard, Marine Gunnery Sergeant Talford, he was probably in the best shape of his life. He worked out every day with the Gunny, and while he would never achieve the combat readiness of his Marine mentor he doubted that there was another federal worker of his rank in as good of shape. What really set him apart and was a small dalliance that he was allowed by the Director of Homeland Security in an ever-present bulge under his left arm. Brentwood never went anywhere unarmed. Never.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

What Brentwood lacked in physical strength and agility he more than made up for with his marksmanship skills. Talford had been amazed how quickly this typical milquetoast Washington governmental bureaucrat had absorbed every scrap of learning and guidance he had given him. Perhaps, it was the fact that Brentwood had no bad habits to unlearn, having never had any experience, desire or training with weapons, he was a blank canvas to work with. Or perhaps it was because he truly realized the dire necessity of this particular tool and the survival skills that go with it. Either way, in a very short time his star pupil had mastered the fine art of pistol craft and had honed his marksmanship to the point that if Brentwood could see it . . . he could hit it . . . every time.

Talford approached the stoic executive staring out the window at the falling snow.

“The workers have finished their clean up and the job is ready for your inspection, Sir.”

“Please Gunny, I’m not an officer in your Marine Corps, Brent is fine when we’re at home.”

“Force of habit, Sir . . . er . . . Brent.” The Gunny stepped to the side and held out his arm in the direction of the door. “Still seems odd.”

Brentwood turned towards the Gunny. “I realize that. But I have to have someplace that I can feel relaxed and at ease. Calling me Sir certainly doesn’t do that.”

“Aye-aye, skipper.” The Gunny replied.

Brentwood stopped and cocked his head at his hard chiseled Marine. “You are absolutely incorrigible Gunny, absolutely incorrigible.”

“That I am, Sir . . . er . . . Brent, that I am.”

The pair chuckled and headed off to inspect the new indoor shooting range that had just been completed in the basement of his Maryland estate. Since his return from the northern peninsula excursion and his convalescent leave following a short hospital stay, the newly returned Homeland Security Secretary for Transportation had been extremely busy.

Brentwood was no longer satisfied with his small bachelor apartment inside the beltway of Washington D.C., convenient though it was. The proximity of so many people crowded around him made him feel like a rabbit in a cage stacked among many, so the search began. His senior bodyguard, Marine Gunnery Sergeant Talford had discovered his new residence after an exhaustive search. The modifications to the property were already underway when Talford finally brought Brentwood home from the hospital to his new abode. To the casual eye his newly acquired ten-acre country estate appeared little changed from the previous owner. The gate was a little heavier and now automatic.

There were some cosmetic differences visible from the outside of the Craftsman style home such as the large heavy shutters that now adorned every window of the brick and river-rock structure. The majority of the changes however were hidden from casual view. Every window and external door now had an automatic roll down steel curtain that could be activated at the push of a button. The craftsmen that installed the roll away metal barriers had done such a superb job that beyond the tracks on either side of the window frames the entire

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

apparatus was nearly invisible. Buried ground sensors ringed the property both inside and outside of the stone wall that circled estate. The alarm system was state of the art. Not even a cockroach could move in the house without being monitored. But what really made this property unique were the other hidden preparations.

The property had been rumored to have housed some rather notorious figures in the past. Sealed off from several generations of modern occupants were several underground rooms that, during the heyday of prohibition, had served as both a storage facility and brewery for the rich thirsty cliental that drove out from the beltway to enjoy rather intoxicating weekends. These rooms had now been converted over to more useful purposes and housed well over a years worth of food and supplies to support more than a dozen people. Hidden behind secret doors and down dark passageways, “The Bunker”, as Talford described the underground complex, would quickly evolve into the nerve center for the fledgling militia resistance in the D.C. area over the next several months. The old rumrunning tunnels and rooms of that by gone era were now serving against a different kind of prohibition, a prohibition against freedom and liberty. And now, thrust into the center of that rising maelstrom, was a slightly built, mild and meek man. What Brentwood lacked in raw charisma and leadership, he made up for in his ability to plan, organize and direct. He was creating a hidden government, within the hidden government, a most difficult and dangerous occupation to take up.

Just before Brentwood followed the Gunny to inspect the most recent construction, a strange foreboding thought crossed his mind.

How does one know if they have picked the right side? He had been thinking about this question a lot lately.

When, if ever, did Benedict Arnold, an early hero of the first American Revolution, realize after crossing over that he had chosen the wrong side and that his legacy would be that of a traitor rather than a patriot?

As Brentwood followed the Gunny down into “The Bunker” to inspect the recent addition he mulled the current situation over and over in his mind. He loved his country and the American ideals, but somewhere the dream that had started so very long ago had become sidetracked. Kidnapped by greedy selfish men and women with only two thoughts on their hungry minds, that of power and money. But the same question kept echoing through his thoughts. Could they reclaim the ideals of freedom and liberty? Could they put the train back on the right track, and if so, what would be the final cost?

Was he a patriot . . . or . . . was he about to become a traitor?

Kevin stepped out of the shed into the crisp grey cloud covered afternoon and removed his goggles and respirator to catch a breath of fresh air. Soft cotton ball size clusters of snowflakes drifted down and muted all sound around him. He made a mental note that they would have to shovel the path to the main shop again before night-fall. With three feet of snow already on the ground and more coming down at a steady rate the path would soon be buried again. Today had been especially productive. He had just completed the last run of the day for the Parkerizing tanks. Tomorrow they would have another twenty-five receivers ready to assemble and by the end of the week another batch of battle rifles would be added to the community armory. Kevin made sure the “Parking Shed” was secure and then headed back to the main shop to check on the progress of the many different projects they were working on.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

After recovering from the initial shock of the battle to free their village from the tyranny of the Homeland Security Forces, his adopted mountain community had finally realized the full ramifications of their actions. They were totally and absolutely on their own. They had suffered and survived the plague, outlasted the vandalism of thugs and beat off the draconian jack-booted oppression of government troops, and now they had survived their total isolation from the rest of the world. It was time to sink or swim entirely on their own without any outside help. There would be no Red Cross, no welfare, and no cavalry riding over the hilltop to protect them, no aid or assistance from anywhere. It proved to be a very rude awakening for many in the community. For some of the old timers it was a flash back to the leaner times of their childhood; the Depression or the big War. For others it was the stark reality of their worst nightmares. More than half of the population had been decimated by the plague or run off to greener pastures or distant relatives. What was left was a rather motley bunch of leftover's that somehow - someday had to pull together and work as a team if they were to survive. But mountain folk are tough folk and it didn't take too long for them to finally iron out their differences and begin the long and tedious work of rebuilding their community.

It was established right off the bat that there would be no room for slackers. If you did not work or contribute to the community, then you would be shown the road - post haste. Several families that had been generational welfare recipients were absolutely unwilling to accept their new responsibilities and were quickly shown the door and escorted across the last bridge out of town with sufficient rations and fuel to make the journey to the next town down the road. They left at gunpoint slinging curses and hollow threats, but they left all the same. Those that had been hesitant to support the new order quickly rechecked their attitudes and happily joined in the program.

A new village counsel was quickly elected with a recovering Frank Richardson promoted to its helm. In no time at all Kevin and Stephanie suddenly found themselves drafted into positions within the leading body. Kevin had never been so busy in his entire life. He understood the need for expedience with winter quickly approaching. For once the snows blew in they would be blocked off from the rest of the world until spring. Due to his experience with heavy equipment and the workings of the water district back home in Pennsylvania, he was placed in charge of the communities' water system. Stephanie was the only active medical provider left in town, besides the Vet and an old retired school nurse. She suddenly found herself promoted to the status of country doctor in charge of their little medical clinic. A new-age herbalist named Naomi Shorewood joined the medical team along with Steph, Dr. Morrison - the local Vet, and Mrs. Evie Bourne, the retired school nurse. This small group made up the entire medical support for anyone above the rim of the foothills.

The loss of population proved to be a boon for the remaining survivors. Once Kevin insured that the community water supply was fully intact, operational and safe he joined the largest scavenger hunt he had ever seen. It had been Earl Schroder, the local plumber and village elder's idea to consolidate the community's resources from the abandoned homes and businesses.

"Those folks that have left or died don't have any use for the stuff they left behind. We will!" He paused. "Now I'm not saying we just bust in and take anything . . . no, that wouldn't be right. But we've got to know what we have to work with and anything we find we can take for the sake of the community by . . ."

He looked around. "James, what's that legal word . . . for . . . taking stuff for the good of the community?"

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

James Stokes, a realtor, thought for a moment before answering. “Eminent domain, I think is what it’s called.”

“Yeah, that’s it, eminent domain. We can take an inventory and leave IOUs or something like that.”

The heads around the room began to nod in agreement.

So it began. Food was of course the top priority along with any medical supplies, weapons, canning equipment and tools. Soon light bulbs and toilet paper joined the list with toilet paper moving right to the top rather quickly. The local supermarket became a storeroom along with the hardware store and auto parts store next door. Every member of the community was issued a “Standard Arm”; usually a recovered M-16 liberated from the National Guard Armory or the defeated Homeland Security Troops, and a pistol. The remaining “spoils of war” were housed in the Armory itself or several other secure caches scattered across the small mountain valley.

It was an odd sight at first to see citizens going about their daily business with an assault rifle slung across their back or over their shoulder and/or pistols worn openly on the hip or in shoulder holsters. Rifle racks mounted just inside of entrance of many businesses sprung up in just a matter of days. Yet for all the hardship and struggle, for all the weapons freely carried about, their little town became a much calmer and better mannered environment. Perhaps it was true that an armed society was a polite society . . . only time would tell.

It was in the local private storage yard that the scavenging crews hit the bonanza. Among the piles of boxes of personal effects and junk they located several large caches long-term storage foods. Hundreds of pounds of wheat, oats, rice and several pallets of processed and freeze dried foods. Of course they also discovered several stashes of previously banned firearms and thousands of rounds of ammunition along with reloading supplies. But the greatest find had been the cases and cases of old canning jars and equipment. They were thinking towards the future when such items would become vital in insuring their survival through the harsh winters. With the owners of these caches either dead or gone from the community this unexpected bounty was quickly gathered up and properly stored among the communities growing assets.

It was a full time job just cataloging the community property that came in. Maggie, the first villager the Jorgenson family had met, and several of the older village merchants along with both of Kevin’s daughters Samantha, Amanda and a couple of other energetic teenagers took on the daunting task of inventorying and sorting out the finds.

An unexpected asset came from one of the village outcasts. Troy Henderson came from the wrong side of the tracks as far as most folks on the mountain were concerned. His family held firm to the lowest peg on the pecking order here. Barely literate and raw in manners from his Spartan upbringing, what he lacked from his “white trash” heritage he more than made up for with his ability to locate things. Troy was the king of all scroungers and the villager’s conduit into the lucrative black market that had sprung up across the country as the normal channels of consumer goods dried up. The switch from running drugs to commodities had been a small one. But if there was something that you needed and you were willing to pay for it . . . Troy could probably get it.

The discovery of this vital talent came as quite a surprise for the village. During one of the first big meetings Stephanie was lamenting about their lack of basic essential medicines. What the previous armed occupiers could not get high on they destroyed. Dr. Morrison had been able to cover some of the antibiotic needs with some animal medications, but that reserve was quickly diminishing. Naomi’s herbs were helpful but were not as ef-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

fective against the stronger infections. Somehow, from the shadows, Troy had constructed a shopping list of vital supplies, and a week and a half later Samantha discovered cases of valuable medicines stacked neatly inside the patient waiting room when she unlocked the front door to the clinic to begin the day. The only hint of their benefactor had been a short note attached to one box. It read: "For helping my baby girl."

It took several days for Samantha to finally figure out and track down Troy. She used the excuse of a medical visit to check up on little Brittany. The little five-year old had been treated for bi-lateral ear infections and pneumonia.

The Henderson's ramshackle doublewide sat at the end of a quarter mile long dirt driveway, hidden among the trees. Even with the Richardson's three-quarter ton four wheel drive pickup it was rough going bouncing up the rutted driveway. Steph had insisted on going out alone but Kevin would have none of that. So the couple arrived in the early afternoon. When the door finally opened up after several knocks the air was pungent with heavy sweet odor of pot and incense. It was evident that a hasty clean up had taken place before Troy's common law wife answered the door. Troy was standing on the other side of the kitchen counter his hands hidden from view. Missy, his wife let the Jorgenson's in.

"Hello Mr. and Mrs. Henderson." Stephanie began. "We were out in the neighborhood and thought we'd drop in and check on your little girl. I just want to make sure her ears and lungs have cleared up."

There was an uneasy silence for a few seconds before Troy walked out from behind the counter and put the shotgun he was holding back up in the rack above the television.

"Sorry, Mrs. Stephanie, we don't get visitors out this way too often. No disrespect intended."

"None taken." Steph answered. "Have you met my husband Kevin?"

"No Ma'am, though I've seen him at the meetings." Troy answered hesitatingly extending his hand.

Kevin took his hand and returned a firm but equal handshake. Kevin then turned to Troy's wife.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Henderson, and how is your little girl doing?"

Several small heads were peeking around the corner that led to the hallway and bedrooms beyond.

"Well, fine, just fine." The shy woman answered. "She's right here . . . come on in here, Brit, the nice lady doctor is here to check up on you."

While Stephanie went about her business with the mother and child, Kevin stepped closer to Troy standing nervously in Kevin's much larger shadow.

"That was a good thing you did for the community Mr. Henderson."

Troy just stared blankly back before answering. "I didn't do it for the community. Miss Stephanie helped my little girl, probably saved her life."

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

He thought for a moment and then continued. "I know most folks around here don't think much of me and mine. I ain't educated nor fancy n'all, but I do love my kids and takes care of them the best that I know how."

Kevin just nodded back.

"Well you did good Mr. Henderson . . . you did very good."

"And I want you to know that I didn't steal them drugs. 'Cause that's what most folks will say I did. I traded for them fair and square."

"I believe you."

"It's the God's honest truth!"

"I believe you Mr. Henderson."

"Well . . . yeah . . . ok. And don't go calling me Mister. That's like trying to put a fancy title on a pig's ass. My name's Troy, just Troy."

"OK, Troy. My first name is Kevin."

The pair stood there for a few uneasy seconds and then Troy offered Kevin a beer. Kevin wasn't much of a beer drinker, especially with several feet of snow on the ground, but to refuse would be discourteous under the present situation. Kevin nodded his head.

"That would be fine Troy, just fine."

When Troy returned with the two cold Bud's Kevin motioned towards the door.

"How about we step out on the porch Troy, I've got a little business I'd like to discuss with you."

The snow had stopped falling and their feet crunched under their steps. Kevin leaned against the rail and welcomed the clean fresh air. He had been getting mildly claustrophobic in the heavily laced air within the mobile home.

"I would like to start off by thanking you again for the medicine you acquired. Stephanie really appreciated the surprise."

"Well, it was the least I could do after what she done for my little Brit, 'n she didn't ask for a single dime, just done it and really was worried about my little girl."

"That's Stephanie, she cares for every one of her patients like there were her own. But what I would like to talk to you about is on a totally different note."

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“I swear to you, Mr. Jorgenson, I didn’t steal none of it! Someone else might have, I don’t know nothing bout that. What I got I traded for fair and square.”

“Oh, I’m sure you did and I totally believe you, Troy. And that is sort of what I’m here to talk to you about.” Kevin took another sip of the cold beer.

“You see, Troy, back when I was in the Army just about every unit had a person with your skill. We called them the unit scrounger or “Comm-Shaw artist”.

“Comm-Shaw?” Troy parroted.

“Yeah, someone that could get something you needed when no one else could and usually for a lot less than you expected. I knew this Sergeant by the name of MacElroy that was simply amazing. He took a box of pencils and a stack of legal pads and through a series of swaps, trades, bartering and Comm-Shaw deals we somehow ended up with a nearly new pool table in the NCO shed. And then two weeks later a soda machine was being delivered to our hooch as well.”

Kevin took another sip and continued. “I suspect that you, Mr. Henderson have those same skills, that of a Comm-Shaw Artist.”

Troy thought about what he had just heard and a slow smile began to creep across his face. “I just might be one of them Comm-Shaw Artists type of people. I can swing a pretty good trade if I’m a mind to . . . and that is sort of what I did to get the medical drugs for Miss Stephanie.”

“So if I were to give you a list of . . . say some things that we could really use. Do you think you could acquire some of these items?” Kevin reached in his pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper and handed it to Troy.

He looked at it for a few seconds and then looked up disappointedly. “I’m sorry.” He hesitated. “But . . . but . . . I . . . ah . . . erwell . . . I just don’t read so good. I never finished school and all.” He handed the slip of paper back.

“If you could just tell me what you want . . . then I can see if I can find it.”

So Kevin read off the list and much to his surprise after he was done Troy repeated the entire list word for word from his memory without missing a single word, number or description.

“Most of that I know. But them collet things, I never heard of them before.”

“They’re used on Lathes and Mills. We need them in the machine shop.”

“Old Conrad’s place?” He asked.

“Yes, we’ve got it back open and working. But there’s some holes in the inventory that are vital for us to manufacture the parts and stuff we need.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Well if you show me what you need, what they look like then I’ll have a better chance of getting them and not getting ripped off.”

“Fair enough, just come by the shop . . .”

“NO, no that won’t do. Them folks there in town don’t really care for me to be hanging around.”

“But you’re helping them.” Kevin answered somewhat taken back at Troy’s response.

“NO, they muss-ent know that I’m doing this. I’m helping you and Miss Stephanie out cause you treat me and my family right. You don’t look down on us. You treat us like decent folks, not like the others. They can’t know, they just can’t know.”

Jacob Conrad had been the village’s jack-of-all-trades before his retirement two years previous. A self-taught machinist, welder, blacksmith and fix-it jockey, he came out of retirement and reopened his old metal shop near the center of town. The village now drew on the extensive knowledge of the elder generations as they geared up to the daunting task of becoming self-sufficient. It had been Kevin’s son Buck’s idea to take advantage of the small streams that passed through and around the village to produce the vital electricity needed by the community. Buck, along with his new found friends the Larkin brothers, became the driving force behind the endeavor. The trio combed through every book and resource in the small village library and came up with several workable plans to build small hydroelectric systems. Under old man Conrad’s guidance the trio quickly had several simple paddle wheel prototypes spinning away in the frigid mountain streams. Soon the community’s diesel generators were relegated to back up emergency support as small hydroelectric systems began to dot the stream banks and feed into the small power grid.

Troy Henderson showed up at Conrad’s several days later. He slinked in the front door and looked for Kevin amongst the dozen or so men working there. It wasn’t long until someone spotted him standing by the door quietly. Their response was not all together friendly.

“What do you want here Troy? NO DOPERS work here!”

Troy just stood there taking the insults until Ol’ Man Conrad approached him.

“What’s your business here, Troy?”

“I’m here to see Mr. Jorgenson.” He meekly replied.

By now the entire shift was watching events unfold in the front of the shop. Just then Kevin walked through the front door. The tension was thick and Kevin immediately regretted his tardiness. Motioning to Troy still standing to the side of the door with his hands in his pockets Kevin spoke loud enough for everyone to hear.

“He’s with me. Come on, Troy, let me show you what we need.” And he motioned Troy to follow.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *A Gray Man*

Old Man Conrad looked first at Kevin, back to Troy and then back at Kevin before nodding his approval. The pair quickly moved into the back of the shop to the heavy machinery with Conrad right on their tail. Kevin began placing various items out for Troy's inspection naming them off one by one. Troy repeated the description names and then he picked up and examined each one, running the item through his fingers and repeating the name. Conrad stood off to the side watching the bizarre event unfold.

The trio walked around the shop stopping here and there to examine an item. Troy suddenly stopped at the assembly table where one of the men was putting together several Uzi's that had been reconstructed from kits furnished by Frank Richardson from his stash. Troy glanced at Kevin who gave him the go ahead and Troy carefully examined the weapon. Kevin walked over to another table and grabbed a half a dozen magazines and placed them in front of Troy.

"Would these help in your negotiations?" Kevin asked.

Troy looked at the offered mags and hefted the Uzi. "It would surely make my Rep a lot stronger." He replied flatly.

A few minutes later Troy left quietly with the Uzi and a bag full of magazines. Conrad met Kevin when he turned back from the door.

"Just what the hell was all that?"

"A test."

"A test? You gave that good for nothing a personal tour of my shop and a perfectly good submachine gun! He'll be back later to steal us blind and hock it all for one of his dope deals!"

"There is that risk." Kevin replied mildly. "But I don't think that will be the case here."

"I thought you were a smart young man when I met you Kevin, but I'm beginning to have my doubts." He stood there shaking his head. "You're just casting pearls before swine. I'm telling you boy, just pearls before swine!"

"That may be Mr. Conrad, that may be. Or I could have just made a silk purse out of a sow's ear."

Through out the winter the community was a constant hum of activity. Every one had two or three jobs they were working on nearly full time every day. The villagers hit the sack exhausted every night. But it was a good kind of tired, because they could see the small amount of progress every day. Kevin had joined the dedicated crew that worked long hours in Jacob Conrad's fabricating shop. He also taught, trained and supervised the villagers in the military techniques he had learned with the 10th Mountain during his stint in the Army. Already rugged outdoorsmen and women they quickly picked up the essential elements of his classes and were becoming a formidable weapon to contend with. The sight of white battle dress clad citizens performing hasty ambushes and maneuvering across the snowy terrain made him wonder what his forefathers must have thought about their future during that long hard winter spent in a little valley in Pennsylvania. Standing in the snowy field shouting orders across the expanse at his raw recruits he could feel a familiar kinship with a Prussian

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Baron that had filled this same capacity over two hundred years earlier. Kevin hoped they would have the same luck as those staunch forefathers.

This is not to say that everything was coming up roses. As rugged as the mountain-bred villagers are, they are just as independent as they are a tough lot. The weekly town meetings could become quite heated, but in the end they all realized that their situation was sink or swim and they were all in the same boat. The news that filtered in via the shortwave or from limited contact with the outside was not good. There seemed to be a rising resistance across the entire country. People were not satisfied with the government's efforts to regain control and open rebellion was becoming more and more common. The plague had swept through a second time and virtually wiped out many first time survivors before finally burning out. It was quite a mess out there and Kevin was more than happy to be isolated as they were by the mountains even with all the risks of such isolation. But he was becoming very concerned about the coming spring. Not only for the possibility of the Security Forces returning to reclaim the village they had been chased out of, but even more he worried about how the community would provide for the food they would need to survive the next winter. High altitude farming is at best patchy and many of the common foods people are most familiar with simply couldn't be grown there.

Two weeks later, the community suddenly found themselves having to reassess one of their least popular members. The call came in from the front gate down by the main bridge into town. Troy was back with a Peterbilt Semi-tractor trailer rig full of gear. A short while later, he pulled up in front of Conrad's shop and jumped down from the rig. He walked up to Kevin who was standing beside Conrad and handed him a clipboard. On it was the list he had originally given to Troy.

"I managed to get most of the things on your list. Plus I picked up a few other things that I . . . sort of fell into. I'm still working on the circled things. They will take a little more time."

Kevin glanced over the list and the several sheets of paper underneath of the non-requested items. A big smile slowly stretched across his face and he handed the clipboard to Old Man Conrad. The stocky blacksmith's eyes practically buggered out of his face as he went down the list.

"WHAaa! Where in the hell did you find all this stuff?!" He stammered.

Kevin interrupted the amazed shop owner. "Never ask a Comm-Shaw Artist that question Mr. Conrad."

He turned and called out to the gathering crowd. "Let's get this gear unloaded and under cover."

He gave the wiry village Comm-Shaw Artist a hefty pat on the shoulder. Troy returned the appreciative pat with a big smile. He had finally found his niche.

Troy had left the village as an outcast, despised for his sorry upbringing and lack of social and economic status. But the rules had changed and what had been a negative attribute a few short months ago was now a vital survival skill. He still had a hankering for a puff of the weed from time to time. But suddenly Troy had a different Rep to protect and his newly found appreciation was more important to him than the call of that forbidden intoxicant. After his second successful Comm-Shaw run Troy requested from the village Elders permission to move into one of the empty houses in town. They readily granted his request. When Kevin noticed Troy on the

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

streets these days there was a different air about the young man from when they had first met. He walked a little straighter and held his head a little higher.

For now they had met all the challenges and beat the odds. Kevin just hoped their luck and ingenuity would continue to hold out. These were good people his family had cast their lot with. Good people that deserved to survive. But he also knew that life gave you no guarantees.

It had been a busy month here in the mountains. He crossed the soft snow and entered the back door of the main shop. I wonder what old man Conrad has pulled out of his sleeve this afternoon he thought to himself as he walked towards the gathering workers near the center of the shop. Kevin looked over the top of several shorter men and could not believe his eyes. The old fart had assembled a large copper still.

“I guess we’re going into the moonshine business.” He said under his breath.

Pax Americana 60 - Metamorphosis

It is better to wake up late, than not at all.

You [should] not examine legislation in the light of the benefits it will convey if properly administered, but in the light of the wrongs it would do and the harm it would cause if improperly administered. -

Lyndon Johnson, former President of the U.S.

Non-cooperation with evil is as much a duty as cooperation with good. - Mohandas Gandhi

He leaned exhausted and panting against the side of the building, trying desperately to suck in enough air to provide the oxygen his body was desperately screaming for. He had never run so hard or so far in his entire life. He was shaking from the adrenaline that was pumping through every cell in his body. His vision was fading in and out with sparkling lights dancing in front of his eyes. Then the surge came and what little he had in his stomach erupted violently forth.

He awoke laying there on the cool ground with a bitter taste in his mouth. His breathing was back to normal; his heart was no longer pounding in his ears. He slowly pushed himself upright and listened to the wail of sirens far off in the distance. He had made it out of the zone . . . alive, and he still had the loaf of bread in his hand. It wasn’t much, but it was something. The food riot had been unexpected, violent and deadly. Richard Kern still could not believe how close he came to joining those lying in the streets dying, their blood running across the blacktop and into the gutters. It had been more than the worst nightmare he could ever image. God, what insanity.

SSgt Larkin looked out over the marina though his binoculars. There were several boats that would suit their needs. Now all they had to do was pick the most seaworthy one, outfit it, escape the local authorities and sail across the largest ocean on the planet without dying in the attempt.

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The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Piece of cake.” He muttered to himself. “FUCKING PIECE OF CAKE!”

It had taken nearly a week to work their way south, avoiding any contact with the locals, to the hilltop where they now were on that overlooked the marina. His team still did not fully know what the world situation was, other than somehow they had been left behind when the rest of the U.S. and Philippine military presence had suddenly and unexpectedly abandoned operations against the Muslim guerillas. It had been better than four hours since LCpl Chavez had stripped off his gear and descended into the village below. Yahzee had stripped down to the barest combat essentials and shadowed Chavez to the outskirts of the village where he waited somewhere unseen.

Larkin knew that to hold this type of operation to a specific timetable was ridiculous, but he would feel a whole lot better when his two Lance Corporals were back inside their hasty perimeter. If something went wrong now they were both too far away for SSgt Larkin to provide any kind of covering fire and support. Time seemed to gnaw on the team as they waited.

Richard edged slowly to the corner of bushes and looked out across the empty street. Nothing moved in either direction but he did not trust the quiet. It had been quiet just before all hell broke loose at the food ration drop off station. When the Red Cross delivery truck ran out of food parcels and tried to drive off the hungry crowd suddenly went berserk and surged towards it. Richard had just received his allotment of a single bag of groceries when people started clawing at him and his bag of food. That was when the security guards opened up with their rifles and machine guns. Richard barely escaped as people began falling all around him. A fat lady fell against him penning him to the ground and probably saved him as round after round made the most sickening sound as hot metal met flesh.

“THAWACK - THAWACK - THAWACK - THAWACK!”

The night was suddenly filled with screaming people trying to desperately to escape the carnage. Richard finally managed to free himself from the mass of dead flesh that laid on top of him and grabbed the only thing remaining from the bag of groceries he had stood in line for over eight hours to receive. The bread was flattened and the outer wrapper stained with blood, but it was food. The crowd had left the immediate area, fleeing from the gunfire, and Richard saw an opening in the slaughter. Grabbing the bread he launched himself out of the hole like an Olympic athlete sprinting across the body-scattered parking lot in sheer terror. The guards didn't spot the fleeing computer programmer until the very last moment. He was only one person and fleeing while there were still thousands to contend with that waited hungrily just beyond the lights of the parking lot. One guard fired off two quick shots, just in case there were others in that direction that might try another rush on the security force. The shots went well wide of the fleeing man but he still managed to kick in the afterburners as a huge surge of adrenaline raced through his already panicked system.

Now he was but a few hundred yards from home and Colleen. But he might as well have been a hundred miles away. Fear gripped him as he tried to garner the courage to sprint across the street and into the awaiting darkness beyond.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

After the umpteenth time he finally wound himself up and managed to jump out of the bushes and onto the sidewalk. He had never felt so exposed before in his entire life. He hesitated one more time then dashed across the street and into the opening of the housing tract. Once inside he quickly looked back to see if he was being followed and was somewhat relieved when he could not hear or see anyone. But the fear would not leave him. He jogged on down the street as quietly as he could.

The streetlights were all out and had been that way for months. No lights shone in the dark windows of the houses that might as well have been mausoleums in a graveyard as most of the homes had been abandoned or housed their previous owners that had died of the plague. His part of the housing tract was still pretty much intact and had fared much better than the opposite section several streets over. The burnt remains of twenty or so houses were a reminder of their isolation and the seriousness of their situation. There were no services of any kind in this part of the city anymore.

Finally he was almost home and he slowed his jog to a brisk walk, trying to catch his breath and appear calm in the middle of the terror that he was feeling. Colleen didn't need this extra strain just now. Damn it for the bad timing! She still didn't show, but that didn't matter right now. Right now they had to figure out a way to get the hell out of here, but to where he didn't know. His folks were two states away and her folks clear over on the East coast, both would be impossible to reach under the current circumstances. There was just no way to get to either place. But to stay here was now becoming suicidal and what of their unborn baby, there had to be a better place to be than here, but where, and more importantly . . . how?

Someone was approaching. The FCT team hunkered down and prepared to receive whom ever was walking right into their midst.

A whispered voice called out. "Jelly".

And was quickly answered "Roll".

Yazhee and Chavez had returned. Only Chavez didn't look a bit like he had when he had walked down off the hill. His combat boots were tied together and hanging around his neck. In their place was a pair of flip-flops, the common footwear in this tropical part of the world. Combined with a pair of obviously non-regulation shorts and a stained wife-beater T-shirt he had liberated from someone's drying laundry his urban camouflage was complete.

"Well, what do you have for us, Chavez?" Sgt Stevens asked eyeing his Lance Corporals new duds.

The pair squatted down and began their debrief.

"There are a couple of likely candidates out there to choose from, Staff Sergeant. The big one on the end doesn't look like its gone anywhere in a long time. There's some fishing boats that could carry us all, but they were looking pretty ragged also. I'd doubt that they'd make it to the next island let alone all the way across the pond. Probably sink just beyond the reef if you ask me. But that double hulled one down on the other end looks like it just might be the ticket."

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *A GrayMan*

“Why is that?” Larkin asked.

“Well it was sort of like Doc told me to look out for. It was just the way he described a cruising sailboat should look like. Lots of gear but all tied down and smart looking. Only one problem though.”

“And that would be?” Larkin asked.

“There’s a guard watching over it.” Chavez answered.

“Shit! A guard?”

“Yeah. We could take him out easy, he’s pretty sloppy. Not really paying any attention, just kicking back trying to look bad.” Chavez gave a street sign like a bad boy from the hood would make.

Yahzee now added his comments. “I think the owner is over in the local lock down.”

“How’s that?” Zipper asked.

“I could hear this dude yelling his lungs out from the back of one of the buildings. So I sort of scooted down and checked it out. Sounds like a Brit by his accent. He’s really pissed.”

“Did you happen to notice any flags on the twin hull Chavez?” Larkin asked.

“Hmmm there were a couple of different flags, but they weren’t from any countries I know. Sorry Staff Sergeant.”

For the next several minutes the pair went into detail about the village below and what the situation appeared to be there. Doc Nabors borrowed Larkin’s binos and took a long look for himself at their potential ride home. He recognized the design of the large catamaran that was tied up to the dock. He had even looked into building one for himself at one time. It was a Wharram. They had been around for a while. The designer was a bit of an old eccentric English sailor, but his design was a strong one based on the ancient Polynesian twin hulled voyaging canoes. The one he was looking at right now appeared to be in the 35-40 foot capacity and with the identical upturned ends and was probably of the Pahi class. If that was true then they did indeed have a blue water sailing boat that could take them home.

“Were there any guerrillas in the village, anyone armed?”

“Just the local cop, no military types.” Chavez answered.

“But that is not to say that they might not be nearby.” Yahzee added.

Larkin walked up behind his Corpsman still eye balling the parked sailboat. “Well, Doc, do you think you can drive that barge?”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Well, Staff Sergeant, if you want the truth . . . I can probably crew that boat ok, but to skipper it . . . ” He put down the binoculars and turned around to face his team leader. “Not if you want to get back home in one piece.”

“But I thought you said that you knew how to sail?”

“I do, but not something like that, and not across an ocean. Shit, there’s a whole lot of difference between day sailors on coastal boats and sailing in open blue water across oceans. This is way out of my league.”

“So, what now?” The Marine looked at his corpsman.

“I’d say we need that Australian dude they have locked up in the village brig.”

“Australian?”

“Well that is the national ensign that’s flying on the boat down there.” The Corpsman replied.

Richard had finally reached home; it had been a long and grueling day with little to show for all his effort. He slipped through the gate to the back yard and down the side of the house to the garage door. He got there mostly by feel because it was so dark in the narrow side yard between the houses. Fumbling with the lock he finally managed to get the key in the slot and swung the dead bolt free and quietly pushed the door in and disappeared into the inky darkness. Once he had closed the door and reset the dead bolt he pressed the little LED light on his key chain and made his way to the door leading through the utility room and on into the house.

Colleen was waiting there in the family room for him. A single solitary candle cast a depressingly dim light in the large room, yet her warm smile stilled shined through the darkness that was hovering on the edge of the room. He wondered how it had come to this. Not so very long ago he had been on the top of his world. A premier programming job with a top rated computer firm. He had quickly risen to the top and garnered a six-figure salary. A new wife, a new house and all the toys that a twenty-second century suburbanite could have wished for and now . . . now there was nothing. All his toys and money were for naught. Today he risked his life for a single crushed loaf of Wonder Bread. His cupboards were nearly bare, his job gone, his bank closed, his life hanging by a thread, just himself and a pregnant wife stranded in the middle of a dying suburb.

She took one look at her husband and knew it had not gone well. They had been getting by on the weekly hand-outs from the Red Cross, but she knew that the time would soon come when that form of charity would also dry up. She placed her hand protectively on her unborn child and wondered just what sort of world she was bringing her baby into. They had not planned for children at this time, but nature would not be thwarted. Despite all her efforts, never missing a single pill, she had still become pregnant. She had never dreamed that their wonderful world would fall apart so quickly. It was bad enough when the Plague first hit and thousands were dying every day. Then Richard’s job just closed their doors one day without a single word or a warning. Next the power became unpredictable and finally went out and shortly after that all the banks closed.

She was glad that Richard had put aside a few supplies back when the Y2K thing was the latest fear. But what little they had left of that was nearing its end, though they still did have several hundred pounds of wheat berries

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

in the storage room under the stairs, for all the good it would do them without a means to grind them into flour. She had cried her last tear several weeks back. It would do no good and she knew it. Somehow she knew Richard would figure out a way out of this mess, he had to - for all their sakes.

She looked at the crushed loaf of bread and noted the dark stain on the white outer wrapper.

“What did you get on the wrapper dear?”

Richard looked at the dark blotch and answered flatly. “That’s blood, dear. They ran out of food and the guards starting shooting the crowd.”

Colleen put her hand to her mouth. “Oh my God!” She exclaimed.

“Are you hurt - are you OK - oh my dear God, what is to become of us?”

He knelt down and took her in his arms and the shaking began again. Together they held each other protectively and wept.

It was well after midnight and the village was out for the night, the last bar had finally closed and all its patrons staggered home. Across from the small police station SSgt Larking, his 249 gunner Sgt Stevens and both Lance Corporals Chavez and Yahzee watched from the shadows. Zipper, the radioman, and both Doc’s were closing in on catamaran they had picked to make their escape. The guard at the boat landing was fast asleep in the deck chair next to the sailboat. Unfortunately his position blocked their access to the boat and since their approach was limited to the narrow floating wharf he would be difficult to sneak up on.

Cpl Zimmerman looked at his corpsman and gave him the signal. Nabors nodded and they both closed their right hands and began the age old tradition to pick which of them would go in the water to out flank the sleeping guard.

“One - Two - Three!” They whispered quietly.

Zipper froze his hand with his first two finger pointing out - Scissors! While the Doc’s hand froze still in a fist - Rock!

“Shit, Doc, you beat me every time!”

“Here, give me your shit and go get wet.” The Corpsman calmly replied with a big smile.

SSgt Stacy the Ranger Medical Specialist just looked on in amazement. A few seconds later the wiry Marine was letting himself down into the water and pulling himself carefully and silently along the edge of the floating dock.

“What the hell was all that?” She asked in a whisper.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Well, someone had to get wet. How else would you choose?”

The Corpsman returned his attention to the sleeping guard.

Back up the road a lone figure in sandals, shorts and a wife-beater tee shirt walked into the tiny police station. The officer on duty was stacking Z's behind his desk when Chavez whipped his M-16 around and jammed it into the side of his face. The officer abruptly woke from his deep slumber and his eyes grew three sizes larger when he recognized the weapon shoved into his cheek. Quickly the rest of the team sprinted into the office and took up their positions. Chavez and Larkin pushed the disarmed and handcuffed police officer into the back of the stations towards the holding cells. There were only two men in residence, one a drunken Filipino and the other the target they had come for. Chavez herded the confused cop into the cell as Larkin roused the sleeping Aussie, who was more than a little confused at the unexpected wake up call.

“You the owner of that big catamaran sailboat in the harbor?” Larkin asked quickly as he nudged the big Australian awake.

“Aye, that's my boat! Just who the fuck are you, mate?”

“We're your fan club, sailorman, and your escort the fuck out of here.”

“Well kiss my bloody arse, why didn't you say so in the first place, Yank!”

With the guard bound, gagged and locked up in the Australian's cell, the group exited the station house quickly and by leaps and bounds made their way through the sleeping village towards the marina. When they arrived they spotted the guard there in a secured in a similar situation tied to one of the pilings beside the catamarans moorings. All the lines had been cast off but one, which held big sailboat against the dock. The group quickly leapt aboard and Nabors cast off the last line. They were underway. The small outboard coughed to life and began pushing the big boat away from the dock as she slowly began to make her way out of the marina and towards open sea.

The Aussie was everywhere at once tying off this line, loosing up another, pulling here and there. By the time they cleared the break water the main sail billowed out and picked up the boats pace as it began to pull steadily away from land in the light chop.

Richard woke up first the next morning and disappeared into the garage. A few hours later Colleen noticed his absence and followed the noise. She found her husband feverishly pulling items down from the shelves and moving between piles of gear on the garage floor. The normally neat garage was a mess.

“What are you doing Rich?”

He suddenly stopped at her voice and looked up. “Something we should have done a long time ago Honey.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

She stepped down onto the cold concrete floor and looked over the various piles. “Richard, what is all this, hon?”

“We’re getting out of here, Colleen, we’re getting out of here now.”

“But where will we go? Both of our parents are too far away and we don’t have any travel passes, they won’t let us out of the city.”

“I’ve got an aunt that lives up north of here out in the country.”

“But dear.” She shook her head. “We don’t even know if she’s still alive and you heard the news just like me. There’s no travel without the proper permits.”

Richard turned suddenly angry, his voice changed to a tone that Colleen had never heard before.

“Colleen, we are getting out of here. We are getting out of here now, do you understand me?!”

The images of the night before were flashing through Richard’s mind. Neither he nor his wife was going to end up bleeding out on an Albertson’s parking lot over a loaf of bread. He didn’t know how he was going to get to his Aunt Betty’s place, but if there was a way he was going to find it. He was not going to wait for the government to get this shit fixed. He had no more faith in that resolution. It was time that he took matters into his own hands. He only hoped that he was not too late to correct his mistaken trust in the system. He picked up the only weapon he had, a spear gun. Well, it was a start.

Desert Doc

Chapter 61 - Into The Crucible

If you lack the iron and the fizz to take control of your own life, then the gods will repay your weakness by having a grin or two at your expense. Should you fail to pilot your own ship, don't be surprised at what inappropriate port you find yourself docked. - Tom Robbins

It is hard to imagine a more stupid or more dangerous way of making decisions than by putting those decisions in the hands of people who pay no price for being wrong.
- Thomas Sowell

The end move in politics is always to pick up a gun. - R. Buckminster Fuller

Doc Nabors sat at the helm totally enraptured with the rhythmic movement of the catamaran on the open ocean. His Marines, finally assured that he could indeed handle the helm crashed wherever they could, lulled to sleep by the gentle rolling of the boat. Ian Chamberlain sat across from the Corpsman and told his story, one sailor to another.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Then we gets this brilliant idea, see. Lets just pop over to the P.I. an hav us a couple of L.B.F.M.’s. (Little Brown F’ing Machines) It would be a great holiday, what!” Ian paused to drain another bottle of warm beer and continued on.

“Only me mate, he gets a royal ‘ard on for one of these little rice eaters. E’s all in love wit this one he is, and off he trots without so much as a by your leave. Next thing I ‘ear he’s calling me, e’s in bloody Manila meetin ‘er family and getting h’tched. Can you believe that Yank. The bloody b’stard up an get’s hitched. Does ‘e invite me to be his best man, hell no . . . well piss off I say.”

“So how did you end up in the local slammer Ian?” Doc asked.

“Oh well that . . . just a slight miss understand’n, really . . . it was an ‘onest mistake. It seems I boffed the wrong Sheila. The little minx was the Chief of Pol’ces niece. How the bloody ‘ell was I suppos’d to know.

“They threw you in jail for a little hanky panky?”

“Oh is was more than a little hanky panky mate, I can assure you of that! What a blow out!”

He took a final swig of the beer and then tossed the empty bottle into the sea.

“So tell me Yank, how is it that you and your mates happen to be in that lil’ armpit of paradise and decide to rescue my sorry arse?”

Doc Nabers shared the events of the last several weeks with the owner and recently liberated skipper of the sail-boat. Ian commented that he hadn’t heard of any reason for the big pull out though there was some talk before he lit out of Fremantle that the Yanks were having a bugger of a time back in the states. Here on the other side of the world many thought that they just might be getting their just deserts for sticking their high handed nose into everybody else’s business. But Ian didn’t hold to that line of thought.

“Naw me Dad fought with you Yanks in Vietnam. Said you all were bloody crazy but then so are most Aussies for that matter. ‘e said it had something to do wit both of our ancestors getting kicked out of jolly ol’ England, only you Yanks had the good sense to get a divorce from the mother country and all we did is get a legal separation.” He started laughing at that and nearly fell of his seat.

Colleen walked around the sorted piles on the garage floor. The first pile had the Kelty backpacks they had used during their camping trip together up in Yosemite when they were first dating. Next to that were their sleeping bags and self-inflating ground mats and their lightweight dome tent.

Another pile was made up of bits and pieces of cooking gear, the butane stove and a pile of various food and water storage containers. She was surprised to find her old broken in hiking boots sitting next to her husbands boots beside a pile of camping clothes that neither had worn for several years as they had drifted away to concentrate more on careers than recreation. Two military duffle bags leaning up against the far wall caught her at-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

tention. In the dim light it was difficult to make out the writing on the side of the bags and the shoulder strap. A series of numbers ran down the strap, a social security number, but the initials were wrong.

“These aren’t yours are they Hon?”

Richard looked down from the ladder he was using to get at the other articles stored in the overhead of the garage.

“What . . . oh those duffle bags? No those were my older brother’s.” He turned back to concentrate on looking through the pile of boxes with the flashlight. “He dropped them off when he got back from the first Gulf War just before he went on leave.”

“Oh . . . is that when he was killed in the accident?”

“Yeah.” Richard turned back to Colleen. “Talk about a total bite. The guy survives the Gulf War and isn’t back in the states two weeks and some drunk crosses the center divider and takes him and a buddy out.” He took in a slow breath and blew it out.

“That was really hard on Mom and Dad.”

“I’ll bet.” She tried to drag one of the bags over into the light. “Man is this thing heavy!”

“Yeah he joked that he had everything he owned including the kitchen sink crammed into those two bags.”

“Well that must be true, these things weigh a ton.” She grunted as she finally dropped the first bag. “Have you ever looked to see what was in them?”

“Naw, was going to . . . but just never got around to it. Sort of didn’t seem right somehow.”

“Oh . . . well do you think we should now?”

“Go ahead Hon. I don’t think he’d mind. After all they’ve been sitting around since the war. What ever is in there is probably so wrinkled that it’s not worth much by now. But there may be some of those military canteens or a field jacket and other stuff we could use now.”

Colleen managed to unsnap the catch with some difficulty, once inside she discovered a large heavy plastic bag that had been duck taped closed protecting the contents. The bag was indeed crammed full of military clothing, carefully rolled and packed tighter than a can of sardines. One thing for sure Rich’s brother knew how to pack. With a bit of difficulty she began to pull out the uniforms and stack the contents to the side. It took a half an hour to finally unload the first bag and she was amazed just how much stuff could be crammed into one bag. Her treasure included combat boots, military back pack, gas mask, a complete set of Gore-Tex raingear, two field jackets, numerous sets of underwear and camouflaged uniforms both desert and woodland. She had never seen so many socks. Must be a military fetish she thought. With that done she got up and dragged the second bag over and commenced to unpack that one as well.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“FOUND THEM!” Richard shouted.

“What?”

“The extra spears to the spear gun.” He said as he climbed back down the ladder.

“Are you planning on going spear fishing for food?” She asked.

“What? Ah, no, I mean I could . . . but that’s not the idea.”

“So what are you going to do with it.”

“I was thinking more along the lines of self-defense.”

“With a spear gun? Seriously?”

“Well I wouldn’t attach a recovery line to it, but yes, at close range this could easily wound . . . ”

“Or kill someone.” She finished his sentence for him.

“You didn’t see what happened last night Colleen. You didn’t see how crazy everyone got. They were shooting people over bread . . . there were dead people everywhere. My God it was the scariest thing I’ve every seen!” Richard exclaimed as he walked over to his wife while she continued to unload the second duffle bag.

Suddenly she stopped and peered into the partially emptied duffle bag. She reached in and grabbing something with both hands asking her husband to hold onto the base of the bag. What ever it was, it was wedged in tight and even with all her strength Colleen couldn’t pull it free.

Richard came around and stood the bag upright. Reaching down inside he tried to unpack the gear that surround the bundle. Finally with both feet and Colleen anchoring the bag he managed to work the bundle free with a final jerk. The bundle was heavy and strangely shaped. He quickly untied the cord that secured the wool military blanket around the parcel and rolled it out. They both just sat there staring with their jaws agape.

“What the hell?” They both exclaimed.

The sunset that first evening at sea was beyond spectacular. The FCT team had awoken from their long nap towards the later part of the afternoon and began cleaning and going over their gear. Ian was more than intrigued with the weaponry displayed. It wasn’t until the daily duties were completed and the gear was safely stowed for sea did the group finally get together to iron out their plans.

Ian whipped up a rice and fresh fish concoction that was a tasty relief after the solid diet of MRE’s over the past few weeks. In the glow of the dim running lights of the ship the group began to discuss their immediate plans.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“So where would you Yanks like to be let off?” Ian began.

The group looked at each other for a few seconds before SSgt Larkin spoke.

“Well . . . what’s the closest U.S. base or installation?” He asked.

“Let’s see now.” Ian rubbed his chin. “I know you blokes have bases up north on Okinawa. That’s a bit of a drive that is. We could just as easily head south and make for me home . . . but they might not be too friendly towards my mug right now.”

That raised eyebrows on everyone.

“Going south we’ve got to steer clear of the pirates and Moro’s. North we’re a bit short of rations for that journey, but maybe we could pick up a few cans of beans along the way. Let’s see, east is out of the question. West and we’d be bumping into the Vietnamese, who may be a bit funny about an armed invasion.” He looked around at the cammie clad passengers.

“Indonesia is crawling with Muslims and who knows what else. No that would be bad Juju to land there. If we head out East we’re got a smattering of little islands through Micronesia that may or may not like us poking about in their backyards . . .”

“So what are you trying to tell us Ian. Cut to the chase, WHERE CAN WE GO?” Sgt Stevens said in his usually gruff voice.

“Well mate. We can go anywhere you lads like. Just some places are better than others. It’s not like I’m all set up for a charter cruise to state side now is it?” He shot back.

“It doesn’t sound like you have any fucking idea of how to get us home!”

“It takes a lot more than buying a ticket and jumping on board to cross the bleeding ocean. I don’t have near the charts, supplies, sail and about a hundred other things I needs before we start skipping off into the bleeding sunset to the other side of the planet - Yank!”

“We should have just left you to rot in that jail and taken this boat and gone our own way.”

“Whoa cowboys, maybe you better pull back on them reigns a bit both of you. There’s way too much testosterone flying around here to get anything done.” SSgt Katherine Stacy jumped in.

“Let’s get one thing straight here Yank, I’m the skipper of this boat. It goes where I say it goes, when I say it goes and how I say it goes. You bark up this tree and you’ll find yourself swinging from a yardarm. Mutiny is still mutiny in this day and age, mate, and there’s not a Crown court that would side against me on that!”

“Stevens can it!” Larkin growled. “NO BODY is talking mutiny here sailor. This is your boat and you’re the skipper. WE won’t argue that.” He looked around the group with a glare that could have melted the North Pole.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“All I’m concerned with is getting my people back home in one piece safe and sound. If you can do that whether it’s to a friendly base, port or country that’s all that is important, I’m sure there will be some sort of a financial compensation made that will more than make up for any inconvenience this little detour may cause.”

“Hell we broke his ass out of jail Staff Sergeant, if anything he owes us!” Chavez added in quickly.

‘Chavez can you swim?’ Larkin barked at his Lance Corporal.

Chavez took the hint and sat back down. SSgt Larkin turned back to speak to Ian.

“Now Captain Chamberlain, where do you propose to take us to get us home?”

Neither Richard nor Colleen could believe their eyes. There laying on the concrete were two war trophies that his brother had liberated during the Gulf War and smuggled home.

“What is it?”

“I think . . . I think.” He pulled back the plastic and sticky heavy paper to expose the wood and metal underneath. “I think they’re Kalashnikov's.”

Carefully he peeled off the wrapping and completely exposed the first rifle. His fingers were now covered in the sticky heavy grease that was smeared all over the weapon.

“Kalashnikov’s? They look like guns.”

“They are guns, more accurately assault rifles. Soviet designed assault rifles.”

“I thought the Gulf War was fought in Iraq and Kuwait?”

“It was dear, but they didn’t make their own weapons, they bought them like most everyone else in the world. Would you please grab me a rag dear and . . . see if there is a can of mineral spirits over by the old paint on the shelf there?”

Richard carefully unwrapped the second rifle. They both looked brand new and were covered with preservative. Dipping the rag into the spirits he began the long task of cleaning the pair of AK’s from their protective coating.

It was several hours later before he completed the long processes stripping all the greasy preservative from the rifles. Richard had never taken a gun of any kind apart and it took him a while to figure it out. Too bad Erik hadn’t included an operating manual with his cache. He did however include all his personal war gear, his flak vest, web belt, combat vest and helmet along with four magazines for the AK’s and two bandoleers of ammunition. As an added bonus Colleen had also found Erik’s personal handgun; a Colt .45 automatic. There was quite an inventory on the garage floor by the time they were all done.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Over a Spartan dinner of stew made from a small tin of canned meat plus some odds and ends tossed in the pot, the couple reviewed their options. Both had forgotten just how much camping equipment they had collected over the years. Even after they had drifted away from active participation due to constantly shifting schedules Richard couldn't pass up a bargain on the off chance that this year they would be able to get away for a week or two. The weapons they had discovered disturbed Colleen deeply. Her urban liberal upbringing had ingrained into her psyche the idea that guns, all guns were evil. While Richard's background was not so liberal, though equally urban, he had an early masculine fascination with guns and shooting through his older brother. But computers had always held his interest and unlike his brother he never felt the need to demonstrate any skill with weapons. Only now years later did he wish that he had paid a little more attention the few times he had accompanied his older brother to the range.

"I don't see why having those - those guns in the house is a good thing."

"Hon, those guns are neither good or bad. They are tools, nothing more." He responded.

"Yes, tools of destruction, tools of death, tools of evil. You saw for yourself what they are used for last night."

"Now that's unfair. I wasn't armed, those people there waiting in line weren't armed. It was the guards that were armed and they used them against unarmed panicked people."

"See, there you are. They ARE evil!" She gave him one of those spoiled little girl looks that he really hated.

"Colleen, you can't use the rules of a civil society when what is going on out here is anything but civil. People are starving, they are hungry, cold, alone and scared."

"Well they just need to be a little more patient. The Government will get things squared away soon. It's just taking them a little longer than we expected is all."

"Well how long do you think we should wait?" He paused. "Until we're too weak to defend ourselves, or too weak to feed ourselves? Dear the situation out there is very serious."

"You think that I don't realized that? Do you?"

"You didn't see what I saw last night. Honey it's getting too dangerous for us here. If we don't get out of here soon . . ." His voice trailed off.

Colleen was still convinced that their best interest lay in staying where they were until things blew over and got back to normal, which she felt could happen any day now. Richard on the other hand, with last night's terror at the food distribution center still fresh on his mind, was even more convinced that it had to be now or never. He realized the risk of traveling under the current conditions, but he felt that to stay put . . . well that was even worse in his book. Their discussion went on into the night. Tempers flared and there were moments of long silence where neither spoke at all. Never in their five years of marriage had they waged so heated a debate. Finally at eleven o'clock they agreed to put the discussion to bed for the night. They had reached an impasse and neither side would budge.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Richard fell asleep first, with his back to her. Colleen was still angry with her husband and sat there in bed stewing over their heated conversation of the evening. This was the first major disagreement they had ever had, but she was bound and determined to stand her ground on this issue. As she was finally about to drift off to sleep she heard the first noise. It was difficult to determine just what it was or from where. She had had Richard cover their windows with plywood when the first problems surfaced in the housing tract. Vandals had been running through the area throwing rocks through windows just to see if anyone was home. If no one responded, they would kick in the front door and ransack the house. The only way in or out of the Kern's house was now through the garage doors or the side door of the garage. Everything else was boarded up with half-inch plywood.

It came again. Was that the sound of glass breaking? She slipped out of bed and tip toed over to her boarded up window. She could hear voices now, clearly, next door. Another boom followed with the sound of glass shattering.

"Oh my God they're right next door!" She realized.

She quickly as quietly as possible ran back and began shaking Richard. It took a couple of seconds for him to realize that he was not dreaming and then the sound of a loud crash against their own house shattered any remnant of sleep that might have remained.

"Are they in the house!" He asked in a loud whisper.

"No . . . they're next door . . . I think."

Another loud boom echoed against the house. They were indeed in the back yard and beating against the plywood covering the sliding glass doors.

"BOOM!"

"What in the hell are they beating against those doors with?" Richard thought out loud as he reached for the spear gun and cocked it.

"BOOM!"

"What are you doing? WHERE ARE YOU GOING?" Colleen said in a panic as she grabbed his arm.

"BOOM!"

"I'm not waiting for them to bust in and climb up the stairs - I've got to do something now!" He shook off her hold and made for the bedroom door.

"BOOM! CRASH!"

By the time that Richard had flown down the stairs the would be intruders had shattered enough of the plywood that it was flexing against the plate glass patio doors and had shattered one of them. He could see the large

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

crowbars smashing into the torn edge of the plywood eating away at it. They were just seconds away from pulling it off as he picked his spot to make his stand and brought up the spear gun. Suddenly the damaged sheet pulled away from the wall and exposed the broken door. Dark shadows moved towards the opening and Richard aimed for the center of the open space and squeezed the trigger. The large steel dart catapulted itself across the short distance and met soft flesh almost instantly.

The scream was hideous and filled the night as the intruder clawed at the steel rod that had impaled him. Rich almost unthinkingly locked in a second spear and drew back the heavy rubber bands in a single fluid motion. Voices filled the room, vicious voices, scared voices and from somewhere a battle cry erupted from deep within the bowels of a living creature. The spear gun rose on point and an instant later a second shadow trying to slip to the right of the first was pinned to the wall by the long steel shaft.

That ferocious roar erupted a second time and Richard suddenly recognized it as coming from himself as he flipped the now empty spear gun around and using it like a club advanced on the hoard at his door step. But before he could make contact with the invaders in the opening in an attempt to seal the breach the room was suddenly filled with a blinding flash and an explosion to his right. His hearing responded to the concussion of sound with a loud high-pitched scream. Two more flashes and deafening reports and then several more in rapid succession. He couldn't hear anything now. But he had caught the image of the intruders in the blinding strobe like flashes as they attempted as rapidly as possible to escape the vicious response to their intrusion.

As quickly as it had begun . . . it was over. He reached through the darkness and touched his lover, his best friend and his wife. Colleen stood there frozen in shock. Still holding his brother's .45, it's slide locked back. He carefully removed the pistol from her shaking hands and gathered her up in his arms.

In the panic of the moment he had forgotten about the pistol. The two AK's were sitting on the kitchen table waiting to be reassembled. There had been one loaded magazine with the .45 when they found it. Why he had brought it upstairs with them when they went to bed he didn't know. Why his wife, a person so adamant about the evils of guns had not only picked it up, but also used it to save his life he didn't know. He gently put her back to bed. Reloaded the pistol and went down stairs to clean up the mess and re-secure the patio doors.

There were three bodies left behind by the intruders and at least one maybe two bloody trails leading out to the street and down the block. Two of the dead he was responsible for. The spear gun had done its deadly deed most effectively out of water as well as it had beneath the surface. The third was a definite result of his wife's barrage at point blank range. It took nearly an hour to drag the bodies around and into the neighbor's backyard and pound up another sheet of plywood adding some left over two by fours to strengthen the repair. By dawn most of the damage had been either repaired or at least reinforced and the two AK's were reassembled, oiled, magazines loaded and checked.

He would wait until his wife got up in the morning to test fire the rifles. The pistol he already knew was in working order. He puttered around in the garage under the light of a Coleman lantern sorting and rearranging their supplies, prioritizing their gear and planning for their departure. Richard doubted that there would be any argument this morning about staying.

Richard stood in the cold predawn light and watched the night gently fade away through various shades of grey until the first light of day stabbed across the morning sky. Until last night if you had asked him what he was, he

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

would have answered what he did for a living; “a computer programmer, or systems analyst”, or something of that nature. This morning he didn’t know. He didn’t know what he was. He had crossed some invisible line and wasn’t quite sure how to cross back over. He didn’t feel bad about the lives he took last night. They would have surely taken his and his wife’s life, of that there was no question. But he felt that he had somehow failed to protect her. Because had she not stepped in when she did, he doubted that he could have held his ground for very long. He was also surprised by the animal rage that enveloped him in the moment. His brother had talked briefly about it in combat, that survival instinct that gives a soldier incredible strength and agility in a time of sheer panic. He shook his head.

“Oh Erik, you were much better suited for this kind of shit than I am.” He spoke softly to the rising sun.

“You did good little brother . . . you did good.” Drifted back on the soft morning rays.

Chapter 62 - A Candle against the Darkness

Learning is not compulsory. Neither is survival. - **W. Edwards Deming**

Responsibility and danger do not tend to free or stimulate the average person's mind- rather the contrary; but wherever they do liberate an individual's judgement and confidence we can be sure that we are in the presence of exceptional ability. - **Carl von Clausewitz**

It is useless for sheep to pass resolutions in favor of vegetarianism while wolves remain of a different opinion. - **William Ralph Inge**

It was mid morning before Colleen came down the stairs from their bedroom. Rich had cleaned up all of the broken glass and most of the blood on the floor inside sliding glass doors. The concrete patio still showed the results of the evening’s ordeal, but that was hidden behind the replacement boards and plywood that covered the breach. He had spent the morning packing and repacking their Kelty packs and his brother’s duffle bags. Erik’s flak vest and web gear hung from the back one of the kitchen chairs and the two reassembled AK’s lay on the kitchen table.

The first thing that Colleen noticed when she entered the room was the shoulder holster and forty-five that Richard was wearing. All their camping gear and the duffle bags were lined up against the wall to the left of the fireplace. She sat down at the table feeling as if in a dream . . . or . . . a stupor. Richard held her head against his chest and kissed the top of her head. The reality of the situation closed in upon her.

“Did it really happen last night?” She meekly asked.

He hesitated for a second then answered her. “Yes . . . yes it really happened.”

“Did I hurt anyone . . . did . . . did . . . did I kill anyone.”

A thousand thoughts flashed through his mind. “No, I don’t think so.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Then I . . . I . . . I . . . just scared them off?”

“I’d say that was a pretty good description of what you did.” He looked at residue of the dark stain against the corner of the floor under the edge of the kitchen counter. “It sure scared the shit out of me.”

“I was so scared Richard, I was so afraid.”

“So was I dear.” He answered flatly.

“I heard this horrible scream, I thought they were killing you. Oh my GOD Richard . . . what are we going to do?” She buried her head in his arms and wept softly.

“We’re getting out of here as soon as possible and we’re going to my Aunt Betty’s Dear.”

Colleen sobbed uncontrollably for several minutes and finally looked up at her husband with red and swollen eyes. “Will we ever be safe again?”

“When we get to Betty’s.” He held her closer. “When we get to Betty’s we’ll be safe my love.”

She buried her head once again in his arm and the young couple just held each other in a long silence.

It was getting harder and harder to keep warm in the old barn as winter set in. The hay bale plastic wrapped shelter he had constructed helped to keep the bite out of the cold. But the high risk to fire didn’t allow for any fire beyond what was absolutely necessary to cook their food and heat water for coffee or hot chocolate for the kids. Malcolm was thankful for his stint in the Peace Corps immediately following the completion of his first degree. He now resorted to much of that almost forgotten third world knowledge he had picked up during his yearlong stint in Ghana.

With several empty coffee cans that had been holding nails, some bailing wire, an odd piece of sheet metal and an old bean can, Malcolm fashioned a crude stove that could boil water rather quickly using either small twigs or even straw. Placing one partially trimmed can inside the other and attaching an old bean can to the inner can to form an ‘L’ shape. Then packing the space in between the inner cans and the outer shell with damp earth, the “L” shape provided a venturi effect and while it would burn up what ever combustible was used as fuel quickly, the flame was extremely hot and relatively efficient.

Each evening after the kids were sound asleep Malcolm would make a sweep of the surrounding area. He varied the pattern, direction and time of he nightly patrols. He did not like leaving the kids alone but he needed to be sure they were still safe in their hideout. He also suffered from a vital lack of information as to their exact whereabouts. Before you can head to point “B” it would be really nice if you knew where point “A” was. He finally found what he needed in an abandoned farmhouse during one of his longer recon sweeps.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

The house had been empty for some time with most of its windows knocked out and the weather let in. The barn he and kids were currently holding up in was in much better shape. He found some old faded and yellowed newspapers in the kitchen. Those along with a much out of date feed store wall calendar told Malcolm he had somehow ended up in Kansas of all places.

“Well we ain’t in New York anymore Toto!” He muttered to himself.

Malcolm couldn’t for the life of him, understand why the federal government had shipped him and the other dissidents so far from home. Why haul malcontents nearly halfway across the country?

The snow softly crunched under his boots as he worked his way back through the woods to the Barn. He tried to stay in the broken cover that the scattered trees provided. Besides breaking up any outline he might present, with a little effort he could avoid leaving clear footprints behind, something impossible in the open snow covered fields. The last thing he wanted to do was leave a clear trail back to the barn. He was becoming adept at picking out the narrow deer and animal trails through the woody landscape and these at least afforded a path and the possibility of confusing any trail he might leave. Though he doubted that an experienced woodsman would hardly miss any sign he left behind, but the vast majority of people today were urban and quite blind in the woods.

If they were indeed in Kansas then to his way of thinking his charges uncle lived somewhere to the west of here. The only big mountains that he knew of meant that they needed to head towards the Rockies. Which was OK as far as he was concerned. The further from the Jack Booted Thugs that had pulled him from his house and trucked him halfway across country to rot in a concentration camp he could get the better he felt.

He had traveled out west only a few times in this life. What he remembered most were the wide-open spaces that got wider and more open the further west you went. While the geography afforded less cover it also meant fewer people and the possibility that he could at least see any trouble before he landed in it.

Richard walked his wife back up stairs carrying a pail of water that he had heated. It wasn’t much and certainly would not take the place of a hot steamy bath or shower. But he thought the warm water would provide some sense of normalcy and perhaps maybe a little comfort. The previous evening had hit Colleen hard. It was the kind of wake up call that no one should ever have to experience. But the current situation would not afford such luxuries as avoidance or denial. She moved like a zombie, sluggishly going through the motions required of her. Richard worried that she might not recover from the shock of the encounter and at the same time he wondered about his own stability. So far he seemed empty of emotions regarding last night. He had killed two men and dragged three dead bodies out of sight. The smell of their blood was still on his hands and no matter how hard he tried to scrub them they would not come clean. He got his wife started and then left her to complete her morning rituals on her own.

Once back down stairs he continued his preparations. Rich felt that he had to keep moving, had to keep busy, there was just so much that needed to be done and he could feel the press of time. He stood in the doorway looking out on their two vehicles in the garage. Neither was suitable for their exodus from the greater suburban metropolis of San Diego to his Aunts place, which was better than ninety miles to the north out in the sticks.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

The freeway would of course be the quickest route and also the most likely to be patrolled and restricted. There were several other secondary routes that paralleled either the 5 or the 15 freeways north but not many. Southern California had both fallen in love with and grown up centered around the automobile. Thus the quickest and sometimes the only means available to move between points A and B was the large concrete freeway system that reached nearly into every community in the Southland. But he needed to find a way to avoid that main artery system and still reach Betty's. This was not going to be easy.

Contrary to popular belief there still were some large expanses of sparsely settled country once you got outside the immediate zones of suburban sprawl. It was harder to get to and most of it was pretty steep and nearly impossible to build on. At least no developer had yet figured out a way to glue foundations to the side of ridges and mountains . . . yet. Richard felt sure that if they could get beyond the city limits and into the backcountry they would have a chance, a good chance of making all the way to his aunts place. But looking at her hybrid electric Honda and his retro cruiser he didn't feel that either of these were worthy candidates. What he needed was something considerably more rugged and capable of handling potholed backcountry roads as well as dirt and gravels trails. He needed something four-wheel drive.

Colleen came up behind her husband and wrapped her arms around him.

"I'm sorry I'm such a flake." She began. "We should have headed off to your Aunt's when you first wanted to."

"Hon, we had no way of knowing things could possibly get this bad." He turned around in his wife's arms.

"Nothing like this has ever happened here before. People have never acted like this. Who could have predicted that the shit would hit the fan like this here in the States."

"The what?"

"The Shit hitting the fan, it's something my brother used to say."

"Huh?"

"Imagine taking a handful of shit and throwing it into a fan."

"Euuuu, it would go everywhere . . . talk about a stink!"

"Precisely, shit everywhere. And that's the situation we're in now. The shit is falling apart everywhere and somehow we've got to get through it."

"Richard I'm scared. Are you sure we can't just stay here?"

"No dear, I don't think we can. It's not safe here anymore."

"You don't think they'll come back do you?"

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“I wouldn’t put it past them. We might of scared them off last night and they just may stay out of this area, but then again they may be really pissed off about a couple of their buddies getting hurt and just waiting for a chance to get back at us.” Richard held her by the shoulders and looked into her eyes.

“I don’t want a repeat of last nights argument, or a repeat of last nights trouble. We have to get out of here and we have to get out of here as soon as possible. We need to face facts that the world that you and I knew is gone. It may come back, but it also just might not. I don’t want to stick around here hoping that we won’t have any more trouble. Besides after the riot at the food issue point I don’t think we can expect any support from the government for a while. Things are going to go from bad to worse here real quick!”

He paused and took a breath. “Besides that Colleen we have more than just you and I to worry about.” He looked down at her small tummy. “There’s another life in there that we have to take into consideration. It’s simply not safe here anymore honey.”

Colleen looked down and nodded her head. “You’re right. Everything is different now. It’s just that everything we’ve worked so hard for is here. If we leave what will happen to our home? What will happen to our lives?”

“We’ll live. Our home, the stuff of our previous lives, everything that is here is just stuff. Colleen, stuff can be replaced . . . people can’t.”

“So what do we do now.”? She asked.

“Well first we have to find a vehicle that will get us to Aunt Betty’s.”

“What’s wrong with what we already have?”

“Not big enough and not four-wheel drive.” He answered matter of factly.

Over the next hour Richard went into fine detail regarding what they had and what he felt they needed to make the journey. They unpacked the Kelty’s and duffle bags and the couple went over every item. Adding here, subtracting there. Colleen suggested they include a sewing kit and at least one of his fishing rods and fishing gear. They decided to gather up their important papers and documents that they wouldn’t be taking with them and after sealing them up in several layers of plastic and duck tape they put them into a Tupperware container and buried them back under the lip of the patio.

Colleen mentioned the old coins that they had sitting on the closet shelf in their bedroom. Richard had totally forgotten about the two sock fulls of old silver dollars his Grandfather had given him over the years. He had received a handful of silver dollars every birthday since he was born until his Grandfathers death just a few years back. There was also an old cider bottle of old nickels, dimes and quarters that he had nearly filled as a kid. All of them dated before the change over in sixty-four to the “fake ones” his father bitterly condemned. Regarding the change when the government did away with minting coins with any real value in them. Colleen also gathered her jewelry that had any value and added that to the kitty against Richard’s strong protests.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

They had a late lunch of fried Spam and sliced potatoes. It reminded Richard of when he went camping as a Boy Scout before it was considered too nerdy to belong to such an organization. It was just as they were finishing up that Colleen about floored Richard with a surprising request.

“Will you show me how to use one of those?” She pointed to the AK’s leaning against the wall nearby.

Richard must have given her a shocked and disbelieving look because she had to repeat her question before she got a response.

“Ah . . . ah . . . sure Honey. But first I have to figure out how they work.”

“Can we do it right after lunch?”

“Ah . . . OK . . . are you sure you want to?” He asked a little unsure.

“I’m . . . not . . . convinced they are the right thing to have in this world. But after last night . . . they are the right thing to have now.”

Chapter 63 - Onto the Anvil

We must think of human progress, not as of something going on in the race in general, but as something going on in a small minority, perpetually beleaguered in a few walled towns. Now and then the horde of barbarians outside breaks through, and we have an armed effort to halt the process. That is, we have a Reformation, a French Revolution, a war for democracy, a Great Awakening. The minority is decimated and driven to cover. But a few survive - and a few are enough to carry on. - H.L. Mencken

Smooth seas do not make skillful sailors. - African Proverb

If you're in a fair fight, you didn't plan it properly. - Nick Lappos, Chief R&D Pilot, Sikorsky Aircraft.

“IAN GET UP ON DECK NOW!” Doc Nabors screamed at the top of his lungs. “STAFF SERGEANT LARKIN WE’VE GOT COMPANY!”

For the past couple of days they had been sailing south. The winds had cooperated and while a little choppy from time to time the seas had been relatively mild. It was now that they were beginning to weave their way through the various islands of the archipelagos surrounding Indonesia that there was any concern about bumping into trouble. That was exactly what Doc Nabors suspected was bearing down upon them now. The area was known to harbor pirates and less than honorable officials and now with the world in a rapid state of flux it was any ones guess what the gunboat that was speeding towards the large catamaran wanted. Either way, Ian would have some difficulty explaining his rather hasty exit from his last port not to mention the heavily armed passengers now sailing under his command.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Ian literally flew out of starboard cat and covered the short distance to Nabors in seconds. He took up the binoculars and followed the Corpsman's point off the port side.

"Bloody hell!" Was his only comment.

Larkin was quickly standing beside the boats skipper. "What have we got Ian?"

"Too far off to tell for sure Yank. But they're headed this way and are bloody well armed. Either way it's the sort of company we don't need."

"Could they just pass us by?"

"Not likely, but then anything is possible."

"Staff Sergeant?" Several voices rang out almost in chorus.

"Hang tight lads and keep your bloody heads below deck!" Ian shouted back. "If we can see them, then they can bloody well see us!"

Larkin was looking around sizing up the situation.

"Can we make that island?" he pointed off to the boats right.

"What?" Ian looked at the Marine and then at the nearby island. "You want to flippin race a power boat?"

"No I don't want to race them, I want to be in shallower water when we meet them." He said flatly.

Ian looked at the big Marine with a confused expression. "What the 'ell is up your sleeve Staff Sergeant of Marines? You want to dance wit these fellows, what?"

"No . . ." Larkin looked back at the speck off in the distance and then to the island just a few miles away.

"How close can you get us to that island Ian?"

"Well I can bloody well beach this bitch on it if that suits you Yank. Now would you mind filling in the Captain of this vessel as to just what the hell you have in mind?"

Larkin turned back to the Aussie. "You got any girls bathing suits on board?"

"Now you're not getting me into some Sheila's gear for your kinky little plans mate, I can assure you of that!"

"Not me . . ." He turned. "Her!" He finished pointing to Staff Sergeant Katherine Stacy who just popped her head though the hatch.

"Are we a friendly harmless civilian sailboat or what skipper?"

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Ian nodded. “Aye lad, that we are . . . that we are.”

Kat looked at the two men staring at her and knew what ever they had in mind somehow had something to do with her . . . and she was not going to like it!

Ian suddenly turned to Nabors who was still at the helm.

“Doc come about starboard and make for that island! Lay on what ever sail you need, throw out the spinney if necessary and haul your bloody Yank arse as fast as you can!” With that he jumped back down into the starboard hull and grabbing Kat by the wrist led her forward through the hull.

Larkin quickly went forward and began laying on more sail as he called to his Marines.

“STEVENS! CHAVEZ! YAHZEE! ZIMMERMAN! BREAK OUT WEAPONS AND LOCK AND LOAD! WE’VE GOT COMPANY COMING! YOU’VE GOT THREE MINUTES TO GET ARMED AND DANGEROUS!”

Seconds later from the forward part of the starboard pontoon. “YOU WANT ME TO WHAT!” followed quickly by a loud smack!

“BLIMY THAT HURT!”

It took several minutes for Richard to fiddle around with the AK before he had a working idea of how it ticked. The pair stood in their backyard as he finally pulled back the operating handle on the bolt and chambered the first round. Pointing the rifle at the ground twenty or so feet in front of him. He had figured out the safe mode with the firing selector all the up blocking the rearward movement of the operating handle. He carefully pushed the lever down to the middle position.

“That must be for single fire.” He said to himself as he raised the weapon to his shoulder and took aim at the ground in front of him and got a good grip. Slowly he squeezed the trigger until he could feel and hear the trigger trip. What came next was quite a surprise as round after round rocked out of the little assault rifle and the muzzle began to climb skyward. Before he realized what had happened nearly half the magazine was gone and he had substantially aerated his fence behind his house and part of his neighbor’s roof.

“SHIT!” He exclaimed as he took his pulled his finger out of the trigger guard as quickly as he could.

“OH MY GOD!” His wife exclaimed.

“I don’t think that was single fire.” He gave her a sheepish grin.

Colleen looked first at her husband and then at the rifle she was carrying, now unsure if this is what she really wanted to do.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Richard took a deep breath, blew it out and pushed the selector lever all the way down so that its forward end was opposite the bottom letters “AB”. Taking up a stronger stance he gripped the weapon and once again squeezed the trigger. This time when the trigger tripped only a single round exited the rifle and spit up dirt twenty feet in front of him.

“OK I think I’ve got it now.” He said as he took aim at the corner post of the fence. His finger slowly contracted and another round ripped from the muzzle and pierced the 4x4 neatly just six inches above the soil. Several more rounds were sent across the backyard before Richard flipped the lever back to the middle and carefully popped off a burst of 7.52 x 39 mm ammo.

“OK. “ He said as he turned to his wife. “Your turn.”

“Richard . . . we’re shooting real guns in our backyard . . . in the city . . . this is insane!”

“What is insane is that nothing is going to happen and no one is going to do anything about it.”

He walked over to his wife and clicked her safety all the way down into what he now knew was the semi-auto mode.

“But what about our neighbors? Won’t this scare the crap out of them?”

“Colleen we don’t have any neighbors.”

“Certainly we have neighbors.”

“When was the last time you saw any of our neighbors Colleen? When was the last time Mrs. Timothy, or Dietz, or Liz from just down the street has been over. They’re all gone. We’re the last ones. They’ve either left or died from the plague. We’re the only ones still hanging around here Honey. It’s time to stop dreaming and take a real good long reality check here.”

He looked at her sternly.

“We’re on our own and have been for the last couple weeks, maybe even the last couple of months. It’s time that we fully realized that fact and accepted it, Honey.”

“But Richard?”

“Colleen . . . Honey . . . it’s time to face facts. Nothing is as it was, nor will it ever be again. There is just you and me and our baby. That’s it.

“Now hold it tight into your shoulder and grip the stock up front. Aim there just at the flowerbed line . . . yeah there. Sight down here and put the front point in the V notch and slowly squeeze the trigger.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

The gunboat was now just a few miles away and Ian could still not make out the flag it was flying, though he was sure that it was not friendly. With the added sail the large catamaran sliced through the water and was rapidly approaching the nearest island. Ian was beginning to believe that they just might make it to the beach if they had a little more time which they didn't. The color of the water was already changing and he was now becoming concerned about striking a reef at speed. If that happened it could very easily rip out the bottom of the wood and fiberglass boat and end their little trip quickly.

He quickly checked the charts and tide tables for the region. If he was right and he didn't have the luxury of time to pinpoint their location exactly they would have to clear two shallow reefs to reach the island. The tide and the wind had so far been in their favor, but time, the one commodity that was desperately needed was quickly running out. The gunboat was now just a few miles off and closing rapidly. There was no doubt that they were the target of its interest.

Larkin re-emerged on deck with one of Ian's garish Hawaiian shirts that was at least two sizes too small and couldn't even be buttoned on the rock solid Marine. It was Kat's appearance that totally dropped the jaws of all three men on deck and those that could see from their hidden positions down below. To say that she filled out the bikini to the ninth degree was an understatement. Larkin watched as she walked up to and past the three men by the tiller and took up a position on the forward trampoline. Her large beach towel was loosely rapped around her M-16 and he could see that she had taped three magazines together and was ready for a fight if presented one.

The Aussie and two Americans looked at each other and rolled their eyes. Ian leaned forward.

"Be careful lads, that one packs a wallop, that I can attest to." His left cheek was still red from her rebuttal to a flippant remark he made when he handed her the bathing suit she was now wearing.

"SHIT!" Kat yelled.

Three heads quickly looked in her direction.

"We just missed a big chunk of coral! Ian are you sure you know what the hell you're doing?"

Ian ran forward and began yelling commands to Nabors. Through a rapid series of zigs and zags the catamaran sliced through the openings between the big coral heads and entered the outer most reef of the island. Now the gunboat was within a half a mile and still coming on strong. Larkin did not know the flag she was flying but he did recognize the Arabic writing that flew on it and as far as he was concerned they were not friendlies. When the forward gun opened up firing across their bow he was more than sure of it.

"HOLD YOUR FIRE MARINES!" he called to his shipmates.

The catamaran was now in the outer lagoon and within easy reach of the white beach less than three hundred yards away. Another series of rounds crossed over the bow and were much closer than the last. The twenty millimeter chain gun on the bow of the patrol boat could easily cut the cat to driftwood. They were totally out-gunned and knew it.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

The gunboat was now through the outer reef and moving up along side the catamaran sitting just fifty yards away.

Ian put on his best “What me worry” smile and waived to the ship. But out of the side of his mouth he was rapidly speaking to Staff Sergeant Katherine who was getting as low as one could under the present circumstances.

“Kat you need to stand up where they can see you. The next burst may hit the bloody boat!”

Kat looked first at Ian and then to Larkin, who was standing by the main mast. He nodded back to her and she slowly stood up. Her weapon under the blanket at her feet.

“Aaaah that got their attention.” Ian remarked.

The gunboat was now just thirty five yards away and drifting in closer.

“What do you make of them?” Larkin asked.

“Pirates, by the look of them. Or renegade soldiers. Either way we’re screwed mate.”

Larkin softly spoke just loud enough for everyone to hear on the boat. “Stevens you take out that big gun up forward and keep anyone from getting near it. Chavez you’ve been bragging how good you are with that 40 mike-mike - take out the bridge. Everyone else get ready to clear the deck.”

Ian looked at the Marine in shock!

“Are you flaming insane! They will cut us to bloody ribbons in ‘alf a heart beat.”

“Ian we need a distraction but this ain’t it” Larkin muttered.

“A distraction? A distraction? Do you want me to shit a distraction?” Ian was now waving his arms about and had the attention of the gunboats crew until several of them looked towards the bow of their next victim.

Larkin caught the rapid speech and arm pointing on the approaching boat and looked back over his right shoulder to where Staff Sergeant Katherine Stacy was standing. His jaw nearly hit the deck. There she was this dedicated Medical Specialist US Army Ranger with her hard body and top completely exposed and not much covering her bottom either. Larkin shot a look back to the gunboat and could easily see that every eye was on Stacy.

“NOW STEVENS NOW!”

Sgt Stevens opened up at pointblank range with his 249. The gunner and loader standing at the chain gun up forward danced like marionettes on tangled strings. Chavez’s 40mm slammed into the starboard side of the bridge and literally blew the two men in there out the back side of the bridge and into the water. The rest of the Marines began to sweep the deck of the gunboat with deadly accuracy. Only a few of the pirates on board managed to even get off a return shot and most of those were wild.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Larkin quickly emptied his first two mags before looking around to see if any of his own crew had fallen victim to the wild return fire. Ian was becoming one with catamaran deck and was out of danger. Doc was pumping away with his shotgun and sending a deadly spray of lead across the short distance. Both Chavez and Yahzee were keeping to their firing zones and sending a steady stream of deadly 5.56 raining in on the gunboat. And SSgt Larkin just had to shake his head at the image of their Army Medic half naked raking the gunboat with hot lead from her M-16. This is the kind of stuff you would only expect to see on the big screen action adventure movie or in an adolescence boy's testosterone laden dreams. The world had truly gone insane.

In seconds it was over and the ocean was once again quiet.

Malcolm pulled the Jeep over to the side of the road and looked out at their first view of the snow covered Rockies. He jumped out of the jeep into the blowing snow. His legs needed a good stretch for a few minutes. The wind was sharp and out of the north, driving south across the open plains with a bite to it that forced him to pull the collar of his jacket up tighter around his neck. It would be dawn soon and it looked like more snow was on the way. It had been a long weeks worth of driving, sticking to the back roads, avoiding anything that smacked of civilization. The country looked barren and empty, normal for this time of the year to an extent, but . . . somehow this was different. Less than half the farm houses Malcolm passed looked to be occupied. Many were burned out. He traveled roads that were deep with snow and often slow going, but the little CJ plowed on with steady determination. Now out on the flats he felt much better. The fear of ambush was far less out here, or at least the possibility of a surprise ambush was less. Still he didn't have much to go on as far as any hope to finding the kid's family, but he had to try.

He wondered what he would do if and when he did turn the kids over their relatives. What would he, what could he do in a country that had sent him to a concentration camp for nothing more than speaking out. He had no idea what he would do next, he had no job, no home, and no money. It was like his entire identity had suddenly been washed from the face of the planet. He certainly couldn't go back to the university. He shook his head at the uncertainty that lay ahead. Well at least for now he had a job - To get these two little ones safe and sound into the arms of someone from their family. He must be out of his mind.

He walked around the Jeep several times and then climbed back in. Thank God for an excellent heater. He looked over at the sleeping pair. If only it was that easy. He eased the Jeep back into motion and continued his way west. To where he did not know. But for now one direction was as good as any other.

Chapter 64 - Under the Hammer

Reason is the main resource of man in his struggle for survival. - **Ludwig von Mises**

Most people can't think, most of the remainder won't think, the small fraction who do think mostly can't do it very well. The extremely tiny fraction who think regularly, accurately, creatively, and without self-delusion - in the long run, these are the only people who count. - **Robert Heinlein**

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The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

I am aware that many object to the severity of my language; but is there not cause for severity? I will be as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice. On this subject, I do not wish to think, or speak, or write with moderation; No! no! Tell a man whose house is on fire to give a moderate alarm; tell him to moderately rescue his wife from the hands of the ravisher; tell the mother to gradually extricate her babe from the fire into which it has fallen; but urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present. I am in earnest - I will not equivocate - I will not retreat a single inch, - AND I WILL BE HEARD. - William Lloyd Garrison

It was a little eerie when the door popped open and Richard first looked into the empty house. He had always been an obedient law abiding citizen. Out side of a couple of traffic tickets when he first started driving and a high school prank that involved toilet paper one Halloween, he had never so much as bent a law. Now he was packing an outlawed assault rifle and breaking into a neighbor's house with a crowbar in the middle of the day. Colleen was not thrilled with the idea of raiding their neighbor's homes in preparation for their departure, but Richard had convinced her that they had no other choice.

"This is stealing Richard!"

"This is a survival situation Colleen. If we don't take advantage of the situation we may not survive this."

"But it's still stealing!"

"Would you feel better if I left them a check?" He asked.

"What good would that do?"

"Exactly!"

"ANYBODY HOME?" He called out as he entered the house.

It didn't take him very long before he became aware of the stench of decay and instructed his wife to wait by the back door for him. Covering his face with a bandana, which didn't help very much, he quickly searched through the house. In the bedroom he found the old couple that had lived next door to them since he and Colleen had purchased their home on this quiet cul-de-sac. He avoided looking directly at their decaying forms and quickly checked out the closet for anything useable. Back in the corner behind the suits all lined up neatly he found an old Winchester pump shotgun with most of the bluing worn off and a revolver in the nightstand drawer. As he went through the house anything that looked usable for their escape and survival was quickly brought to the back door and loaded into the wheel barrel. Canned goods, a cast iron Dutch oven, an AC/DC/battery powered AM/FM/SW portable radio. And so went the scavenger hunt as they worked their way house by house around their little cul-de-sac.

By evening they had several more large piles of supplies separated and lined up on the garage floor. There was a surprisingly hefty amount of canned goods in the first pile, enough to last the pair for many weeks. A variety of camping gear and cooking supplies made up the second grouping. Against the garage wall were six jerry cans full of gasoline that Richard had found and filled by siphoning off the parked vehicles and lawn mowers of the

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

neighborhood. Next to them was a stack of various bottles of lamp oil, kerosene, and Coleman fuel. Their arsenal had been surprisingly expanded with the discovery of two small gun safes in neighbor's homes. It took a while to find the combination for the first one. Thankfully Danielson was a rather meticulous sort of neighbor and Colleen located the combination stapled inside the owner's manual filed away in a filing cabinet. The second safe was one of the cheap K-Mart sheet metal varieties that surrendered its contents with a little hammer and cold chisel work. Now laid out on a blanket in neat order on the garage floor was more firepower than Richard had every seen outside of a gun store. True it was a mish-mash of shotguns, bolt action rifles, several varieties of rimfires, a handful of pistols; both revolver and magazine fed Semi-automatics.

No wonder gangs were breaking into homes all across the city. Why should they stand in line for hours on end for a mere bag of doled out groceries when they could kick in a few doors and have a feast? Colleen was still not at ease with their actions of the afternoon but she did have to admit that their capabilities to survive had been greatly enhanced by the recent acquisitions.

In addition to the smaller gear they now had an escape vehicle parked inside their garage. The Cardwell's, who lived at the end of the street, oldest boy had been working on restoring an old Jeep Cherokee through out his last two years of high school. Begun as a father/son project and the two had completed the rebuild about six months ago. It was a mean looking brute that only lacked a new paint job to be totally finished. Dale, the son, had taken the Cherokee into the sticks several times with the local off-road club and certified to everyone who would listen as to the vehicles awesome abilities. Richard hoped that his youthful overtures were based more on fact than fantasy. He knew Gene the father fairly well. A machinist by trade and quite skilled with just about any tool in his hands, Richard felt confident that the Jeep was as stout running as it was looking. Dale had enlisted during the first wave of patriotic fervor and left the 4x4 with the family. Richard wasn't really sure what had happened to the Cardwell's. They had weathered the initial storms of disease and plague that had swept through the area. But when the second wave hit . . . well one day their motor home was gone as was Gene's big one-ton 4x4 pickup.

That's the way it seemed to go. People just suddenly weren't home or were not seen again. The most difficult part of the afternoon was the final realization that he and Colleen were truly alone. At least a third of their neighbors had fallen to that damn plague that had swept through their city twice in the last six months. The others . . . the others whereabouts were unknown. Maybe they had fled. Hopefully they were with family elsewhere, safe and sound. But he doubted it. Each night the sound of anarchy grew louder and closer. He knew it was only a matter of time before they too, were overwhelmed by the rising tide chaos. He didn't feel totally right about what they had done invading their neighbor's homes and rummaging through them. But now they had the tools, the way and the means to escape. The question was now . . . did they have the determination to follow the course of action plotted out before them?

He looked down at the stack of books beside the arsenal lined up on the blanket. They had found several on the subject of firearms that Richard hoped would quickly fill in the gaps of his civilized politically correct education. He had no plans to ever again face an intruder with only a spear gun, boxer shorts and ignorance to protect his family. He had every intention of becoming armed and dangerous.

The aroma of Colleens cooking drifted into the garage as Richard bent down to pick out two books that caught his eye. The first with its bright red cover and to the point title was "Survival Guns" by a Mel Tappan. It was the

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

author's name on the second book that caught his eye, "Boston's Gun Bible" by Boston T. Party. What a curious name for a writer. He carried the books back into the house. He would begin his studies after dinner.

CEASE FIRE! CEASE FIRE! CEASE FIRE! Larkin yelled over the din of gunfire.

The onslaught quickly tapered off and the Marines popped their heads up from behind their firing positions to witness the carnage they had wrought. The patrol boat was listing to the aft port side and flames were beginning to lick at the remains of the bridge structure. Several bodies floated in the water nearby and nothing moved on the boat.

"Sheeee-IT!" Sgt Stevens exclaimed, looking at their handy work.

"Mother of God!" Chavez muttered.

Larkin looked back to where his Semi-nude medic had been firing and caught a glimpse of her backside disappearing down into the starboard hatch.

'Cammies just do not do a women justice!' He thought to himself and wondered what she would look like in civvies. He hoped that they'd survive long enough to get that opportunity.

Ian slowly stuck his head up and looked over at the floating wreck that just seconds before had been the menacing their very existence. He shook his head in utter amazement.

"You bloody Yanks are beyond friggin dangerous!"

"Never fuck with a Marine unless you are ready to meet your maker . . . who ever that may be." Zimmerman answered matter of factly.

Larkin suddenly snapped out of the afterglow of battle. "Get a line on the boat!"

Everyone looked at him as if he had lost his mind.

"Ian we've got to tow it into the beach as close as possible - QUICKLY!"

"What the bloody hell for?" He said as he stood up. "You've already blown them to hell, what do you want to do now - dance on their bloody graves?"

"I don't give a rat's ass about them. I want whatever supplies they have on board and I want that gun!"

Sgt. Stevens looked back to the twenty-millimeter deck gun. "SHIT HOT! Chavez get me a line!"

They managed to drag the patrol boat nearly into the beach before it sank. It lay in less than twelve feet of water, its mast just protruded above the gentle waves. Its contents could be easily salvaged but there were other

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

concerns that suddenly took on a higher priority. They were taking on water. The feeble return fire from the ambush had holed the port pontoon in several places and while not immensely dangerous at the moment, any hole in a hull required immediate action and repair.

Ian may not have been of much help during the firefight, but his worth was more than proven in its aftermath. He quickly stemmed the inflow of water through the numerous small punctures in the hull made by the pirates return fire. He hammered small wooden cone shaped plugs into the numerous little holes, then had the Marines carving more out of doweling and fit those to the remaining leaking holes. As masterfully as possible he drove the big catamaran up onto the beach. The anchor winch finished off the effort and inched the boat the last little bit out of the shallow water until all but a foot or so of the hull was high and dry.

“Can you fix the damage Ian.”?

“Aye Marine.” He muttered as he inspected each hole that had stitched the port side of the catamaran.

“How long will it take?” Larkin asked.

Ian hemmed and hawed looking through each hole and trying to figure out what other damage lay hidden within the hull.

“Well Staff Sergeant it’s a bit too soon to tell. We’ve got holes on the outside as well as holes on the inside. Those bastards could have sunk us!”

Larkin looked off towards where the patrol boat lay in the shallow lagoon. “How long?”

“Did you hear me mate . . . they could have sunk us!”

“Yes Captain I heard you.”

“Well?”

“Well what Ian? We’re alive and they’re not! That’s all that matters! Now how long?”

Ian began to stomp off. “Bloody Yanks! BLOODY IMPATIENT BASTARDS! I can have her back afloat by morning. Providing the woods not too water logged. Providing the epoxy resin sets correctly. Providing the moon is in the correct phase. Providing a storm doesn’t blow in on us! Providing the sky doesn’t fall. Providing . . .” His voice trailed off as he walked around the stern of the boat cussing and spitting the entire way.

Larkin just watched the disgruntled Aussie storm away. No wonder the bastard was locked up. Just then a loud SMACK was heard followed quickly with a loud. “BLOODY HELL!” Staff Sergeant Katherine Stacy walked into view from the same corner that Ian had just disappeared around. And she looked none too pleased.

Larkin’s eyes widened with her approach. Katherine walked right up and into the big Marine Staff Sergeants face. Her voice was low and the tone was one of totally serious business.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“If you ever say anything about what happened out there in that firefight, I will castrate you myself.” She said in a low whisper.

“Kat . . . er . . . I mean Staff Sergeant . . . ah . . . I would never say . . . UGH!” Larkin stuttered as she pushed the barrel of her M-16 into his crouch.

“Not . . . a word!” She growled slowly with emphasis.

“Ah . . . Yes . . . soldier . . . not a word. On my honor . . . now would you mind removing that barrel from my privates?”

Kat gave a deadly wicked look to the Marine. “It a good thing all men’s brains are directly attached to their private parts Marine or those bastards would have shot us to shit for all the good you two brainiacs were doing arguing on deck.”

She gave him another nudge with the business end of her rifle and then turned and walked up the beach. Larkin watched as she walked away. He drew in a long deep breath and blew it out slowly as he watched the natural sway of her walk. ‘Now there’s a women worth taking home to mother.’ He thought to himself. Shaking his head of such fuzzy thinking he suddenly remembered what the business was at hand and began walking up to his Marines that Kat had just passed through.

“MARINES WE’VE GOT WORK TO DO!” He began barking orders.

Malcolm eased over the tip of the low ridge and glassed the valley below. His makeshift camouflage made from a white sheet smudged with dirt and grease and worn like a poncho worked perfectly to blend him into the broken snowy field. He was near the foothills of the Rocky Mountains well off the main roads and looking for a place to cross Interstate Twenty-Five and get up into the mountains. So far by sticking to the back roads as far from the Interstates as possible he had managed to avoid meeting anyone. But Twenty-Five was a major north south artery and from the looks of it still busy in spite of everything. He watched the road for several hours taking breaks only to check on the kids and then returning to resume his vigil.

It appeared that traffic was being run in large convoys made up of commercial rigs, some private passenger cars and trucks as well as military transport trucks. Escorting the groups of vehicles were heavily armed gun jeeps, or HumVee’s as they were now called and large eight wheeled turreted armored vehicles. Malcolm wondered why they needed such heavily armed protection out in the middle of nowhere. While the convoys were not regular like clock work they did seem to be coming through at about one to one and a half hour intervals. In between the convoys, like a pack of hunters, several of the armed vehicles would race up or down the road as if looking for trouble. Malcolm didn’t want any trouble. He just wanted to cross the road and continue on with his quest to return the two wards under his care to someone, anyone that was related to them.

It was an hour or so after midnight when he finally worked up enough nerve to make the attempt. He waited until a convoy had passed and was pretty much out of sight. He had already cut through the snow and deer fence and hit the opening on the run. The deep powder tried to slow down the loaded CJ but he barreled through it and

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

made onto the highway. Trailing the last convoy and driving without headlights, he was trying to stay just out of sight. The partial moon lit the road in an eerie fairy tale like light and the ruts through the snow helped, but he was taking a grave risk.

Malcolm kept nervously scanning the rearview mirror and the road up ahead. His greatest fear was running into a roadblock or having the security hounds sneak up behind him. He had covered a least twenty some odd miles before he saw the first overpass. He carefully nudged the CJ onto the off ramp and around the warning cones and wooden barriers. Up the ramp and barely stopping at the top he turned left and crossed over the freeway.

Back down the highway in the extreme distance he could just see the glow of the headlights of the security patrol headed his way. He slowed enough to give the tires a solid bight going over the bridge and then picked up speed and headed down onto the road and up into the Rockies. He only hoped that security team would not follow his freshly made trail. He could never hope to outrun one of those heavy military vehicles in his lighter civilian Jeep. The snowfall was starting to pick up and perhaps, just perhaps it would soften the evidence of his passing enough to escape their immediate attention.

A few miles into the mountains Malcolm was forced to turn on his lights and work his way carefully along the dark winding mountain road. He didn't know how far he could hope to get in this weather. If he was where he was supposed to be according to the map then they were nearing the end of this journey. The little Jeep plowed through the deep snow in a steady even crawl. “

Just a little bit more.” He said to himself. “Just a little bit more.”

The debriefing continued.

“So Lieutenant what are their capabilities?”

The young black officer turned to his commander and began.

“Well Sir, they are extremely well organized and meticulously prepared. They have established a layered defensive structure with each ring section functioning entirely independent of the rest of the structure. They know their individual sectors intimately and would be very difficult to extract using conventional methods.”

“What kind of losses would we expect to see with a conventional approach?”

“Sir? Ah . . . well . . . er . . . Sir?”

“Well Lieutenant Lee?”

“Ah . . . well . . . Sir . . . Sir it is my opinion that we could not retake the city using conventional means.”

“What the hell do you mean we couldn't retake the city, of course we're going to retake the city Lieutenant!” The Homeland Security General of the Central Region bellowed at the young officer.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Do you mean to tell me that a bunch of fucking communist niggers are going to stop us from reestablishing sovereign control over one of our greatest cities? Is that what you are telling me Lieutenant?!”

The African American Homeland Security Lieutenant stood stoically during the general’s tirade.

“Well Lee, what do you have to say!”?

“Stalingrad Sir.”

“What?”

“Stalingrad Sir. A World War Two battle that stopped the Nazi advance and signaled the defeat of the German invasion of Russia.”

“Don’t presume to tell me my history lieutenant! Now I want to know how we can route those anti-American rats out of that city and I want to know now!”

“You can’t Sir.”

“What do you mean I can’t?”

The young officer turned to face the red faced general. “You Sir can not hope to achieve your objective without substantial loss of men and material. You will fight for every foot gained and that fight will be incredibly expensive. Sir!”

The meeting ended as the General in a huff kicked his chair back and angrily strode from the room.

“Lee where you trying to be some sort of a smart ass to the General? “

“Fuck him, er . . . ah, Fuck him Sir.” He said to his Colonel.

“Well he is an mega-ass, but he is also in charge and you just seriously pissed him off.”

“Colonel what did you want me to say? That we could take them with ease? That we wouldn’t loose any men doing it? I’ve just spent the last three weeks inside there and there is no way we’re going to roll in there and those people are going to just lay down their arms and roll over.” He looked straight into this CO’s eyes. “They are not going to give up their freedoms so easily.”

“But we’ll provide them food and security, why would they object to that?”

“They already have food and security. They already have power and electricity. They are already self-sufficient. Colonel we have absolutely nothing to offer those people.”

“It sounds like you admire the renegades LT.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Permission to speak freely Colonel?”

“Of course Lee, always.”

“Sir, I do admire them. They got handed a shit sandwich and they’ve somehow managed not only to survive but to rebuild their world in there.”

“But they are part of the United States of America, they just can’t ignore that.”

“Why not, they’ve been ignored for decades. What was our job when we came here Sir? To shut them in and let them die. Well they didn’t die did they? Somehow, someway they have not only managed to survive they have managed to rebuild and now that pompous general wants to level the city because they won’t surrender to him? Why the hell should they?”

“Lieutenant you are bordering on insubordination.”

“Yes Sir, maybe I am.”

Later that night a lone figure moved quietly beyond the security camps perimeter and back into the dark city, another soldier joining the ranks of the free.

It had taken Ian, Doc Nabors and SSgt Stacy two days to complete all the repairs to the hull. During which time SSgt Larkin and his team of Marines had managed to salvage most of the useful items from the sunken patrol boat. On deck his Marines worked diligently stripping and cleaning the handful of Kalashnikov’s, ammo, and gear brought up from the bottom of the lagoon. Sgt Stevens poured over the big gun like it was his own child. Amid the weapons and miscellaneous gear they also recovered nearly a dozen cases of US issue MRE’s.

Ian scratched his head as they washed down the plastic bags of GI meals.

“Now how do you suppose those bastards got a hold of all that Yank chow?” He asked Larkin.

“Hell we probably gave it to them as part of a good will package.” He answered curtly.

“Shit it seems that one day we’re feeding, arming and training the assholes and the then the next they’re pissed at us and we’re fighting them. Fuck Ian, I’m just a simple grunt, give me a target and I’ll kill it. I don’t know shit from shin-ola about politics.”

“Well don’t feel bad Yank, neither does anyone else from what I’ve seen! Neither does anyone else.”

Two days later Ian was ready to put the “Izzard’s Folly” back to sea. Using the anchor windlass they had managed to pull the large catamaran back into shallow water. Then with the incoming tide she was back afloat. With

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

a little help from the outboard motor and some careful sailing they were through the reef and once more back on the open sea.

Yet the smooth easy sailing that they had experienced during their initial escape from the Philippines was not to continue. SSgt Larkin noticed the ride was becoming much rougher and went up on deck. White caps surrounded them and the sky had an evil dark bluish grey look to it. He carefully made his way back to the stern where Doc Nabors and Ian were deep in discussion. Both had already donned storm gear. This did not bode well in Larkin's mind.

"What's going on?" Larkin had to raise his voice to be heard.

"We're sailing into a blow." Ian yelled back.

"How bad?"

"There's no way to tell Staff Sergeant." Nabors answered. "But by the looks of it . . . it could be a bad one."

"Is there in safe place that we can pull into or do we have to ride this out?" Larkin asked.

"There in lies the question Marine." Ian half answered. "So far you blokes don't play too well with your yard pals and I've got a bit of a problem since I didn't clear customs when we left in the middle of the night. I don't have me papers . . . and I might add, neither do any of you yanks."

"But in the case of a storm . . . can't we run into port somewhere and sort the paperwork out in the morning?"

"Perhaps, but it can be far worse in port than on the open sea." Ian nodded to Larkin's Doc.

"That's what we've been discussing."

"And?"

"You better get your mates down below to batten everything down. Make sure all their gear is secure - and Staff Sergeant I do mean secure! These next couple of days are going to be a real bitch and I wouldn't want any one hurt because of shit flying around. Get that big Sergeant of yours to add a few more lines across that cannon and then get everyone as comfortable as possible. No one goes on deck without my permission . . . DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"

Larkin nodded. "AYE AYE SKIPPER!"

Three hours later the wall hit them. Doc Nabors had never sailed in blue water before. He had never sailed in a storm at sea and he had never been so scared in his entire life. The big catamaran flexed and groaned with each advance as walls of water boiled around them. He added a second security rope to his safety harness as he manned the helm. One moment he would be looking at towering dark green water as the Izzard climbed the wall and then fought its way over the top to drop down into the next trough. The gale force winds slapped the water droplets into his cold flesh like daggers stinging his face.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

It was an even a worse roller coaster ride for the Marines down below. One minute the deck is pushing up to drive them through the overhead and the next they felt nearly weightless as the boat dropped into a huge trough below. Despite the Meclizine issued to everyone by Ian no one had been able to keep anything down which added to the already miserable conditions below deck. Water seemed to find a way into the compartments down below; they were all cold, wet and wretched. The waves pounded incessantly against the side of the hull and the wind while the evil squall howled like hells half fury trying to drive sanity from their minds. The large catamaran was but a tiny wooden bobber that was being bashed about the surface of a vast ocean and they had only entered the leading edge of the tempest. They had yet to meet the hammer of the storm.

Ian wedged himself into a corner of his rack and tried to catch some sleep. He would be on deck in another four hours. He had ridden out storms before. He knew that if they could maintain watertight integrity that the odds were vastly in their favor in even the biggest storm. But that didn't stop this experienced sailor from feeling scared shitless. The ocean offered few guarantees, especially related to survival. Despite the rebounding ride he finally managed to drift off to a fitful sleep.

He felt the ship lift up and heel over nearly forty-five degrees. His eyes snapped open instantly.

“WHAT THE BLOODY HELL!”

He sprang out of his rack and ricocheted his way up the gyrating compartment to the main hatch. Through the tiny inboard porthole window he peered through the dark grey sheets of rain and his heart suddenly stopped. There was no one at the helm! He looked up and down the deck but Nabors was nowhere in sight. Panic suddenly filled the Aussie as a wave of green water rolled across the porthole and streams of cold angry Pacific Ocean cascaded through the cracks on the sliding hatch overhead.

‘WHERE THE HELL WAS NABORS!’ Echoed through his mind at a hundred and fifty decibels.

“MAN OVERBOARD! MAN OVERBOARD!” He screamed as he hurriedly pulled on his oilskin coat and snapped his safety harness around him. A wall of water tried to push him back inside as he sprang through the hatch and into the full fury of the angry storm raging about them. Nabors was nowhere to be seen and the boat was sliding sideways down the face of a large trough.

“OH BLOODY HELL!”

Chapter 65 - Into the Forge

I find the great thing in this world is not so much where we stand, as in what direction we are moving: To reach the port of heaven, we must sail sometimes with the wind and sometimes against it - but we must sail, and not drift, nor lie at anchor. - Oliver Wendel Holmes

Energy may be likened to the bending of a crossbow; decision, to the releasing of a trigger. - Sun Tzu

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

The only easy day was yesterday. - US Navy SEALs

“OH BLOODY HELL!” Ian muttered to himself as he looked up at the giant rogue wave about to crash in on the catamaran.

Sliding sideways into the trough meant certain disaster. If his catamaran capsized there was little hope of righting the boat and they would be lost for sure. Midway down the slope facing certain death, the sailboat suddenly swung around nose first facing the bottom of the trough. Ian quickly snapped his safety line to the security cable and looked behind the stern of the boat and spotted something in the water. Two lines played out behind the cat, one was dragging something through the water.

“NABORS!” Ian called out and started towards the stern.

The boat shuddered and then leveled out and he knew what that meant. Looking over his left shoulder he saw the giant wave that was about to break on top of the wooden craft. Ian lunged for base of the mast and curled about it like a snake. Izard’s Revenge began to climb the face of the wave when suddenly the sky fell in. Tons of water pressed in upon the Australian trying to crush and pull him away from his death grip on the mast. It seemed like hours had passed and he was near unconsciousness, his lungs burning for air, his body pinned to the deck. Every instinct screamed at him to take a breath, to suck in the cold dark water and breath. He felt the world spinning about him and then the sound of the storm returned to his ears. The roar of the wind and sting of rain replaced the dull rumble and numbing press of the dark water.

He opened his mouth and felt the burning rush of fresh air filling his lungs. His vision, which had nearly faded out suddenly came back into focus. He was alive! They were still afloat! There was still a chance.

Ian tried to pull himself up but found that he was entangled in a mass of cables and lines. The central mast had been snapped nearly in half and lay over the port side. He unsnapped his safety line and pulled his way through the tangle of wires. His beautiful boat looked like hell. She was down on the port side. The hatch was missing and he could just imagine how much water they had taken in when that last wave crashed down on them. They were lucky to still be afloat. He looked over the damage and shook his head.

“As long as we’re still afloat.” He muttered to himself.

Then he remembered the stern lines. He scrambled over the debris on the deck and made his way back to the stern and the two lines. On the shorter of the two being dragged across the surface was the lifeless form of the navy Corpsman. His flotation jacket kept him on the surface but there was no movement. Ian tried with all his might to pull him in but it was useless, he needed help. Again scrambling across the cluttered deck he stuck his head through the missing hatch. Water was knee deep and sloshing back and forth.

“SHIT!” He screamed. Followed by. “ALL HANDS ON DECK! ALL HANDS ON DECK!”

He bounded across the trampoline and pounded on the starboard main hatch repeating his order. These Marines may have defeated the guerrillas in the jungle and the pirates back in the lagoon but now these bloody Yanks had to fight the Pacific Ocean in its full fury and all their military training would not help them here.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Like battered and drowned rats the Marines pulled themselves out of the pontoons and emerged on deck. Ian was in a near panic as he tried to haul the Corpsman in. Suddenly a second and third pair of hands joined in the effort. Sgt. Stevens, the M-249 gunner, reached his big paws down and grasped the safety harness of the unconscious sailor. Letting out a furious yell he nearly single handedly hauled the limp helmsman out of the water and pulled him on to the deck. Kat suddenly appeared and began the resuscitation efforts. SSgt Larkin jumped in and together they worked at a panicked pace. Ian stood back in shock looking at the pale blue-lipped corpsman and the Marine and Soldier working in unison to bring their comrade back to life. Abruptly the boat jerked and bobbed over a large swell and Ian came quickly back to reality. He still had a ship to save. He grabbed the other Marines hovering about and pulled them to him.

“COME ON YANKS - WE’VE GOT TO SAVE THE BOAT OR WE’RE ALL IN THE SHIT!” He yelled over the storm.

It was a little after midnight when Malcolm finally edged out of the narrow ascending gorge and drove out onto a widening alpine valley. It was getting harder and harder to keep the jeep moving forward through the deep snow. Several times he had to carefully back up and ram his way through the larger drifts that spread across the narrow road. Now at least if he went off the road it would only be into the ditch on either side, not down the side of the mountain. He was dog-tired and barely keeping his eyes open when he spotted the turn out. He had to pull in and set up camp for the night. He would have preferred to have pulled in under some cover but at this point if he didn’t pull over soon he knew that he would end up wrecking the jeep and stranding himself and the two sleeping kids curled up on the floor boards and seat.

It took Malcolm nearly an hour to shovel out a space beside the jeep and set up a suitable shelter. Cutting nearby branches he laid down a thick insulating bed of pine boughs and added a good number of larger branches around the vehicle to break up its outline and partially camouflage it from casual observation.

Fixing the tan poly tarp over the Jeep he created a lean-to under which he set up the larger pop-up tent. Using several of the wool army blankets to further insulate the floor of the tent and soften any larger branches he bundled up each of the sleeping little ones and snuggled them next to each other in side the tent. Then after he was sure they were set he then prepared to settle in for the night.

He wiped down and loaded the M-60, positioned it under the jeep for instant use then covered it with small canvas tarp. Then positioning one of the M-16’s beside him, he finally worked his way into a sleeping bag. Before he finally laid back he opened the remaining two bags and threw them across the kids and himself. He sat there for a few seconds listening to the snowfall, or actually it was the lack of sound that he heard. Malcolm understood the physics of the muffling effect of gently falling snow, but he was always a little awed by the effect. He didn’t remember falling asleep or even laying back, he was that exhausted.

When the grey light of the new day finally broke through his sleep he suddenly popped wide-awake. Straining to take in every sound around him, all he could hear was silence. He looked over and thankfully the kids were still asleep. He marveled at their cherubic innocence. If only life could be that simple and peaceful. As a long tenured university professor of history and ethnic studies he knew better. Humankind’s legacy on this world was

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

one of pain and suffering, of war and hardship, of disease and death. There would be nights while preparing for the next days lecture that he would walk out on to his small redwood deck and look up at the distance stars and wonder just why we were here in the first place. Malcolm felt that there was so much potential in his species, yet so very much that was wasted and thrown away.

Early on in his university education surrounded by dissatisfied fellow students protesting the Vietnam War and communistic sympathetic college professors he was nearly sucked into their madness. Ah the youthful impressionistic mind. He had skirted along the fringe of the Black Panther movement, careful to leave himself a back door. Each and every group or cause that was recruiting new followers just seemed to lead to the same kind of oppression only on different people. They were not interested in resolving the hate, just transferring it to someone else. Many of his college classmates wanted to tear down the system. Well perhaps that would be necessary. Certainly it had happened enough throughout history. But they could never articulate what they would replace it with. Anarchy for anarchy's sake seemed like an insane ideological cause. One form of oppression for another form of oppression was still oppression!

So for years he continued to struggle on his own to find the answers to his questions. Then over time, little by little he drifted off the questing path and into academic compliance. He went through the motions and shoveled out the facts no longer interested in meanings. He recognized too late the wall that was being constructed around the rights and freedoms of all American citizens. He always assumed "his people" the academics would be free to continue their pursuits in any change of political climate, after all this was America. But when this country's latest political administration began constructing lists of academic's that they wanted restricted and later terminated from their positions, he once again awoke, but it was too late. He raised his voice, demonstrated, wrote letters, lectured and harangued the administration at every turn. It was like the 60's all over again. Only this time the government was playing hardball. Something fundamentally had changed within the country's hierarchy and he was directly made aware of the change when they came for him in the middle of the night and he suddenly found himself in one of their detention camps. Call it what ever you want, a gulag is a gulag!

So here he was; half way across the country, somewhere in the Rocky Mountains, with two small children, trying to locate an unknown relative, a fugitive from the overlords, heavily armed, a murderer (self-defense, like that would matter for a black man in a rigged government court), a thief (ok just a borrower), with no idea where he's really going, what he'll find when he gets there, or even if he would survive the day. Malcolm pulled himself out of the warm sleeping bag into the biting chill of the new day. He crawled out of the dome tent to the cleared area under the overhead tarp and lit the butane stove.

"If there be gods they must be having an insanely good time over this little dilemma." He muttered to himself.

The water was just about hot enough when he heard the first sound, a distance crunch in the snow, a crunch that wasn't natural. Suddenly every nerve was tensed. It had stopped snowing during the night, so he knew that the sound could be off in the distance. He looked out under the tarp and couldn't see anything, but heard the sound again and it was moving in his direction.

Malcolm reached into the tent and gently shook the children awake, Sara first then her little brother. In a hushed whisper he warned them.

"Shhhhhh there's someone coming, I'm putting you two into the Jeep. Stay absolutely quiet . . . OK?"

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Sara nodded her head slowly, not quite awake, but he could tell from the look in those large doe eyes that she understood. He lifted Jesse up first and then Sara, still in their sleeping bags and snuggled them into the protected area on the passenger side floorboard.

The crunching footsteps were coming closer now. Malcolm thought about it but realized that there was no time to escape. What ever it was, who ever it was he had to stand and fight. He slung the M-16 across his back and then retrieved the M-60 from under the Jeep. He checked the load, grabbed a second and third box of belted of rounds and moved to the rear of the vehicle to prepare for whomever.

It suddenly dawned on him that he had to get away from the Jeep. If a firefight should erupt he didn't want the kids endangered. He picked up the heavy machine gun and trudged through the knee-deep snow into the nearby tree line of the turn out. It wasn't the perfect angle but it would do for now. Anyone approaching the Jeep would have to expose themselves. The mountain butted up to the turnout edge and there was no chance of being out flanked. But there would also be no escape from his position without exposing himself.

The first white clad figure emerged around the corner. He was armed and on snowshoes. At the sight of Malcolm's encampment he froze and signaled to others just emerging behind him.

Slowly they advanced into Malcolm's killing ground. Who ever it was they were not amateurs. With silent hand signals and practiced movements they began to spread out and encircle Jeep. The ten man unit were almost at the point where Malcolm would have difficulty keeping them all under the gun. This seemed to be the total team as no one else had emerged around the corner.

"THAT IS FAR ENOUGH!" Malcolm called out.

The squad froze in mid-stride. Only half the group looked in his direction trying to spot the origin of his voice. The other half scanned the opposite side of the road. These were definitely not amateurs! Malcolm felt something hit him in the pit of his stomach. To get so far and still not escape . . . something was rising hot and fiery from the center of his soul. A quote flashed into his thoughts.

*Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

*Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.*

*Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

*Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,*

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Do not go gentle into that good night.

*Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

*And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

Malcolm slowly squeezed down on the trigger. Now why in the hell had his mind flashed back to something he had read in his first English Literature class from so many years ago?

The lead squad member suddenly spoke.

“WHO EVER YOU ARE, YOU ARE HEREBY ORDERED TO LAY DOWN ANY WEAPONS YOU HAVE AND MAKE YOURSELF VISIBLE WITH YOUR HANDS ON YOUR HEAD!”

Silence was their only reply. Malcolm could see that the men before him were preparing to do something. Had they not been in knee-deep snow and wearing cumbersome snowshoes they probably already would have acted. For now he had the upper hand.

“DID YOU HEAR ME? BY ORDER OF THE HOMELAND SECURITY GUARD AND UNDER PRESIDENTIAL ORDER NUMB . . .”

The soldier never got a chance to finish his sentence. That was all Malcolm needed to hear. The big 60 started barking its deadly venom. The troopers were less than forty yards away and the wicked 7.62 rounds shredded the distance in fractions of a second and tossed its victims across the snow like rag dolls.

Angry hornets zipped past Malcolm raining debris and dirt down upon him as he swept the area again and again. The enemy muzzle flashes quickly died off before the first belt was finished. He ducked down behind the small tree and quickly linked the second belt to the first and resumed the onslaught. He was not going back into another camp and BY GOD HE WAS NOT GOING TO SEE THOSE CHILDREN TAKEN AWAY!

The second belt emptied quickly as he racked again and again the bloody forms sprawled across the open stretch of snow. The 60's barrel was smoking and steaming as he viewed the carnage he had wrought. For several minutes he sat there in numb anger.

‘OTHERS? Were there any others?’ He wondered.

He pulled his M-16 around and advanced along the tree line in the direction that the troopers had appeared. It took him several minutes to work his way around the killing ground before he could look down the road. To his surprise and satisfaction there was nothing to be seen. No back up team waiting to pounce on him. But now

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

panic began to set in. He had to get out of here and out of here now. He made his way back along the trees where it was easier going to the M-60 and then back through his earlier path to the camp.

“Sara! Jesse! Are you all right?”

There was no answer. He tore into the Jeep in near panic. They were fine . . . scared . . . but unhurt!

Malcolm began to tear down the camp as quickly as he could. In a matter of minutes he had everything hastily stuffed back into the jeep and began the process of digging the four-wheel drive out. He needed to clear the exhaust pipe and a short open track in front to give himself a small running start. He only hoped there would be enough time.

It took nearly twenty minutes to complete the immediate job. Malcolm peeled off layers of clothing as he hastily worked, building up a sweat, a sweat that could be dangerous in such cold. That done he jumped in the jeep and tried to kick it over. The cold engine groaned and complained for the first couple of tries then finally kicked over and caught. Malcolm said a little prayer. He would give it a few more minutes to warm up before kicking it into gear and attempting to bash his way back onto the road. He kept looking over his shoulder expecting to see more troopers at any second. Then an idea hit him.

“I’ll be right back kids.”

He jumped out and slogged his way through the snow to the first body. His fingers were stiff and burning cold as he undid the binding on the snowshoes. He then quickly stripped the ammo off the dead trooper and attempted to drag him into the tree line. But it was just too much effort. He had thought that if he could stash the bodies in the tree line anyone looking for them would be left with an empty puzzle. A little more snow and there would be no evidence until spring. He tried one more time then he heard something coming from the other direction.

Malcolm looked up to see several white clad soldiers on skis beside the Jeep, their weapons pointed right at him. He was now in the killing zone. His M-16 was hung across his back out of immediate reach. He would be dead before he ever got it around.

“SHIT!” He muttered to himself. He had failed.

Colleen awoke alone and wondered down stairs towards the smell of coffee. A hot pot was sitting on the Coleman stove on the kitchen counter. She filled herself a cup and then walked into the garage where her husband was busily loading up the Cherokee. The piles of supplies and food that had been spread across the garage floor had somehow disappeared into the back of their escape vehicle.

“Morning Hon.” Richard acknowledged his wife.

“So we’re really going?”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Richard stopped and turned to his wife. “Yes I’m afraid so.” He said as he tossed a box of canned goods into the back of the Jeep.

“You’ve got it almost packed?” She observed.

“Just about.” He sighed. “There is just so much we might need and only so much space.” He answered and sat down on the tailgate.

Colleen walked over and gave her husband a hug that was enthusiastically returned.

“The world has changed my Love. We can no longer count on civilization to protect us. As if it ever could. We’re going to need family and lots of friends. There is no one left here. Maybe if the neighborhood had stuck together we could have made a go of it here. But not now. We’re it. We’re all alone and that is dangerous.”

“I know.” She responded meekly.

The sound of squealing tires interrupted the moment. They both froze listening as a second set of tires screamed around the corner of their cul-de-sac and the two vehicles raced past their house down the short street to the turn around. Richard suddenly spun into action.

“Get the rest of this stuff into the Cherokee as fast as you can Colleen.” He said as he grabbed his AK and web gear with extra magazines and raced through the living room and to the peephole on the front door. Colleen stood there in her pajamas as her husband disappeared into the house.

What Richard saw made his blood run cold. Two pickup trucks full of rough looking armed thugs had stopped at the end of the street and were methodically kicking in doors and ransacking houses. It would only be a short matter of time before he and Colleen had to either run or stand and fight and he had no misconceptions as to the outcome of the later. He pushed a heavy cabinet up against the front door to reinforce it and then ran back to the garage to find his wife just staring blankly at him. He grabbed her by the shoulders and as firmly and as quietly as he could he got his point across.

“GET THE GEAR IN THE JEEP NOW COLLEEN! NOW!”

He ran back into the house and picked up the two backpacks and threw them into the Cherokee. He packed up the Coleman stove and crammed that into the back as well. He was now glad that he had already started to preposition and load the Cherokee. He was just about done when his wife had walked in. Two duffel bags of clothes flew into the back and then he hefted a roll of firearms that he had sorted through earlier this morning. The Ammo was already on board packed up front nearer the center of the 4x4. Colleen was now moving in sync with him and the last of their gear was hastily crammed into the back. As he closed the tailgate their house shook. The bastards were already at their front door.

“GET IN - GET IN!” He pushed his wife towards the passenger door.

BANG - BANG - BANG!

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

He could hear the boards snapping that he had nailed across the door and the cabinet banging against the door with each pounding. He jumped into to the driver's side and instinctively reached for the key. IT WASN'T THERE!

"SHIT! WHERE'S THE KEY?"

He looked frantically about. Checked his pockets - nothing! The sound of the pounding changed. They were nearly through!

"ON THE COUNTER - Oh RICHARD THEY WERE ON THE COUNTER NEXT TO THE COFFEE!"

"SHIT! SHIT! SHIT!"

He opened the door and started out when something jabbed his arm. Colleen had poked him with the business end of his AK.

"Take this!" She pushed the weapon to him.

He quickly pushed the barrel away from him, grabbed the rifle and disappeared into the house. Colleen pulled up her AK and carefully pulled back the bolt and charged the chamber. Her heart was pounding in her throat and every second Richard was gone was painfully too long.

Richard looked quickly through the debris on the counter top in search of the ring of keys. 'Ah there they are!' He clutched them in his hand at the same moment that the front door crashed in. The large cabinet finally gave way and crashed into the tile entryway floor.

"WHAT THE FUCK! KICK IN THE REST OF THAT FUCKING DOOR! THERE MUST BE SOMETHING VALUABLE IN HERE!" Echoed through the house as three thugs began to climb in over the shattered cabinet.

Richard could just see them through the angle of the kitchen door. 'RUN OR FIGHT? RUN OR FIGHT? RUN OR FIGHT?' He decided to do both! He stuck the barrel of the AK through the door and pulled the trigger sending a burst into the chest of the first man through the door. He crumpled over backwards as the rounds stitched their way up his torso, pounding him back out the door. His compatriots caught completely by surprise frantically dove away from the exposed opening and out of the line of fire. Richard sent a burst to either side of the door through the stick frame walls and heard the cry of a second man as the rounds spun through the drywall and stucco structure. He pulled the trigger a third time and there was nothing. He had emptied the magazine!

Colleen heard the brief firefight and started crying in fear.

"OH MY GOD - OH MY GOD - OH MY GOD!" She repeated over and over again. She pushed her AK over the top of the piles of gear in the Cherokee and watched the garage door that led into the house, her finger on the trigger. Richard suddenly appeared and dashed to the driver's side of the vehicle. He tossed his rifle in banging it across Colleen's legs and jumped into his seat. It took him several seconds of fumbling with the keys to get the right one into the ignition. He turned it and got a cough.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“SHIT!”

He turned it again and the big engine barked to life.

“SEAT BELTS!” He yelled and closed his door, let off the brake and punched the accelerator.

The big Cherokee died! Shots could be heard from inside the house. He kicked the ignition again, the engine roared to life and he revved the engine two more times, kept the rpm’s up and then dumped the clutch. The Chief Cherokee jerked forward with all four tires spinning. In less than five feet it met the aluminum garage door and pulled it off its tracks and ripped it from its mounts. The Jeep rolled over the remains and hit the street gathering speed. Richard cranked the steering wheel hard right and felt the passenger side begin to lift up into the air. He took his foot off the gas, the right wheels again were on the ground. He straightened out and punched the gas again. The kid certainly had built a brute.

The big primer gray 4x4 tore down the street and around the corner before the gang of pickup raiders knew what had it them. Richard didn’t know where he was heading at the moment. But he was going to put as much distance behind him and the raiders as he could. Fortunately he had jogged much of the housing tract and knew just about every street in it. He wove his way through the suburban village avoiding all the blind dead end streets until he came to the main boulevard entrance. He shot out onto the empty street and barreled down the road. THEY HAD ESCAPED!

A million thoughts ran through his mind as he tried to plan their next course of action. For the time being he would angle away from the main freeways and boulevards. He needed to get on the back roads and if possible up into the trails. He looked over at his wife still clutching her AK.

“You might want to get dressed Dear.” He said calmly, as she was still in her pajamas.

She gave him with the most incredulous look. “I just peed myself.’ She answered matter of factly.

Chapter 66 - Dancing in the Flames

*He either fears his fate too much,
Or his deserts are small,
Who dares not put it to the touch,
To win or lose it all. - Montrose's Toast*

*With reasonable men, I will reason; with humane men, I will plead; But to tyrants, I will give no quarter.
- William Lloyd Garrison*

“COME ON YANKS - WE’VE GOT TO SAVE THE BOAT OR WE’RE ALL IN THE SHIT!” He yelled over the storm.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Ian scampered across the shambled deck like a mad man on a mission from God. Only in this case it was more his desire to put off meeting his maker for as long as possible.

Pulling Chavez along with him he jumped down into the swamped starboard hull. The saltwater was knee deep and sloshed about with every movement. Ian disappeared beneath the water for a moment and then resurfaced with a long wood handle. He jabbed one end into some unseen slot beneath the water and began working it back and forth.

“Here lad.” Motioning to the young Marine. “This here is the bilge pump, work this lever like your life depends on it . . . because it does mate.”

He put the Hispanic Marine’s hands on the lever and showed him the motion. Ian then turned and started up the ladder to return to the main deck. Looking back he saw the panic in the young mans eyes.

“HAVE AT IT MARINE!!” Ian yelled.

Chavez put his head down and commenced to work the pump at a frantic pace throwing his whole heart and soul behind it. Stevens and Yahzee had cut way the entanglement of lines and wires by the time Ian returned to the deck. The pair had a line on the upper part of the shattered mast and were trying to haul it aboard. Ian lent the pair an extra hand and after several difficult attempts they landed the mast on the heaving deck.

“Secure it to the deck solid Sergeant.” Ian commanded. “Yahzee give me a hand Mate.”

The pair quickly cleared the rest of the debris from the deck, cleaned up the mess of lines and cables tossing them over the side. Then they began to fasten a tarp over the opening where the missing hatch had been. Chavez was still pumping furiously and Ian had Yazhee spell him. The water had dropped over half a foot in the short time that he had been pumping. Chavez crawled up on deck his hands already sore and showing the first blisters, but Ian ignored his pleas and set him to work on the other side of the deck lashing down anything that had not been washed away during the last rogue wave. The fury of the storm seemed to be quelling and the vicious winds had toned down their wail. Ian looked to the sky and then realized the full implication of their situation.

“OH BLOODY HELL!”

Sgt Stevens looked at him in an odd way. “What’s the problem skipper. The storms over . . . we’ve made it.”

“Like hell we have Yank. That was only the first half!”

“What?”

“Were in a Bloody big typhoon and we’re not even half way through it.”

“A typhoon?” Stevens asked.

“Like one of your hurricanes in the Atlantic . . . only this bastard’s a lot bigger.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“You got to be shitting me!” Stevens gasped.

“I might joke about a lot of things Yank . . . but not this, not this.”

Ian looked around their little boat in every direction. As far as he could see were the scattered white caps. Off in the far distance was the other wall of the storm, dark and evil looking as it slowly advanced across the Pacific. They were currently in the eye of the storm and a right bloody big mother it surely was.

“Stevens give your partner a break at the pumps.”

Stevens relieved Yahzee and Ian turned around to look back towards SSgt’s Larkin and Stacy. The pair were sitting there on the deck next to Nabors their heads bowed together. Ian felt something kick him square in the bollocks.

“DAMN AND BLOODY HELL!!” He cried as he raced back to his fallen comrade.

Larkin sprang up and caught the wiry Aussie, holding him back.

“It’s over Ian. He’s gone . . . there was nothing we could do that would bring him back.”

”NOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!”

The other Marines on deck suddenly turned and knew in a second that their doc was not coming back.

Ian was frantic. “NOOOO YOU’VE GOT TO SAVE HIM! DON’T YOU SEE WE’RE STILL HERE BECAUSE OF HIM! HE GOT THE SEA ANCHOR OUT - TOOK IN THE SAIL - HE - HE - HE!”

Ian fell to his knees and begged Larkin and Stacy to try one more time.

“Please mate, please . . . I’m begging you. You’ve got to try one more time. You can’t let him go like this . . . he’s . . . he’s just a kid, just a bloody young kid that wanted to sail on the open sea.” He pleaded and cried.

“Please Staff Sergeant of Marines, try, just try one more time . . . ”

Larkin held Ian close and spoke gently into his ear.

“Ian . . . he’s gone . . . he broke his neck when he went over the side or while he was in the water . . . he’s gone . . . ”

NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!

Malcolm looked up to see several white clad soldiers on skis beside the Jeep, their weapons pointed right at him. He was now in the killing zone. His M-16 was hung across his back out of immediate reach. He would be dead before he ever got it around.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“SHIT!” He muttered to himself. He had failed.

A thousand scenarios rushed through his head and all of them ended badly. The soldiers were standing right beside the jeep just a few feet from the kids hidden inside. Malcolm dropped the dead soldier and slowly stood up. He carefully brought his hands up to his side as close as he dared get to his rifle.

“I’m not going back trooper.” He said matter of factly.

The soldiers keep their rifles pointed right at him and said nothing.

“I’M NOT GOING BACK TROOPER!” He said a little louder.

One of the troopers said something too low for Malcolm to hear. The lead trooper nodded and then spoke.

“Going back where?”

“YOU KNOW EXACTLY WHAT I MEAN.” His hand was now just a fraction of an inch from his rifle. “YOU KNOW EXACTLY WHAT I MEAN . . . YOU WANT ME? THEN COME AND GET ME . . . JUST DON’T HURT THE CHILDREN . . . PROMISE ME THAT!”

Suddenly several heads began to bob about.

“Kids . . . what kids?”

“There in the jeep, passenger side. I . . . I . . . was taking them to relatives. They got no other family left. They’re just babies.”

“JENSEN CHECK IT OUT!”

A third soldier skied up to the jeep and opened the door. Carefully he looked over the heavy sheet of plate metal and spotted two pairs of dark eyes staring back at him.

“Buck there’s two kids here just like he said.”

The tip of his fingers were just brushing against the cold steel barrel.

The soldier reached in and lifted out the young girl who turned her head as she was picked up and saw Malcolm thirty yards away.

She started to cry. “DON’T HURT UNCLE MALCOLM - PLEASE - PLEASE DON’T HURT HIM.”

With that Jesse too started to cry and their combined wail echoed off the snow covered hills.

“Where were you taking these kids?” The lead soldier asked sternly.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *A Gray Man*

“They’ve got an uncle that lives up here somewhere.”

“You related?”

“No.”

“Then why are you taking care of them?”

His fingers were just touching the barrel.

“Their folks are gone, they got left behind. There was no where else to take them.”

The leader now turned to the older of the two children. “What’s your uncle’s name little girl?”

She sniffed and looked at Malcolm.

“Go ahead Sara, tell the man your uncle’s name.”

She looked teary eyed back at the soldier and then to Malcolm.

“Go ahead Sara, tell them who your uncle is.”

“Ah . . . ah . . . my uncle is Uncle Jake and he lives near Grandpa Frank.” She stuttered out.

“Do you know their last names?”

She nodded her head. “It’s the same as mine.”

“And what would that be honey?” The white clad trooper asked.

“I’m Sara Richardson . . . my Grandpa Frank and Uncle Jake are like me . . . Richardson too.”

Malcolm could see that something was happening. That name had shot through the gathered soldiers like a spark. He now had light grip on the barrel.

“Sara . . . you’re Grandpa’s is named Frank Richardson?”

She nodded her head. “Uh huh, but I just call him Grandpa Frank.”

More muttering was going on between the soldiers by the Jeep. Malcolm now had a good grasp on the barrel and could swing it forward and go on the offense, but something was happening.

The first soldier, the leader stood up slightly and lowered his guard.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Where did you find these kids?”

Malcolm could hear the change in the tone of his voice. It was not quite as harsh as it had been.

“I ran into them somewhere in Texas or Oklahoma. I had escaped from a detention camp while on a work detail. Those two little ones were looking for food when we sort of ran into each other.”

Two of the troopers conferred quickly with the leader.

“HOLY SHIT!” The leader turned to his men. “STAND DOWN - STAND DOWN! Peters get on the radio and get word back to central. Bring down the cat and get these kids back to base.”

The young soldier pulled back his white mask and hood and skied forward to Malcolm. Taking off his gloves he reached out his hand in friendship.

“Mr.-----“

“Danielson, Malcolm Danielson.”

They gripped hands firmly.

“I’m Buck Jorgenson, of the Free Citizens Mountain Militia of Crestview Valley.”

Malcolm looked strangely at the young man that just a few seconds ago was his adversary.

“Free Citizens Mountain Militia? Free Citizens?”

“Yes sir, you are now standing in Free America.” Buck said matter of factly.

Malcolm suddenly dropped to his knees and wept. Buck just looked startled and lowered himself to one knee beside the stranger and placed his hand on his convulsing shoulder.

“You don’t understand son . . . You don’t understand.”

“Mr. Danielson, Sir. You’re wrong there. I do understand. I understand perfectly.”

Buck waited a few more minutes and then patted old professor on the shoulder.

“Sir we need to get going now. Our mayor is going to want to see his grandchildren as soon as possible. And I’m sure he’ll want to meet you.”

Malcolm looked up at the young man.

“How would you like a hot meal, a hot bath and a warm bunk for the night.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Malcolm could only nod as he tried to compose himself. He could hear the Snow cat rumbling around the corner. Leaning on the younger man he pulled himself up, sniffed once or twice and walked over to his two charges. He had made it. They had made it!

Buck looked at the old warrior as he hugged the two children.

“Now that’s one tough old son of a bitch!” He said looking over the carnage of dead troopers sprawled across the snow. Buck waved his arms to the other militiamen standing by idly.

“Get all the gear off these troopers and take care of the bodies, you know the routine. I’ll meet you back at out-post four.”

He skied up the snow cat and stepped out of his bindings to climb aboard. He wanted to hear this story first hand.

Chapter 67 - Reprieve

...the truth is that I already know as much about my fate as I need to know. The day will come when I will die. So the only matter of consequence before me is what I will do with my allotted time. I can remain on shore, paralyzed with fear, or I can raise my sails and dip and soar in the breeze. -Richard Bode, "First you have to row a little boat"

Nobody is stronger, nobody is weaker than someone who came back. There is nothing you can do to such a person because whatever you could do is less than what has already been done to him. We have already paid the price. -Elie Wiesel

”NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!” Ian awoke with a start and immediately bonked his head on the overhead (ceiling on a boat).

“OooH Bloody Hell!” He commented as he rubbed the sore spot.

He laid back down and felt the motion of the boat. They were in shallow gentle swells that gave a gently rocking motion to the entire boat. It had been three days since Doc Nabors’ accident. Three days of hell as they struggled to stay afloat through the backside of the Typhoon. Three days of little sleep, little food and sheer solid panic. When it finally looked like they were going to survive the tempest SSgt Larkin had shoved Ian into his rack and under threat of bodily harm forced him to finally take a break.

He didn’t know how long he had been asleep, not that it mattered. They, or most of them had survived. Poor Doc Nabors, he thought to himself. It should have been him on deck not the kid. Ian rolled out of bed and landed with both feet on the slightly damp deck of his stateroom. He chuckled to himself. “Stateroom”, more like a long closet.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

When he emerged on deck the evil grey demonic skies had finally swept themselves away. Replacing them was the brilliant perfect blue of the Pacific heavens. No pollution, no smoke, no obstructions, just the most brilliant blue . . . the way it was meant to be. He walked to the bow and looked into the crystal clear ocean beneath the hull. Streaks of sunlight pierced into the depths of Ian's favorite shade of blue, a shimmering turquoise and sapphire liquid mist that beckoned one to dive in and drink deeply. This was the way the world began, under a clear blue sky and beneath a clear blue ocean. Ian could think of no other place in the world to be. Yet for all its beauty and calm what lay beneath was a wicked foul tempered vixen. No wonder ships and oceans were referred to as "she", they were two women in a perpetual catfight, each trying to best and conquer the other.

His grand little boat had weathered another storm. She was battered and bruised, her mast toppled, her decks awash with the remnants of the storm and one of her crew sewn into a shroud made of torn sail. But despite it all they were still afloat. Ian had no idea where, but that was not important at the moment. What was important was that they had survived the biggest storm he had ever experienced.

The sea was incredibly calm and nearly flat and for most of the morning Ian and the crew just laid about the deck soaking up the warm rays of the sun through that clear blue sky. A little before noon Ian began to pull everything he could out from below decks. He hoped the next several days would continue to be calm and warm in order to dry out the drenched interior of his boat. His biggest concern was the repair of the mast, which had been snapped off about six feet up from the base. There were enough extra cables and sail on board to re-rig the sail if they could get it back up. By late afternoon most the storm damage had been repaired or at least patched up. The final element of the day was raising the repaired mast, with Stevens and Yahzee supporting the now shorter mast Zimmerman, being the lightest of the group, shinnied up the mast and finished securing the last lines. They wouldn't be drawing the maximum capabilities of the boat with the substantially shorter sail, but they would be moving and that was the most important part.

Richard floored the gas pedal and shot through another intersection. It seemed strange to find so many streets devoid of traffic. There were scattered cars off to the side of the road, some looking like they were just parked there, others burnt out hulks, but for the most part it was like driving the boulevard early on a Sunday morning. He kept looking in the rearview mirror expecting to see the pickup truck raiders trying catching up with him. As a result of his preoccupation with pursuers he nearly drove through the roadblock.

"RICHARD LOOKOUT!" Colleen screamed.

He planted his foot onto the brakes with determined gusto and locked up all four wheels. The big rig bounced and slid to a stop less than a dozen feet from the roadblock behind which several soldier's leveled M-16's at the pair. The sudden stop probably saved them both in two ways. The first was that the soldiers at the roadblock didn't open fire . . . the second was that everything loose in the vehicle slid forward. The pair of AK's they had on the seat between them slid into the floorboards and were covered by the hastily stored gear tossed into the back of the Cherokee during their hasty escape that catapulted over the top of the front seat.

The guards quickly surrounded the vehicle and menacingly demanded its occupants to exit the vehicle with their hands up. It was at this point that Colleen broke down. Richard just sat there in shock with his hands on the ceiling of the big 4x4 station wagon.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“OH MY GOD! - OH MY GOD! - OH MY GOD!” She screamed between tears. “THEY WERE TRYING TO KILL US! THEY BROKE INTO OUR HOME SHOOTING GUNS - OH MY GOD! THEY WERE GONNA KILL US! WE RAN - OH MY GOD! THEY WERE EVERYWHERE - THEY SHOT AT US - OH MY GOD - MY HOME - MY HOME - MY BEAUTIFUL HOME!”

The soldiers began to lower their weapons. As Colleen’s near hysterical, blubbering, crying, and ranting continued on. Richard cautiously leaned over and put his arm around her to provide some comfort.

“You have to calm down dear. We’re safe now. These soldiers will protect us.” He hoped.

One of the nearest soldiers leaned forward. “Mister, you need to step out of the car and we need to see some form of identification.”

Richard nodded. “Just give me a second to calm my wife down. Its not been a very good day for her.” Then an idea hit him.

“Ah officer, we’re pregnant, er ah, I mean, I mean my wife is pregnant and she’s had a very bad scare. Do you have a doctor with you?”

The young guardsman blinked. “Shit! Ah no sir we don’t. She’s not going to have a baby here is she?”

“Oh no officer, she’s not that far along, but we just had two truckloads of thugs attack our street and breaking into every home there. We barely escaped alive.”

“Sir, first I’m a Corporal not an officer. Second, your wife can stay there for now Sir, however I’d appreciate it if you would please step out of the vehicle for a second so. We need to get this cleared up.”

Richard joined the National Guard Corporal at the front of the Cherokee. He explained the incidents regarding the first break in, their fight with the spear gun. Of course leaving out the bit about the .45. Then he told the young soldier about the events of the morning. He was careful to leave out any mention of firearms on his part. No need to give them any more information than necessary. He tried to play the part of the panicked frightened citizen . . . which was not too far from the actual truth in reality. He explained that they were planning to drive up to stay with his Aunt when [the BGs?] came down on them like a load of bricks and forced them to expedite their plans in panic mode.

“Well Sir, that sure sounds like you’ve had a rough day. But I’m afraid there is no travel permitted out of the immediate area without special permission.”

“But where are we to go?” Richard asked.

“Well Sir we have some special refugee facilities set up for people in your situation.”

“But Officer . . . ”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Corporal.”

“Oh ah yeah right. Well Corporal we’re not really refugee’s we have a place to go and we can take care of ourselves. We don’t want to be a burden to anyone. My Aunt has plenty of room and is waiting for us right now.”

“I’m sorry Sir. There is absolutely no travel without the Area Commanders authorization, in writing. As for your gear that will be confiscated and added to the supplies at the refugee center. Everyone has to do their part in the emergency now don’t they. So do you have any ID on you so we can begin your processing?”

“Ah . . . ID?” Richard said reaching for his wallet, that wasn’t there.

“Hmmm. I don’t . . .”

He was cut off by the sound of tires squealing and engines roaring. It was a familiar tone and he quickly looked around and immediately recognized one of the raiders trucks as it rounded the corner quickly followed by the second truck.

“OH MY GOD!” Richard said in disbelief.

The Guardsman followed his gaze towards the approaching trucks.

“THAT’S THEM!” Richard shot out in panic! ‘THAT’s THEM!’

The fact that the pair of trucks were still approaching the roadblock in spite of the obvious military presence spoke either to their bravado or insanity. Richard didn’t want to find out which. He quickly ran back to the driver’s side of the Cherokee and jumped in.

The young Guardsman stepped to the side and briskly waived him through the roadblock. Richard rolled through the blockade as quickly as he could and once beyond the last concrete barrier floored the gas pedal and was once again roaring down the road. As the roadblock disappeared in the rearview mirror they could hear the sound that reminded him of popcorn. Richard only hoped that the goons were getting their just rewards right now. This was getting insane, he had to get off the main drag, but where and how? The last thing he wanted was to end up in a refugee camp. As he barreled down the road he wondered what would have happened if soldiers had searched the vehicle or worse, if those goons had caught up with him. He shuddered to think!

Two hours later the primer grey Jeep Cherokee was cautiously rolling down a seldom used jeep trail. The old topo map that he had found in the glove box, showed a connection that would take them around the major suburbs and highways and thus allow them to skirt the most likely troubled areas. At this rate it would take several days to reach his Aunt, but Richard felt that this option gave them the greatest guarantee of success.

Colleen had finally curled up on the front seat and using his thigh as a pillow fallen asleep. Richard wished that he could join her, perhaps if he could find a turnout or side trail into a covered area he would give it shot. Every fiber in his body felt drained. He was a computer programmer not some Johnny Rambo! Shit like this was supposed to happen in other countries not the United States! He wondered what they would find when they finally reached his Aunt Betty’s. He hadn’t seen her since shortly after his uncle had died. They talked on the phone off

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *A GrayMan*

and on since that time. But he was always too busy with his life to take the time and drive up there. Now he wished that he had.

The trail he was now on dipped in and out of several small creeks and streams as it wound its way around the sharply rising ridges. It was just past one ford that he spotted a little dirt trail that a forest service gate blocked. It took Richard a few minutes to locate the bolt cutters in the pile of debris in the back of the Cherokee and just a few seconds to snap the lock off and substitute one of his own. A hundred or so yards up the trail that paralleled the creek the narrow path opened up into a small valley. He pulled the dusty vehicle to the far side and backed into a hillock of scrub oak.

“Are we there yet.” A bleary eyed Colleen asked half a sleep.

“Not hardly Dear, but we can rest up a bit here I think and get things in order.”

“Where are we?”

“Back in the mountains around Borrego Springs I think.”

“Borrego Springs? How did we get here?”

“I just followed those maps I found in the glove box. There’s all sorts of trails that will keep us far from the crazy shit in the city.”

“I’m so sorry for losing it back at the military check point Honey. I just couldn’t deal with anything else, it’s been a total nightmare, just a nightmare!”

“Well . . . as it was it worked out OK Colleen, but from this point on we’ve got to work together as a team if we’re going to survive. There is no place or time for any more shit like that anymore.” He looked at her with the most serious expression she had ever seen on him.

“Do you understand? You’ve got to be strong and we’ve got to be tough or we’re as good as dead! And that is for real!” He lectured her.

She dropped her face and looked at the ground. “I won’t let you down again Richard.” She said flatly.

“Honey . . . from this point on we have to be tough as nails. If we fail we DIE!” He was beyond serious now and on a roll.

“Civilization is an illusion, it always has been. It is nice while it lasts, but right now it’s gone and until we somehow manage to regain that illusion it’s just you and me against the whole fucking world.”

She had never heard Richard swear in this manner before. He was always so calm and practical, so self assured and easy going. This was a side that she had never seen before. It reminded her of how he spoke about his brother, aggressive, a surly alpha male. She wasn’t sure whether she liked this side of her husband or not, but it was somehow reassuring under the current circumstances.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

The couple set up camp in the shelter of the scrub oaks. The nearby stream softly babbled in the distance and added a calming element to the insanity they had experienced earlier in the day. Richard took this opportunity to totally unload the Cherokee and rearrange the essential items they would need immediately. Together they went through every weapon and piece of equipment they had. Richard insisted that they be fully armed and ready at all times, even in camp. At first Colleen made fun of the requirement, but after a stern warning from her husband thought better of it.

For almost a week they sorted, packed, prepped and prepared for the second leg of the journey. Every day Richard insisted on going over the various weapons they had, cleaning, loading and firing them. Colleen practiced and practiced with her husband until she was sure she could perform the routines in her sleep. She had never seen Richard so focused or forceful in her life. But with each day she was feeling more self-assured as well. He even had her stripping and reassembling her AK and pistol with a blindfold on. The first attempts were humorous, but Richard finally laid down the law and she got more serious. Pretty soon it took little effort for her to operate her primary weapon blindfolded. Her back up was a Browning High Power 9 mm that they had liberated from a dead neighbor. That took more work but she was finally getting the hang of it by the forth day.

The night before they were to set out once again to Aunt Betty's they made love for the first time since all the insanity had descended upon them. When the dawn of the next day crept into the grove of scrub oak the couple had their rig fully loaded and ready to go. They sat back down into the Cherokee with a totally new attitude from a week earlier. No longer would they accept the role of being a victim. From this point forward they were a team that was focused on the mission at hand, survival and reaching their destination.

Richard turned the key in the ignition and the Cherokee Chief roared to life. The big four-wheel drive began to roll forward. They were now ready.

Malcolm could hardly believe his luck as the Snow Cat finally rolled into the small mountain village. For the first time in a long time something had the look of normal. There were people out and about, not many but more than what he had expected to see after escaping the gulag. Shops appeared to be open for business. Here was a living and breathing community. But something was different and it took him a few minutes to become aware of it. Then it struck him like a thunderclap. THEY WERE ARMED! Every citizen he saw had a rifle slung across their shoulder or were carrying it in hand. Those without rifles sported pistols carried openly as if it was everyday.

The snow cat rumbled down the street and out the other end of town. After a few minutes it turned down a driveway and rolled up to an inviting looking house. The kids got very excited, as they got closer.

“GRAMPA FRANK! - GRAMPA FRANK! Uncle Malcolm that's Grandpa Frank's house just like we told you!”

Malcolm could hardly believe the last couple of hours were real. He had met the children's grandparents and their friends. They had sat down to a large feast of a meal and now he was sitting in front of a warm fire sipping on a glass of Chivas Regal straight on the rocks. If this was a dream he didn't want to wake up from it.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Malcolm . . . Malcolm . . . Malcolm?”

He snapped out of his inner thoughts. “I’m sorry Sir. I didn’t mean to fade out. I’m just a little overwhelmed by the moment. You can’t imagine how many times I thought I was surely dead over the last several months.” He raised his glass and looked through it.

“And to be sitting here in front of a warm fire. The kid’s safe. A fine meal under my belt and an equally fine Scotch in my hand . . . well Sir, it’s just all a little unreal at the moment.”

All the heads around him nodded in agreement.

“Well Mr. Danielson . . .” Betty Richardson began

“Please, Malcolm will do just fine.”

“Well Malcolm it is just a miracle that you found our little grandkids and made it all this way. You cannot imagine how eternally grateful we are.”

Malcolm looked about the room before he spoke. “I never had children of my own. But I can image what the panic and heartache must be like for parents separated from their kids. Getting those two little ones to family was not a choice. It simply had to be done.”

“Well thank you for your convictions Malcolm.” Grandpa Frank added. “They are a rare and valuable commodity in this day and age.”

“I do have one question for you folks, if I may be so blunt?”

“Yes, go right ahead. Blunt abounds around these parts.” Several others chuckled in response.

“What happens now?”

“Now?” Frank looked at him confused.

“Yes, what happens now? I don’t want to seem ungrateful for the superb hospitality you fine folks have shown me, but what happens in the morning?”

“I’m not sure I understand the question Malcolm.”

“Frank . . . well you said blunt abounds around here so here goes. What happens to me? I can’t go home even if I could get there, there’s nothing there for me as a wanted man. I’ve no place else to go and I probably don’t quite fit into the demographics of this community.”

David McMillan had been sitting quietly throughout the conversation until the reality of Malcolm’s question hit him.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Frank.” David looked at the evening’s host. “Is there any question in your mind?”

“Not a one . . . not a one.” Frank returned.

Malcolm looked puzzled now.

The big Swede turned towards Malcolm now and David began. “Malcolm the only color requirements of this community are Red, White and Blue. We require only a few things from our community members. They are Honesty, Integrity, commitment to hard work and above all else dedication to the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. From these things we will not waiver. Can you agree to these requirements?”

“Of course I can.”

David rose, put out his hand and took a step towards Malcolm. Malcolm rose in kind and gripped David’s hand. His grip was firm and solid, an honest grip.

“Welcome to the community Malcolm.”

It was after dinner cooked on deck with the little Hibachi stove that the Marines stood to bid their last goodbyes to their fallen comrade in arms. They didn’t have an American Flag to lay across him, but Ian felt that some symbol of a sovereign state should be represented and draped the Navy Corpsman in his own national ensign.

“He may not have been Australian, but he sailed like one.” He began. “I didn’t know this young man very well but he was a sailor and because of his sacrifice we’re standing on deck right now and not with Davy Jones. Doc . . . you stood your post. You sailed straight and true and I was proud to have stood at the helm with you.”

Ian stepped back and motioned for SSgt Larkin to continue.

The big Staff Sergeant cleared his throat and began. “There is no higher praise that can be given to a sailor than to call him Doc. You were our Doc. You were a Marine Corpsman . . . Doc . . . our brother in arms. Always there, always ready and always willing to go the extra mile for us and with us. You never bitched, never complained, never shirked your duty.”

Larkin paused and looked around the group.

“Doc, there is not a person here that you haven’t touched or helped in some way. You were our mother hen, always worrying over us, taking care of us, and making sure we would come back home healthy and whole. Even right up to the end you were looking out for our welfare. You sacrificed yourself so that other would live. Damn it Doc . . . you’re going to be sorely missed. I would like to think that you were recalled and left us because God needed a damn good Corpsman to stand beside the Marines that guard Saint Peters gate. Well . . . he got the best in my book.”

His voice trembled just slightly before he continued.

“And . . . from this day forward, after every toast that is raised to the Corps, I will raise a toast to the Corpsman of the Corps. Semper Fi Doc. God Speed you on to your next duty station. Stand tall and always remember you are a part of us . . . a part of the Corps to the very end of time.”

Larkin nodded and Stevens raised the plank that Doc Nabors shrouded body lay upon and it slid quietly into the dark still waters.

Chapter 68 - Wolves in the Back Yard

“Are we to understand,” asked the judge, “that you hold your own interests above the interests of the public?” “I hold that such a question can never arise except in a society of cannibals.” - Ayn Rand

All governments are more or less combinations against the people . . . and as rulers have no more virtue than the ruled . . . the power of government can only be kept within its constituted bounds by the display of a power equal to itself, the collected sentiment of the people. - Benjamin Franklin Bache, in a Philadelphia Aurora editorial 1794

It was late winter and spring was still well over a month away. Only the bravest souls were out and about on the snow-covered streets traversing the many paths cut by human sweat that wove their way down the boulevard. The famous lake effect winds off the Great lakes had deposited another three inches of wet frozen flakes the night before as the stranger walked through the empty streets. Devon Lee pulled his collar up closer in a feeble attempt to keep out the bite of the ever-present Chicago wind. It was not too late to turn back. He could just turn around and nobody would be the wiser. If his mother, God rest her soul, was watching at this moment . . . she would be furious with him. He could hear her piercing voice right now as clear as a bell.

“Devon Joshua Lee!” She would begin. “Don’t you throw away everything I done for you boy. All the pain I’ve endured on your behalf since the day you were born! Don’t you throw away all your hard work for some fool notion!” And the tempo would build from there.

How could he justify throwing away all those the long hard hours of study necessary to get into the best schools? The extra jobs his mother took on to pay for those schools. The double major in college that he struggled through to earn that coveted degree. The first on either side of the family, she had been so proud of him. He still remembers vividly the heartache he gave his mother when in a moment of patriot fervor he joined up with the new Homeland Security Forces. He saw it as a golden opportunity to get in at the beginning and rise quickly through the ranks. A rise that would be based on merit and not a good ol’ boy network that hadn’t yet been established in the new organization, or so he thought. But it turned out that bureaucracy’s just begat other bureaucracy and good ol’ boy networks transfer from one bureau to another with amazing rapidity.

So here he was slogging through empty streets in a half dead town, a deserter from the organization that he had hoped to make a career in. Crossing over the line and . . . and . . . and . . . joining the other side.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

'If they would have me.' That thought suddenly flashed across his mind. "Wouldn't that be a bite?" He thought to himself. "Wouldn't that just be a fucking bite!"

He lowered his head against the cold biting wind, shifted the heavy load he was carrying and continued his march deeper into the ruined city.

The homestead was finally showing signs of that things had returned to some form of normalcy, as much as was possible under the current circumstances. A light dusting of snow covered the landscape and gave the world a clean and fresh look. The soft crunch of fresh snow had greeted David when he went out to conduct his morning rounds. It was hard for him to believe that not so many months back a major battle had taken place here in this very ground. But the scars were still evident if one chose to look for them. This morning . . . he chose not to see them and instead he concentrated on the freshness of the morning.

David loved working in his greenhouse. The rich moist odor of growing living earth was relaxing and helped to put out of his mind the shit the rest of the world was in. Right now there appeared to be a lull in the storm and while that bothered him, being the pessimist that he was, he was still enjoying the time he had with Denise and their home. His neighbors had been more than helpful in repairing the damage inflicted during their battle with the government forces. The old place almost made one forget that the winds of change were in the air. He knew that it was only a matter of time before they would once again be engaged, it was inevitable. If only there was some way to transition the coming struggle and arrive at the end destination without tearing down the old regime.

Unlike many others in this Free Community, he felt that it wasn't so much a tearing down of the house, as it was a major house cleaning that was long over due. The foundation was good, well intentioned and solid. It had been built with strong hands, good hands that put forward the best intentions of the day. But somewhere along the way the walls had become soiled and major parts of the structure had become infested with termites, then the roof began leaking. Soon there were patches upon patches trying to stem the eventual tide of disease when what was needed was amputation of the infected parts.

He pondered for many an hour while tending the greenhouse gardens as to the path that would lead to the next step in the American experiment. The problem as he saw it was that we had become too bogged down with the minute details. Rather than accepting the spirit of the law we had become possessed with exploiting the letter of the law. For example how many different ways did the American justice system define stealing? There were all kinds of degrees of theft. Volumes and volumes of legal precedents, judicial findings, etc., etc., etc., yet wasn't the bottom line that of someone taking something that didn't belong to them from another person?

David found it amazing that business entities such as corporations were treated as if they actually had the status of a living breathing real person. Yet the flesh and blood people that actually ran these institutions making the day-to-day decisions were rarely ever held accountable for the actions of the organizations that they ran. But what really bothered David was how individuals in high leadership positions were not being held personally accountable for their actions. It was probably the archaic idea that he held that somehow leaders were accountable both up and down the chain of command. That being in a position of leadership actually placed that individual in a special position of accountability, the highest level of accountability, to the people that he led. David had

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

always felt that a leader should be mandated to put the needs of the group above all his or her own personal needs, when in fact it was almost always the other way around in the real world.

“Oh well.” He thought as he added another head of Broccoli to the basket. “In a perfect world, even Murphy would be a nice guy.”

Richard and Colleen had slowly and carefully crept along the back dirt trails and lonesome firebreak lanes for two days without seeing a soul. A trip that normally took only a matter of hours to reach his aunt was now becoming a cross-country expedition. Richard could well image how early settlers moving out west had felt when they were deep in Indian Territory. The pair scouted the path ahead, peaked around corners and often climbed steep ridges to get a look at the trail beyond. The last thing they wanted was to walk into another ambush. The small forest service and mining roads that cut across steep slopes and switch-backed up ridgelines afforded no mistakes.

Often the roads were so narrow that the big Cherokee wagon barely kept all its rubber on the trail. There was often little if any room to turnaround and driving backwards to escape trouble was not Richard's idea of fun. By noon on the third day they parked the Cherokee in the shade and cover of a large clump of grey green oaks that draped across the shallow ford of a small stream.

Colleen began rummaging around in the back of the Jeep to find something that she could slap together to give them a hot meal. Richard set up the Coleman stove and got it going. He was getting quite adept at this camping game, though in reality it was no game. That task completed and Colleen setting out several cans of stew to choose from, he hefting the AK, gave her a peck on the cheek and grabbed the binoculars.

“I'm going to check out things ahead from the ridge just above us Hon.”

“Don't be long. I'll have something ready in about thirty minutes.”

“Well, keep it warm for me. That ridge is surely taller than it looks.” He said as he ducked under a large oak branch and headed up the ravine.

Forty-five minutes later and over four hundred feet higher Richard tucked himself under a small scrub oak on the ridgeline and proceeded to glass the route ahead. The country they were getting into was rugged and offered little chance of actually running into anyone and little chance of retreat if you did, he wanted to be sure. He carefully followed the dirt road they were on as far as he could. Then he looked over each and every ridge, every fire lane and mining trail and there were a lot in this region, though what they actually dug for he didn't have a clue. So far so good in the direction they were traveling. He scooted around and began to glass the path they had taken to reach this point. Then he saw it. He wasn't sure at first. But he thought he had seen a wisp of a dust cloud that seemed to fade into the haze at the extreme end of his vision. He pulled back and let his eyes re-focus and quickly checked around his spot under the tree to be sure nothing was crawling up on him. This wild region of the southland was well known to harbor sidewinders, scorpions and tarantulas and it wouldn't do to be surprised by any of these. He crunched up again and focused once more into the distant haze.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

There it was again. Something was definitely moving along the road stirring up a dust trail behind them. Richard tried to guesstimate just how fast the vehicle must be moving and how far off it was. With all the switch backs and everything it would be difficult to tell. He and Colleen had taken it slow to specifically avoid sending up just such a tell tale. So who ever it was didn't feel the need to be as cautious. To Richard that meant that they were either well armed and not worried about what they might run into, or were incredibly stupid and didn't care or were totally unaware. One way or the other he definitely didn't want to run into them. With any luck they were still at least thirty minutes away give or take, maybe more. But that wasn't much time to get out of Dodge or find a hiding place. Richard quickly scoped out his return trail down the slope. That's when he spotted it.

"HMMMMM. That's odd." He said to himself.

About fifty yards up stream from the ford was a small trail that disappeared into the scrub oak. Richard looked back down the road and could see the dust cloud was in fact moving in their direction. The decent down the steep slope took considerably less time than the ascent, but it was still too long in his book. Several times he nearly fell ass end over teakettle but managed to catch his balance at the last second. Colleen could hear him as he kicked up rocks and busted through the chaparral coming down off the side of the ridge and though perturbed at his tardiness to join her for their noon meal she knew that his rapid movement down that steep slope was not due to the call of her gourmet cuisine. Someone was coming and she quickly began packing up the lunch and stowing away all the gear.

Scrapped and bruised Richard nearly landed face first into the creek bed when he finally reached the bottom. Panting and nearly out of breath he ran across the shallow water to his wife. Colleen had quickly stowed everything, broken out her battle dress and was prepared to defend her position until he arrived.

'That a girl.' Richard thought as he staggered up.

"We got company coming." He spit out between breaths.

Richard bent over and tried to catch his breath. He was a computer programmer, not an infantryman like his brother had been. He found it hard to believe that Erik actually liked this kind of stuff. But then he had always been an inside kid, while Erik was the outside and in the woods kind of guy. What he wouldn't give to have his brother with him right now.

"What do we do?" Colleen asked with a mile hint of panic in her voice.

"Just . . . just." He took another breath. "Just a second. I think I spotted a place just up stream, but I've got to check it out first."

With that Richard turned back to the stream and began to run upstream in the shallow water. It didn't take him long to notice that the upper section of this little waterway was markedly different from any other foothills and mountain streams he'd ever been in, which was not a lot, but still. The bed of the stream was relatively flat with spaced out larger rocks here and there, but it looked like he could run the Jeep right up the center of it. There were no deep pools and then he noticed a second ford leading out of the stream to a small dirt trail that paral-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

leled the water to the point that he had first seen it in a break in the trees. If he didn't know better this looked to be intentional, not a fluke of Mother Nature. He quickly ran back to the Cherokee and fired it up.

The Jeep was already in four-wheel drive, now he shifted it into the low range and carefully crawled into the water. Colleen looked at him as if perhaps had lost his mind sitting under the sun up on the ridge. The big grey beast rolled steadily up the stream bed. Just as it began to curve gently to the left Richard saw the egress point and lugged the 4x4 up the shallow bank and onto the narrow trail. When he was up on the trail solidly and away from the water he suddenly stopped the Jeep and leaving it running, reached back over the seat, grabbed the machete and jumped out of the vehicle. It only took him a few seconds to whack off enough branches large enough to cover the point that they had left the water and at least partially camouflage the trail. Unless someone actually walked up to this point, some fifty yards above the lower ford he felt that it was unlikely this trail would be spotted. Unless someone else was sitting up on the ridge as he had and happened to look down.

Back in the Cherokee and heading up the narrow trail Richard filled his wife in on what he saw. She asked him if he was sure it was someone they should be running away from. He shook his head. At this point he told her, he wasn't taking any chances. The going was much easier now, narrow and relatively flat. Moving as quickly as he dared he wanted to put distance between them and the lower ford and yet not stir up a dust trail. Slowly the Cherokee disappeared up the canyon. A few minutes later the trail dipped back down and across the stream again. On the other side he pulled in under a shady scrub oak and tuned off the engine. They had traveled only about five or six hundred yards up from the ford but Richard hoped that it would be enough. Together they sat and listened. It wasn't long until their patience was rewarded. Off in the distance the sound of not just one but several vehicles echoed up the canyon. Richard quietly opened his door and grabbed the binos sitting beside him.

"I'm going to see if I can get a look at them."

"Well make sure they don't get a look at you Richard Kern." Colleen scolded him. "This kind of stuff scares the crap out of me."

"Me too Love . . . me too."

The distant roar of vehicle traffic continued as Richard carefully worked his way up the side of the canyon. Crawling through the chaparral he felt pretty sure he would be difficult to spot but he was extra cautious just in case. He finally found a vantage point part way up the ridge where he could see between the oaks at the lower ford. But now he was even more confused. What he saw there were military vehicles, a convoy by the looks of it. There where Hummer's and heavy trucks quickly passing through the small visual gap that Richard had. But something wasn't quiet right. He couldn't put his finger on it . . . but there was something different about these vehicles.

Captain Raphael Diego Martinez sat quietly observing the terrain through his dusty goggles and tried not to choke on the fine dust that worked its way through the desert scarf he was wearing as a mask, not that he was hiding. The time for hiding was all through. It was time for acting. He was leading the first of several columns of special operations troops that crossed into enemy territory and would be opening up the way for the retaking

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

of Aztlan. While the Gringo's choked on the fear and unrest that was spreading across their country the day had finally come to cast off the oppressive overlords that had stolen over half of the land that had once been Mexico's. While the Americans were busy chasing shadows on the other side of the globe wolves were on the prowl in their very own backyard. He did not like the idea of becoming bedfellows with the Muslim heretics. He viewed them as atheists in turbans nothing more, but as his colonel had explained it to him.

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend Raphael. We must first reclaim our country and then we can deal with these heretics."

"Yes Colonel, I understand."

They toasted to the upcoming invasion. It had been a long process, daring and fraught with potential disaster. Carefully, methodically the Aztlan force had been built up. Step by painstaking step, man by man. The irony of it all was that they had mostly been trained and equipped by the very people that would feel their bite when the time came. He did not entirely trust their allies in this endeavor. There were so many hyenas circling the American carcass waiting for their pound of flesh. The Cubans were especially hungry for having been under the American hammer for so long. The Chinese had provided millions of tons of equipment and war materials, while all at the same time draining the capitalistic Americans of their ability to produce anything for themselves by flooding the American markets with cheap trinkets and toys. Virtually nothing was made in consumer America any more. Of course the Arab world was more than glad to contribute to anything that meant the death of the Great Satan, as long as they didn't have to get their hands dirty. He guessed that sheiks considered it beneath their dignity to get directly involved when oil money could do the dirty work for them. And there was no shortage of ready ignorant martyrs to perpetuate the cause of Islam. It was even said that the Russians were involved; at least the remnants of the old school that still festered beneath the Kremlin and blamed the Americans for all the ills of their fallen communist society. Yes the list was long and detailed. He felt that he should be able to look up into the clear Southern Californian sky and see the vultures circling. The Yankees had become fat and lazy safe in their suburban homes watching mindless TV night after night. They would be easy to subdue and remove and once again Aztlan would be theirs.

Back in the lead command vehicle of the assault convoy he daydreamed about the coming battles. 'The Coyote Pathfinders have done their work well.' Captain Diego Martinez thought to himself. 'By the time the Yankee government realizes that we have arrived in force it will be too late. Then we shall see how they like to negotiate at the point of a gun!'

The Café was warm and filled with the tempting aroma of freshly made French bread and pastries. Jonathan always liked visiting Quebec. It seemed somehow oddly European for the American continent. His espresso was perfect as was his biscotti. The atmosphere made it difficult to believe that the world was in such turmoil and more was on the way. A distinguished looking elder statesman walked over to Jonathan's table and quietly pulled back a chair and sat down across from him.

"Good evening Jonathan."

"Good evening Sir."

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

The elder gentleman waved the waitress over.

“A light latte please and two slices of crisp toast.”

The waitress took his order and then quickly sped away.

“So how goes the merger young man?”

Jonathan cautiously looked around before speaking. “Quite well I believe Sir. We’ve sent in the accountants and we should have a complete inventory of all assets within a few days.”

“And the retirement packages?”

“Being delivered as we speak Sir. By morning we shall have completed a clean sweep of the executive suites and I believe the steering committee will support our actions once they realized the inevitable.”

“And the rank and file? How will the unions view this turnover in your opinion?”

“Well Sir, by morning - tomorrow afternoon at the latest it will be a moot point. Most will be happy to be retaining their jobs. As for the union.” He shook his head from side to side. “They can always be negotiated with once we have a firm hold on the corporate assets.”

The Latte arrived along with the toast. “Sir” took a sip and then a small bite of toast.

“They do make the best coffee here, don’t you think so Jonathan?”

“Yes Sir, very much so.”

“Very nice selection.”

Chapter 69 - Bad Moon Arising

There have been many great empires scattered across the tattered history of Mankind. Each felt that their values were the ideal, the dream and aspirations of all men. This was especially true because they were guided by divine insight from on high. Thus they were driven to obtain control of the world around them. Through their enterprise and expansion they soon conquered and influenced all within their vision. It was their worldview that became the standard against which all others were measured. Each ascended to the throne of global leadership and grasped the addictive reins of power. Through their influence, direct and indirect intervention in the lives of the rest of the world they brought about peace and prosperity for their people. But power is fleeting, as is peace, and the PAX of a great empire cannot last forever. History demonstrates that all too clearly that jackals are forever just beyond the fringe of that narrow vision waiting for the first signs of weakness in those who would crown themselves kings in the fertile fields of power. The memory of PAX ROMANA and PAX BRITANNIA is

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

still fresh in the consciousness of human kind, their fires burned long and bright. It is said that the brighter the flame the quicker the fire. The light of PAX AMERICANA was the brightest illumination yet known to human civilization.

The few politically correct talking heads that were still on the air, referred to the event as a “Government Restructuring.” Anyone with the slightest bit of common sense easily recognized it for what it was - a “coup d’etat”, the overthrow of the elected government. A second revolution was underway and very few accepted it for what it was until long after they were well into the middle of it. After all most Americans were not watching the nightly news, few had enough electricity to power such trivial appliances; their more immediate concerns revolved around surviving the catastrophes that seemed to be arriving in waves, one after the other. To many American’s it was that final straw in a series of symptoms that was known simply as TEOTWAWKI. When spoken as a single word it sounded strangely like something from a lost Native American language: “Tee-Oh TaWaw Kee”. The meaning was profound and to the point - “The End Of The World As We Know It”. They were to be first hand witnesses to the dreams and aspirations of their forefathers falling apart around them. From their position at the top of the world the decline was steep and perilously rapid. All would agree that the PAX of AMERICANA was in swift decline and about to fall over the edge and into the abyss. Yet as it is with all fires . . . some embers burn long into the night. And if nurtured properly - can rekindle the lost flame.

Hitler had his “Night of the Long Knives”, Stalin his “Purges”, Mao his “Long March”, and Pol Pot his “Killing Fields”, Jonathan looked out his bay window onto the dark Potomac and wondered how Historians would treat the past several days.

“Of course,” He thought to himself. “*We* could always rewrite the history books to favor our point of view. It’s not like it hasn’t been done before.”

He felt confident that history would reflect favorably upon this recent action. Change can be a good thing. Yes it would be interesting to see how these events would be spun into the history books. Especially since history is written by the victors and not the vanquished. Perhaps a hundred years from now his name would be iconized along with the original founding fathers. He chuckled to himself; it was all nonsense for the masses anyways.

He sipped his well-aged Scotch and pondered recent events and thought about the aftermath of the “Restructuring.” It was about time that someone started running this country like a business. Politics was such a messy enterprise. Always trying to kowtow to the uneducated masses that knew little more than the drivel spouted by the idealistic liberal media. Well we had had enough of that in this country. The liberal buffoons had served their purpose and they would not be missed. Their naïve agenda was helpful in disarming the masses thus making recent events all the more easier. Oh sure there were pockets of resistance. Isolated and scattered they were of little concern. It would just be a matter of time before they came out of their holes and begged to be fed, clothed and housed. Those that refused to capitulate to the new world order would be mopped up as was convenient.

He looked down to the flashing screen on his laptop, mounds of paperwork waiting for his review and signature. He chuckled to himself. ‘It’s all-electronic and yet we still refer to it as paperwork. How ironic.’

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Two men on horse back watched the convoy speed along the dusty Southern California Forest Service road from the ridge top. To the casual eye there was nothing unusual about the pair of horsemen surveying the valley below, nothing that is if you were living in the 1880s. Upon closer inspection you would notice beneath their worn dusters were arranged an array of western hardware that would have made Wyatt Earp jealous. The pair were loaded for bear as if they were riding into a full-scale range war, and perhaps they were.

Paul “Pepper” Cardwell sat relaxed in the saddle of the large Buckskin gelding as he watched the convoy below.

“Jack was right. That’s more of ‘em.” He commented matter of factly.

“So what the hell is going on here Pepper? Are we being invaded or what?” Dick “Double Deuce” Daily asked.

“What . . . Is the operative question?” He handed the binoculars over the Double Deuce.

“That’s the third column like that we’ve seen the in the last couple of days. All running hell bent for leather, all on back roads and not a Yankee face among them. I don’t think this is some kind of military exercise Deuce.” Pepper responded with a concerned voice.

Pepper instinctively scanned the chaparral around them, keeping a careful eye on his gelding’s ears. Rebel would let him know if anything out of the ordinary was approaching but he still liked to eyeball the surrounding terrain periodically himself. It was a good habit to maintain and had saved his bacon several times since their exodus from mainstream society.

When it seemed that everything had fallen apart, he along with his immediate kin and the extended family of his Single Action Shooting Society club had relocated to this remote region six months back. Sanity seemed to be on the warpath against civilization and nothing and no one was safe back in the modern world. At least hidden here in the “outback” of the rugged Santa Rosa Mountains there was some resemblance of safety and sanity for their families. After two major run-ins with brigands and roving packs of starving gang-bangers the Silverado Canyon Regulators had proved more than an equal match.

Despite the antiquated firearms carried by the Regulators the brigands and bangers found their ranks shredded before their very eyes by the amazing accuracy of the “fat old cowboys” they had faced. Unlike the punks and their modern magazine fed semi-automatic wonders that relied on high volume firepower and spray and pray tactics, the years of single action competition and honing of firearm skills to a razors edge had paid off. While the punks filled the air with lead, the Regulators filled the punks with it.

The cowboys gave new meaning to the term one-shot kill! After years of shooting at small iron silhouettes from all different distances and angles against a stopwatch, a full sized human target was . . . well, like shooting at the side of a barn. Not even the worst of the Regulators could miss very often. Another amazing revelation of the conflict was the difference in sheer stopping power between the 55 grain 5.56 mm round when compared to the absolute freight train knock down of a 500 grain 45-70 slug of lead. The clean up after the carnage yielded a vast mixed array of modern firearms, to the Single Action shooters credit the overwhelming majority preferred to stick to the weapons they knew like the back of their hands, perhaps even better. For many their single action revolvers and lever action rifles were extension of themselves. They were one . . . with the gun.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Pepper and Deuce pulled away from the rim and began the slow process of descending the backside of the ridgeline. There were definitely weevils in the flour and they both agreed it was time to sift 'em out. As they rode they began to discuss the multitude of options available. Their conversation very quickly turned to dynamite and bridges.

Colonel Ernesto Fuentes looked down over the valley where a few of the local residents that had remained behind were holding up his forward advance. San Diego and the rest of the county north had been a simple if not too easy a conquest. The Marine Corps training center at MCRD had been all but closed down years earlier. The nearly deserted naval yards had taken only a few hours to occupy and suppress. The Marine Corps Air Station at Miramar was now occupied and under Mexican control. Well Cuban and Nicaraguan troops were in control but it was his officers that were in charge. The resistance had been fierce but brief. With most of the Marine squadrons off on deployments to the far corners of the globe-chasing terrorist and the few remaining armed guards limited to just a single loaded magazine to perform their duties, overwhelming them had been rather simple. What the Captain didn't understand was where these civilians had acquired not only the outlawed assault weapons, but also the proficiency to use them. They were now forced to fight for each and every building and the slow dangerous house-to-house resistance was costing him both time and men. Neither of which he had in excess.

Michael LeRoy, retired Marine Corps Sergeant placed the crosshairs of his pre-64 Winchester 70 on the advancing officers brow. Regulating his breath with patient experience he waited for the optimum moment and then squeezed the trigger. The buck of the 30-06 was a surprise, as it should be. It was even more of a surprise to the men immediately surrounding Major Felipe Montenegro as their executive officer's head suddenly filled the air with a red mist. He was in mid sentence regarding the cowardly resistance of the Norte Americanos who refused to stand and fight. Apparently he had never read early U.S. American History. The British complained of the same thing. Those cowardly Yankees who wore clothing that blended into the woods, fired their rifles from behind stonewalls and trees rather than stand and face the British regulars out in the open and men should in war.

LeRoy cranked in another round and sighted through the scope for his next victim.

The crosshairs locked on the next target . . . "nope too junior."

He shifted his gaze and caught the movement of an arm giving directions. A second officer suddenly stopped giving orders as the 190-grain jacket round traveling at 2765 feet per second ventilated the invading Major's brain housing group.

Michael headed for the next window.

The American sniper's fire was dropping men all around him as Sergeant Manual Ortega worked his rapidly dwindling squad down the street. The trooper to his right sudden snapped back from the impact of another of the deadly sniper's rounds. From his position on the hilltop building the sniper commanded a view over the en-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

tire village. To move into the open down below was to invite swift and sudden death. Who ever this bastard was, he was good. He had even taken out two of Ortega's best riflemen when he tried to set up counter sniper fire. The abandoned old brick building provided perfect cover for the American assassin. He rarely fired twice from the same position working the entire floor of the old hotel. Firing through loops created by knocked out bricks and partially boarded up windows it was impossible for his men to cover every potential shooting position. Ortega wished they had armor for this mission. That would make this business short and sweet. But for now he only had sheer manpower to complete the job. Another trooper hit the ground screaming as his lungs began to fill up with blood.

Like a horde of ants advancing towards a picnic the little men in camouflaged uniforms moved ever closer to the sniper's position. But Sergeant LeRoy wasn't abandoning his post. He racked in another round and went hunting for more officers and targets of opportunity. The intensity of their return fire was increasing. He knew that he couldn't hold out this position indefinitely, but that was alright with him. He should have died along time ago back in the 'Nam. For too many years he had been part of the vast walking dead that had survived the hell-hole known as Vietnam. Like so many others he was left scarred and forgotten by the country that he had served so very long ago. But now the enemy was on his turf and by God they would pay for every inch of U.S. soil!

He cracked off two more rounds and managed a double play with one of them. 'Never get behind another man unless you want to catch his shit!' LeRoy thought to himself. He had seen that in bush. Stay close but not too close. That had been the new kid's mistake. Sergeant LeRoy had tried to train up the "Cherry" as quickly as possible but the kid just wouldn't listen. The booby trap the "Cherry" set off had killed him instantly and severely wounded LeRoy and several others. He could remember as clear as the blazing tropical sun the faces of his Marine brothers on that last day as the chopper lifted him out of that vast verdant nightmare. It would be months and several surgical operations later before he would finally learn the fate of his squad. His company had walked smack dab into the middle of a NVA Hornets nest. His boys had been out in the lead and took the full brunt of the ambush. Most of them were dead before they knew what had hit them.

The invaders were now within three hundred yards and closing. It would only be a short matter of time before they would gather up enough nerve to rush his position. Leroy dropped three more troopers in rapid succession and then moved as quickly as he could to his final redoubt within the building. It wouldn't be long now.

Richard carefully maneuvered the Cherokee Chief up the narrow canyon trail. Colleen was not comfortable with his decision to take this track but he could not be persuaded to return to the main dirt road. There was just a feeling that he couldn't put into words and though he still felt this was the better of the two choices he was beginning to question his own sanity as the trail got rougher and rougher. They were committed now. There was no way to turn around and backing down was not within the realm of possibilities.

For six hours they crept over the rugged rocky terrain. Several times Richard had to exit the vehicle and run out the 6000-pound Warn wench cable and pull the grey beast over the top of insanely large boulders and steep walls. Several times he thought that they were going to be forced to abandon the Jeep and hoof it out of the canyon, but each time he would look at all the angles and finally come up with a solution. Then suddenly they popped out onto an open expanse of pristine mountain valley.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Finally on level ground the pair got out and nearly kissed the earth. Colleen looked back down the route they had just traveled and couldn't believe, wouldn't believe that they had just come that way. She gave her husband and hug and looked at him in a new light. He seemed to stand a little straighter since they had defended their home and later abandoned it and hit the road. There was a sureness that she had never seen before.

Richard looked up the valley floor and noticed what looked like the signs of civilization. He pulled out his binoculars and was surprised to see what looked like an old western town. Complete with people that looked like they had just dropped out of the nineteenth century. There was not a vehicle in sight, but instead plenty of horses, even buckboards and buggies. This was really weird.

"What do you see Richard?"

"Well . . . I'm not quite sure." He said handing her the bino's.

After a few seconds Colleen looked back at her husband. "That's weird!"

"That's what I thought."

"Should we go in and see what's up?" She asked.

She handed him back the binoculars and looked back to the small settlement at the far end of the valley.

"Hmmm I don't see that we have much of a choice. I have no idea how to get out of here and back on the way to Aunt Betty's."

Colleen looked at her husband in total astonishment. "WHAT? Do you mean you are going to stop and ask for directions?"

He popped her on the backside and gave her a hug. "Just this one time . . . for you honey."

They rolled cautiously into the edge of town: cautious not to arouse too much apprehension and because as result of their travel up the rugged canyon they had managed to bend an axle. There had been several children playing until the sound of their jeep was heard then suddenly the few people they had seen in the streets and the children disappeared from sight.

Richard carefully drove past several horses tied to hitching rails in front of what appeared to be the general store and pulled over to what looked like the blacksmiths establishment several buildings down. He checked his .45 and the got out with the AK slung over his shoulder but behind his back. He was ready just in case.

"Hello is anyone in?" He called out. "Hello?"

"Who are you mister and what's your business here?" Came a deep voice from the shadows.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *A GrayMan*

Richard was sure that more than one set of eyes was watching his every move. He made sure that his movements were careful and non-threatening. He knew that Colleen held her AK just below the windows edge on her side of the Jeep.

“I think I’ve got a bent axle . . . ah . . . and I was wondering if I might get it fixed here.” He answered the voice from the shadow.

“Then what are your plans Mister?”

“Well then if someone can point me in the direction out of here we’ll be back on the road again . . . I’m just . . . trying to get my pregnant wife to my Aunt’s where she’ll be safe.”

A few long seconds elapsed then suddenly another voice came out of the shadows, a higher feminine voice.

“Your wife’s pregnant?”

“Yes Ma’am, just found out before everything went to hell and we had to leave.” Richard answered as politely as he could.

“Maggie don’t!” A deep voice boomed.

A handsome middle-aged lady in full calico walked out of the shadows carrying a Winchester rifle in her left hand.

“Oh Rutherford he ain’t no renegade.” She walked up to Richard and gave him the once over before sticking out her hand.

“Martha Stewart, not the bitchy one. Most folks just call me Maggie.” She shook his hand with resolution and enthusiasm.

Richard took her firm grasp and responded in kind. “Richard Kern of San Diego with my wife Colleen.”

Martha or Maggie as she preferred strutted over to the passenger side of the Cherokee and began speaking to his wife. In the mean time something considerably larger emerged from the shadows with an intimidating rather ancient looking 12 gauge pump shotgun and a pair of rather large hog-leg pistols strapped to his side. Richard took this to be Rutherford. Rutherford the blacksmith.

Both men eyed each other cautiously. It was Maggie that broke the spell.

“My Rutherford can fix anything that is made of metal. Hell he even fixed my broken heart a few years back and it’s been good as new ever since!”

Richard could hardly believe he could actually see the big guy blush. It was only for a moment but he saw it.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Just then two men on horseback rode into town and were drawn to the grey Jeep Cherokee parked in front of the blacksmith's shop. The situation looked peaceful enough, though both Pepper and Deuce made quick note of the AK slung over the shoulder of the stranger, his shoulder holster and his battle dress. Deuce also spotted the AK in the front seat with the women.

"Pepper - front seat." He said in a low voice.

"Got it." Pepper responded as he rode up. "Well Root what kind of stallion you fixing to shoe here now?" He called.

The stranger turned cautiously and Pepper was careful to notice that he took great pains to keep his hands clear but ready. This fellow had been in a scrape before by the looks of it. Just then the women in the vehicle got out leaving the battle rifle behind on the front seat. A good sign. She walked up and clutched the man's arm.

"Maggie here has asked us to stay for dinner and a soft bed if want."

"Maggie! We don't know these folks . . ." Rutherford growled.

"Rutherford." She began sternly cutting him off. "Where are your manners? This young lady and I are going up for some ice tea and unless you behave yourself and lend a hand to her husband I won't be bringing anything down for you boys."

Maggie grabbed the stranger's wife's arm and started back to her house with her arm in arm. She suddenly stopped and said loud enough for all to hear.

"Now Colleen you better fetch your rifle and bring it along with us. You never know when you'll have to cut down a coyote or two!"

Colleen hesitated and looked at Richard. He nodded and answered her look.

"When in Rome . . . or . . . er."

"Silverado young man, you're in the township of Silverado." Maggie answered.

They were now within the old hotel. He could hear them, like rats scampering across a linoleum floor they moved up through each level in rushes. A muffled explosion or a sudden scream echoing through the vacant building meant that another invader had met one of his booby traps; he had learned well from his Viet Cong teachers. The redoubt was in a back corner of the open attic. Behind sand filled twenty millimeter ammo cans, steel plate and stacks of old furniture he was more than prepared to make them pay for every inch. His position was secure beneath him unless they set fire to the entire building. He had had the rooms below this position used for storage and they were chock full of the detritus of past residents. You couldn't even open the doors from the outside of the interconnecting rooms. It would take hours to clear the spaces below him. LeRoy didn't figure he'd live that long.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

By the time they reached the open attic where the sniper was hiding Sergeant Manual Ortega's troops were nearly worn to a frazzle. This gringo was going to pay for his all his comrades deaths. There across the low open floor space was the barricade in the far corner. The bastard had cleared the floor space between the main access doors to the attic and his position and now invited anyone foolish enough to venture into the open a sure kiss of death with his deadly fire at point blank range. Ortega ordered up the rocket launcher. The first rush of troopers that entered the killing zone were met with a deadly hail of automatic fire. From the two access doors to the attic Ortega's men poured round after round into the barricade with little effect. There was only one choice left.

Ortega cleared his doorway of troops and grabbed the rocket launcher himself.

"CLEAR THE HALL BEHIND ME!" The big Sergeant yelled and saw his troopers quickly comply.

He turned back to the battle and singled for covering fire from the other doorway. Quickly stepping into the open he lit off the rocket that streaked straight across the confined space and into gringo's position.

The first rocket exploded against the outer redoubt wall. It's concussion knocked LeRoy to the ground. Motes of light sparkled in his vision as he crawled into the corner and located the detonator switch. He grabbed the dead man switch and flicked off the safety and gritted it between his teeth.

Pulling himself up and bracing himself against the wall he stuck his old M-16 out the firing port. An old familiar rock and roll song sudden filled his mind as the brass began flying and his old rifle bucked against his shoulder. That old CCR classic "A Bad Moon A Rising" rocked through his consciousness. Two more Federalies jerked like marionettes and slumped to the deck, their dance of death completed. More rounds impacted harmlessly against the outer wall just before the second rocket blew through the damaged barricade and blasted out the wall behind it. Troopers in the street below dove for cover as the blast rained debris, bricks and burning wood splinters down on them. Back on the top floor there was a heavy rush of troopers firing under full auto into the smoking pile of debris.

Medically retired Sergeant Michael Leroy faded out of consciousness and dropped the dead man switch from his mouth. Thoughts of his long dead comrades rushed back to him in that instant. He could still see their faces. Just like that day at "The Wall" near the Lincoln Memorial when he finally located their names carved into that black stone. He couldn't reach up and touch them until a couple of fellow 'Nam vets had lifted him from his wheelchair and he could finally run his fingers across their names. At the moment that his fingers touched the carvings a sudden chill ran down his spine and he was sure that they were all there on the other side of that cold dark stone. He had been the lucky one that day when the FNG stepped on the land mine that took both of his legs.

Michael had suffered terrible survivors guilt since that fateful day. He had always felt that his name should have been on the wall, yet for some reason he had been left behind. Left broken, confined to a wheelchair and addicted to the harsh drugs that the military doc's had pumped through his veins on a regular basis. Julie had left him shortly after his return home. She had wanted a "whole" man and couldn't even bring herself to look at him directly. It had taken years to kick the damn drugs, but the guilt had never left. He fought it every day . . . but no longer.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

He was crossing through a bright mist toward familiar faces and waiting arms. His legs were once more propelling him forward to the waiting arms of his comrades. It had been a long time.

Sergeant Ortega looked down upon the crippled man beneath the rubble. Laying over on its side was a bent and broken wheel chair.

“Mother of God!” he exclaimed beneath his breath. “This man had no legs . . . he was a cripple!”

Ortega looked out the smoldering hole left by the second rocket back down the streets strewn with his own dead. If this one cripple could cause so much death and destruction what would happen if the Norte Americano’s decided to turn and fight? He shuddered at that thought at the very same moment that the twenty fifty-five gallon drums in the basement filled with fertilizer and diesel fuel ignited as a result of the dead man switch’s activation.

Colonel Ernesto Fuentes felt the concussion and turned to witness the old four story building at the top of hill disappear in fire, flame and smoke. He had a bad felling about this. As well he should, he would very soon learn that he had lost nearly an entire company clearing out one lone sniper’s nest. It was indeed going to be a long day . . . and an even longer night.

Chapter 70 - I’m Still Here

Never appeal to a man’s better nature. He may not have one. Invoking his self-interest gives you more leverage. - **Robert Heinlein**, from The Notebooks of Lazarous Long

You can have peace or you can have freedom. Don’t ever count on having both at once.
- **Robert Heinlein**, from The Notebooks of Lazarus Long

The old man sat there in the cold wet predawn trying to remember a time when he had been more miserable. Try as he might he couldn’t think of one. Well there was that time in Korea. He was a wild-eyed seventeen-year old punk with a hot rash to see the world. Well he saw it, more than he ever expected. The cold still gave his toes hell. But ol’ Chesty had pulled them together and marched their dumb asses out of certain annihilation. The past two days and nights had been more than a nightmare for the senior senator from Georgia. Eli pulled the old scruffy wool blanket closer across his shoulders to fight back the cold. It would be light enough soon and he was going to risk a small fire. He simply had to warm up, dry out his socks and get something hot into his innards. This would have been an adventure had he been forty or even thirty years younger, but his old bones didn’t take to sleeping on the ground like they had when he had been a kid growing up in a small town so very long ago. Thank God for that old Marine training well back on the other side of the millennium. He was sure that he had made good his escape. What a damn sloppy mess he was in.

‘Thank God Mary Elizabeth hadn’t lived to see this day.’ He thought to himself, with the vision of their home burning in the night.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Something was moving through the brush nearby. The Senator slowly raised the 12-gauge shotgun in the direction of the rustle and waited. Suddenly a momma opossum with her clutch of kiddies clinging tightly to her fur skirted across the edge of the clearing and disappeared into the briars on the other side. Eli realized that he had been holding his breath and let out a long sigh.

The steel grey dawn sky was showing signs of lightening up as the Senator caught the tip of the match against side of his knife blade and dropped the light into the ducks nest of wood shavings. Carefully he blew on it just enough to spread the flame through the tinder. With in a few minutes the warmth of the fire began to improve his mood. Not much, but enough. The bastards that were responsible for this would pay, Eli would see to that. When you try to take out the President Pro Tempore of the Senate of the United States of America you better do it right. It took a lot to rile the Old Gentleman from Georgia and they had done just that.

"I may be seventy-five years old but I sure didn't fall off the tobacco truck yesterday." He muttered to himself as he scooted the canteen cup of water further into the fire.

"Someone is throwing out a heavy hand and think they hold all the aces . . . hmmmmmm." Names and faces flashed across the Senators mind.

Forty-five minutes later his hunger, thirst and caffeine addiction satiated he carefully put out the small fire, spread it out and covered it with damp earth. As he backed out of the bramble bivouac he stirred up the brush and scattered leaves over the traces of his visit.

"It wouldn't fool a real woodsman, but then those Yankee butchers that came calling on me certainly weren't woodsmen. At least not Georgia woodsmen."

He adjusted his bedroll and closely eyeballed the woods around him and particularly in the direction of his intended travel. With his shotgun ever ready he cautiously walked deeper into the backwoods. He was back on patrol a half a century ago, every nerve in his body on alert. He may have aged considerably since his last tour of combat. Was now grey and considered a little long in the tooth but for all the water that had traveled under his bridge his wits certainly hadn't slacked any.

He thanked God that he hadn't become one of those fat sedate senators that frequented the capital city. Mary Elizabeth wouldn't have tolerated such a husband and he certainly wasn't an indoor sloth like so many of the Washington elite. An avid outdoorsman, Eli had become a prolific hiker in his golden years. He and his wife were known for their outdoors nature and together had twice hiked the entire Appalachian Trail after they were well into their sixties.

Eli figured he had another two to three days of travel left to reach the old lodge. It had been several years since he had visited the old place. It was he and Mary Elizabeth's hide away, their secret hide-away when they wanted to escape the hussle and bussle of Washington and the world and return to those carefree days before politics. He hadn't returned since her death. He hoped the old place was still standing.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Eighteen miles in the other direction, shivering in the culvert that had been his hiding place for the past two days, Mark Bennett sat on the edge of terror. He felt like a trapped animal, hunted, hungry, dirty, and damn cold. He still couldn't believe the world that he had been suddenly thrust into. Two nights earlier he had been among the few exalted guests dinning with Senator Eli Simpson of Georgia, the President Pro Tempore of the Senate, when all hell broke loose and his world came crashing in around him. One minute they were discussing environmental issues in light of the current threats to American peace and security and the next there were explosions and machine gun fire coming from all directions.

The reality of the sudden disruptions didn't hit home until the roasted duck sitting on the platter between him and the current Speaker of the House, suddenly blew apart just before the Speaker himself was jerked up and out of his seat from the next burst of gunfire. Someone beside him rushing to escape knocked the young hotshot environmental reporter from NPR to the ground, probably saving him from the immediate onslaught. Under the table Bennett could vividly remember the shock of looking at the stark expressionless face of the man he had just been talking to seconds before. Representative Clifford the Speaker of the House lay in a growing pool of his own blood. Somehow the threat to the environment seemed a distant concern. Right at that moment all Mark was concerned about and wanted was to get as far from that dining room of death as he could. That was when the north wall exploded.

Somehow in the middle of all the gunfire, smoke, flames and confusion the young NPR reporter found himself on the outside of the congressman's lavish dwelling laying face down in the cool grass on the edge of one of shorter hedges that surrounded the formal gardens. He watched in stark horror as surviving guests and household servants were roughly ushered out of the burning building, lined up and summarily executed. A gunfight erupted on the other end of the building and it seemed that someone was fighting back. Intermixed with the popcorn staccato of the attackers assault rifle fire was the echoing boom of a big gun. Mark caught a glimpse of one of the attackers being jerked back out of the shadows following the discharge of that big gun. But he never saw the person behind it.

The next several hours were a kaleidoscope of images as Mark ran for all he was worth in sheer panic from the scene of that holocaust. Somehow, he found the rain culvert he was now in. How long he had been there he didn't know, but he knew that he had to keep going, had to find food, dry clothing, shelter and the police. Someone had to be notified, but who? There was a nagging feeling that seemed to be just below the surface of his consciousness. He knew he had to notify the police but he was hesitant and didn't know why. Something was gnawing at him.

Slowly, cautiously he crawled to the opening of the culvert. The corrugated metal killed his knees to crawl on but he was numb to the pain. Once at the edge he watched and listened for several minutes before emerging into the open. His foot sunk into the soft muck as he tried to maintain his balance and work his way up to the side of the road. The grey overcast of the morning did nothing to raise his mood as he limped along the side of the road.

For better than an hour, he numbly continued limping his away along the side of the empty road. Then up in the distance a dark shape was steadily approaching. Bennett wasn't sure he was really seeing anything at first then as it got closer he was suddenly filled with apprehension. He waffled in his panic for several seconds before he limped over to the ditch and slid into the ditch. The old Chevy pickup slowed as it approached and Mark buried his face into the long grass willing himself to invisibility.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Several minutes pasted and then a voice with that distinct Georgia drawl called out.

“Mista . . . you’ all right?”

“Mista . . . you there in the ditch. Are you’ all right?”

Bennett slowly looked up. The work boots that he first saw showed the kind of scuffs and wear of a working-man that knew the soil. His eyes scanned up further and followed the coveralls to the shotgun held relaxed in the right hand. Finally his gaze ended in the sun tanned well-wrinkled unshaven face of one who was among the salt of the earth. Bennett began to cry and sob uncontrollably.

The four men were left in the dust as Maggie marched off arm in arm with Colleen headed for the ice tea she had mentioned.

“Root what do you see in such a high spirited filly?” Pepper asked as he swung down from the saddle.

“Lord only knows Pepper, the Lord only knows.” Rutherford sighed.

Pepper walked straight up to the stranger and stuck out his hand. “Pepper Cardwell”

Richard accepted his hand and returned a strong but equal grip. “Richard Kern and,” he nodded his head in the direction of the retreating women. “Colleen my wife.”

“So young man, how did you get to Silverado? We surely didn’t see you coming in the way we did.” Pepper tilted his head towards the other man on horseback.

“Richard here came in from the south end of town.” Rutherford chimed in.

Pepper’s eyebrow raised slightly. “Do tell.”

“Yes sir, we came up that canyon just over the other side of the fields south of town.”

“In that?”, asked Double Deuce as he looked back across the fields.

“Yes sir, that’s how we bent the axle I guess. It was pretty rough going.”

“I’ll say, we blasted most of that rock into the canyon to cut off any travel from that direction.” Deuce remarked. “Well I guess we’ll have to take care of that again.”

“Oh I don’t know about that.” Richard replied. “It was pretty insane to even take that on.”

“So why did you . . . take that on?” Pepper asked.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Richard gave the three men the run down of recent events that lead to this moment. When he got to the latter part regarding the military caravans and his uneasiness regarding them he could see the sudden increase in his listener attention.

“Did you get a look at them.” Pepper asked.

“No not really . . . but something just didn’t seem right.”

“Well that’s the same conclusion that we’ve come to. We’ve been watching them for the past several days now, one right after the other, but not a Yankee face amongst them. No US markings, nothing to really put a finger on but something just don’t seem right.”

An uneasy quiet descended upon the group. After a long minute or too Richard broke the silence.

“We’re trying to get to my Aunts up in the foothills. She’s got a little place out in the country up one of the canyons there. It’s rather isolated and should be safe from the kind of troubles we saw in the suburbs.”

“Mister.” Rutherford began. “There ain’t any place safe, anywhere. Not even here!”

“Now don’t go scaring the young man Root.” Deuce scolded him.

“Well it ain’t. We’ve had our own troubles even here. Not no more though. Skinned those polecats ourselves.” He said patting the barrel of the shotgun that now rested in the crook of his massive arm.

Richard wasn’t quite sure just what the conversation he was listening to meant but caught the implication well enough.

“Colleen and I certainly don’t want to cause you folks any trouble. We’re just trying to get to some relatives in one piece. Which here of late isn’t the easiest of things to do, especially now if I’ve wrecked our only form of transportation.”

“Well Richard I’m sure that if it can be fixed ol’ Root here can set it right.”

“If it’s metal that needs mending our Root is the man to see.” Pepper added.

That evening the Kern’s were treated to the best country fried chicken they had ever experienced. The atmosphere was light and happy and for the first time since the dark times started both Richard and Colleen felt relaxed and safe.

Gny Sgt Talford was a little on edge as he completed his nightly rounds on the Davis estate. There was major shit going down all around them and Talford had half expected some of that fecal material to drift down in their direction. He cleared through the last guard station and headed in for the mid-watch reports. Everything was quiet . . . too quiet.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

When Talford entered the radio shack Brentwood Davis was still there.

“Any new word Mr. Davis?”

“No . . . nothing new since this morning Gunny.”

“So what’s your take on this?”

“Well if I didn’t know any better I’d say we’re in the middle of a coup. But just who’s behind it . . . well it’s too early to tell yet.”

Talford just shook his head. “Who is right. I’ve checked and double-checked all the militia groups that we have regular contact with and even stretched out to some we don’t. Mr. Davis it isn’t any of our boys. In fact they’ve all gone to ground and are staying extra low. No it’s someone else running amok across the whole country.”

Nearly a week after his exodus from his burning estate manor Eli approached the small rural cabin with extreme caution. It didn’t appear that anyone had been there in quite a while. Even the old drive way was beginning to become overgrown with weeds and a few brambles that stretched their tendrils across the gravel road. The old place brought back memories of much happier times to him. Eli slowly worked his way around to the back of the cabin and carefully stepped up onto the back porch. The board creaked a little under his weight but was going to hold. He quickly located the hidden key, opened the back door and stepped in.

The air had a musty smell of neglect and long absence but it was just the way he remembered it. As he walked across the room he ran his fingertips through the fine layer of dust that had settled on the kitchen table. He could almost feel his Mary Elizabeth nearby. A tiny tear squeezed out of the corner of his eye.

“Well . . . first things first.” The Senator said to himself as he ascended the narrow stairway to the second floor bedroom. Once there he laid the shotgun down on the bed and pulled the dresser away from the wall. It took him a few seconds to locate the release and then the wainscoting suddenly popped open to reveal a storage space in the void between the roof and the eaves. He leaned over and carefully pulled the heavy steamer trunk over to the opening.

He didn’t remember it being so heavy. Spinning the dial of the combination lock around a couple of times before he got it right he pushed back the top and looked over the wrapped contents of the trunk. It had been many years since he had taken this walk through his past. Carefully and quickly he began to methodically empty the trunk placing its contents in an orderly fashion beside him.

Later the evening after he had cleaned up, shaved and dressed in the first dry clean clothes he had worn in a week he sat at the kitchen table and completed the task at hand. He smiled as he gave a final wipe down to his old warhorse. Despite all the years quietly waiting in storage, his M-1 gleamed in the flickering light of the oil lamp. He knew every nick, scratch and ding on the walnut stock. There was the graze on the barrel where he parried a bayonet thrust of a crazed North Korean before cracking his skull with a well-practiced horizontal butt

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

stroke. That had been another long night followed by an even longer march out of certain death behind the best Marine he had ever known.

He picked up a clip of eight rounds and with practiced ease locked it in, chambered a round and set the rifle to safe before placing it on the table beside a pair of old government issue 1911's and the shotgun he had escaped with a week ago. He would not be caught off guard again he thought to himself as he placed one of the .45's in an old leather military style shoulder holster. From this moment on he was preparing for war.

He ate a quiet dinner of pork and beans and hot coffee. Names and faces raced through his mind. Snippets of conversations, over heard discussions, hints and odd bits of information spun around inside his head. Somewhere he had the information. He only had to put the pieces of the puzzle together and he was very good with puzzles. It was just a process of lining up the odd bits of information that took time. But then time was what he had plenty of. Who ever had come at the old senator probably thought that he had gone up with the rest of the house. After all, how far could such an old fart get. He chuckled to himself at that thought.

"We'll see who the last man standing is." Eli got up from the table and opened the cupboard.

He opened an old tin of tobacco and began stuffing some of it into one of his old pipes. He had given up the habit years ago for Mary Elizabeth but just couldn't come to part with the old briars. The smoke was a little dry but comforting. He sat in the old rocking chair and continued to spin through all the variables in his mind. Slowly little pieces began to fall into place. It was only a matter of time he thought as he slowly puffed on the pipe.

"I'm still here . . . you bastard . . . I'm still here!"

Chapter 71 - A State of Mind

I hold it, that a little rebellion, now and then, is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical. - Thomas Jefferson, Letter to James Madison, January 30, 1787

No one is bound to obey an unconstitutional law and no courts are bound to enforce it. - 16 Am. Jur. Sec. 177 late 2d, Sec 256

When all government . . . in little as in great things . . . shall be drawn to Washington as the center of all power; it will render powerless the checks provided of one government on another, and will become as venal and oppressive as the government from which we separated. - Thomas Jefferson, 1821

When they call the roll in the Senate, the Senators do not know whether to answer "Present" or "Not Guilty". - Thomas Jefferson, 1821

Senator Eli Simpson sat in the old familiar rocking chair deep in thought. The humble cabin's interior was softly illuminated by the dim glow of a single oil lamp on the small kitchen table. Smoke from his pipe slowly drifted

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

above him, rising through the still air as he sat quietly, masked in an expression of deep concern. With hawkish concentration he slowly puffed on the old briarwood. The smoke softly blown out through the right side of his lips drifted up to join the other thinning strands of wispy clouds that entangled his thoughts overhead. The images that ran through his mind at this late hour were no longer filled with good memories of he and Mary Elizabeth. That time was over. Someone, or someones had felt it necessary to end his career in a rather abrupt manner and he didn't take kindly to being sacked in such a way, not at all! But who . . . and why? Something was gnawing at his consciousness just below the surface and he couldn't quite set the hook into it.

He rose up and looked about the small cabin. He liked the homeyness of it . . . it was comfortable. Much like an old leather jacket that has been broken in just right . . . it fit. He had never felt at ease in the huge mansion that was expected of someone of his political stature. This was where his roots were and where he felt at home. This humble and tiny cabin was where he came to recharge his emotional and personal batteries. It was both a place of remembrance and healing, a refuge from the insane world around him.

He checked the front and back doors and the solid shutters on the windows and then, picking up the oil lantern, his M-1 and disappeared up the narrow stairway and into the bedroom. The place was a little dusty and needed a good spring-cleaning. Perhaps tomorrow he would spruce it up a bit. Mary Elizabeth would appreciate that and he would feel more at home.

While he felt the rising need to do something more drastic, more direct, he had acquired the wisdom that comes with age and experience to know that now was not the time. It was time to wait, watch and think. Time was on his side, his enemy did not know that he had escaped the carnage and had no reason to suspect that he had. For the time being he needed to think and not to act. There would come a time to act and when it did they would find that he was not so old and frail as they thought. He chuckled to himself as he placed the M-1 beside the bed's headboard and one of the 1911's under the pillow and the second in his boot beside the bed.

"Youth and enthusiasm will never defeat age and deceit." Eli mumbled to himself as he swung his feet into the bed. "And as far as youth and deceit . . . well they might have the enthusiasm, but not near enough wisdom to use it properly."

He blew out the lamp and pulled the covers up to his chin.

'Hmmm,' He thought to himself. 'I haven't grown a beard in a very long time. It irritated Mary Elizabeth's face. Perhaps it is time to . . .' he drifted off to sleep.

Mark Bennett awoke to the smell of coffee and bacon. He turned beneath the homespun quilt and buried his head into the feather pillow. Then suddenly with a start he sat up. The last thing he remembered he was looking down the barrel of a shotgun . . . a very big shotgun! Then he flashed to he flames and noise of the attack on Senator Simpson's place and the running and the running and the running through the darkest night he could ever remember. Then the damp dark clamminess of the drainage ditch he had hidden in. What the hell was going on with his world? One day he's the senior environmental field reporter for National Public Radio (NPR) and the next he a fugitive from a terrorist attack upon the residence of the President Pro Tempore of the Senate! He sat there trying to wake up wondering just where the hell he was in this nightmare?

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

He felt her presence before he saw her. She was old enough to be his great-grandmother, perhaps even older. She stood in the doorway plump, craggled and grey, eyeing her new charge. Short and stooped from years of hard pan living. She had raised seven children to adulthood, buried another three before they had reached maturity. Buried two that would never reach middle age from separate wars and a third from bad luck on the streets. Of her four surviving offspring only one still visited. She nodded to the clothes folded neatly on the chair in the corner of the room.

“There’s some clean clothes on the chair for you son.” She looked at him without emotion.

“Breakfast is on the table,” She said turning away. “. . . and getting cold so you best be getting up and dressed quickly if’n its hot chow you want.”

He nodded and waited for her to turn from the doorway before he rose stiffly from the bed and started to get dressed. Mark was astonished to find that he was naked beneath the fresh clean sheets. He looked down at himself and gathered the impression of a half naked mummy. There were bandages covering both knees, his right calf and thigh, both hands and elbows and his right ribs, even one foot was wrapped up. He must have bashed himself good in his flight from the assault on the Senators place.

Bennett stiffly pulled on the baggy coveralls and white-buttoned shirt. He had never worn “Farmer Johns” before and felt a little silly in them, but clothing was clothing and he certainly wasn’t going to breakfast naked. His bare feet crossed the hardwood floor and entered into the outer hallway.

There was the smell of old wood and wallpaper, bacon and eggs and other scents that he couldn’t quite put a name to. He passed through a small pantry the floorboards creaking under his weight, past the back door open but for an old style wooden screen door and into the kitchen. He felt like he had suddenly stepped into a time warp and somehow ended up in the late forties or fifties. He had seen a chrome legged vinyl topped kitchen table just like the one before him in an antique store once. This one here in its natural environment showed the years of age and the passage of many a family meal, yet it was somehow noble, clean and honest. A plate with all the fixin’s of a country breakfast was unattended in front of an empty chair.

At the head of the table sat what must have been the old Grandmother’s husband. A scarecrow thin man with rail strong hands and a hawkish beak of a nose. His grey whiskers stubbled across his face did nothing to soften his look. He was reading a tattered newspaper between sips of hot black coffee. A younger version of the old man sat across from Mark. He was a heavier version of the hawkish old man, plumper and rounder featured, and odd mix of the two parents.

Mark scooped up the hot scrambled eggs with his fork and let the morsel melt in his mouth. He had never tasted anything so good in his entire life. He sat there puzzled for a second or two as he slowly chewed and swallowed the fluffy bit.

“Is everything alright Mista?” The young man asked.

“Oh, ah.” Bennett swallowed. “Oh yes, quite right, in fact delicious . . . very delicious.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

He picked up another fork full.

“I was just trying to figure out when was the last time I had eaten.” Mark answered.

“Well you were a bit rough around the collar when I found you.” The young man added.

“Oh it was you that found me.” Mark shoveled another mouth full of eggs in, chewed quickly and swallowed. “I must of looked pretty bad I guess, judging by all the bandages.”

“Well you looked like you’d been whooped on pretty hard Mista. How did you come by . . .”

“Now Jason it ain’t polite to inquire about a man’s private business.” The old man sharply interrupted.

“Yes Grandpa, sorry Mista, I didn’t mean to pry.”

Mark looked quickly between the two and responded.

“That’s alright . . . Jason is it?”

“Yes, Jason, Jason Harcourt. And this here is Grandpa and Grandma Harcourt.”

Mark cleared his throat. “I’d like to thank you for your hospitality Mr. and Mrs. Harcourt and you as well Jason.”

“It was the Christian thing to do.” Grandma Harcourt said as she sat down with plate full of toast and a hot pot of coffee.

“Though I will say you were a rough sight to see when young Jason brought you home in the back of the pickup truck.” She continued. “Looked like something the hounds had chewed on for near a fortnight.”

That would explain the visions of sky and clouds that Bennett recalled. He had been lying down in the back of a pickup truck.

“I can imagine I must have looked pretty bad. I apologize for that and appreciate you taking me in and cleaning me up. I will see to it that you are properly compensated as soon as I get back to my office.”

“You’ve got an office?” Jason asked inquisitively.

“Yes, Jason, it’s not very big as offices go. I’m a reporter for National Public Radio.”

“You’re like a radio star?”

Mark took a sip of the stout black coffee before he answered.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Not exactly. I’m the senior reporter and commentator covering the environmental news for NPR. I was having dinner with Senator Simpson when terrorists suddenly attacked his home. I barely escaped with my life. I don’t know how long I was running through the woods and the night until you found me. For which I am most thankful. As soon as I can make a few calls . . . ”

“Phones been out for most of the week.” Grandpa said flatly.

“Most of the week?” Mark asked. “What day is this?”

“It’s Thursday.” Jason answered.

“Thursday! I was at Senator Simpson’s Saturday night when all this started.” Mark stated with a stunned expression.

“Well Grandma and me has been doctoring you up for the last couple of days.”

“Jason here brought you home early Tuesday morning.”

Mark sat there in stunned silence. He had lost nearly a week. What the hell was going on.

“YOU WANT ME TO DO WHAT!?” David McMillin exclaimed.

“Put in a bid for Governor.” Sheriff Eckert restated calmly.

David stood up from the couch and walked over to the fireplace.

“Eric, have you lost your mind?” David began. “You can’t just up and secede from the state.”

“David we already have. This will just be a formality declaration. Look you’re the one that gave us the idea in the first place. It’s not like it hasn’t been tried before.”

“Yeah and look what happened the last time . . . it was called the Civil War or the War of Northern Aggression, depending on your perspective at the time.”

“We’re not necessarily leaving the Union, just this part of it.”

David rolled his eyes and waived his arms. “Oh I’m sure that’s how it will be received in both Sacramento and Salem. Not to mention the response we’ll get from Washington.”

“David it IS ALREADY A FACT! The State of Jefferson (<http://www.jeffersonstate.com/>)already exists and has been operating just fine since shortly after we booted out the feds during the attack on your place here. We’ve been running independently through out this region since then. This is only a formal declaration for what already is!”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“But Eric, you can’t think for a second think that they will actually allow such a division to happen, let alone exist? I mean really now, think about it!”

“David you think about it. It makes perfect sense. That’s why so many counties on both sides of the border have joined in. We’ve been left out in the cold by both state capitals for the last time. The entire country is in a state of emergency with all that is going on. Did we see any relief effort out here in the boondocks? HELL NO! Nothing has changed. The big cities rule the roost and we get stuck with the scraps. It hasn’t changed in over a hundred years. You know that.”

David began pacing the room.

“But look at the reality Sheriff. We would need not only the approval of both state governments, but the federal government as well, and don’t think for a second that they will go for it. We’ll end up with another civil war and we don’t have the resources to even consider such a possibility. It’s just not possible.”

“It is possible and we’ve already done it David!”

Joseph Stanowski, David’s neighbor chimed in. “David you better then anyone here know that there as been a long standing feud between our rural region and the two state capitals. It is only natural for us to finally cut the umbilical cord and create our own state. We don’t share a damn thing with those city folks. They just want our timber, our water and our precious resources. They are happy to come up here and rape all our wealth and then run back to the big cities and we’re left with nothing, hardly even the dregs!”

“Oh me and my big mouth.” David sighed.

“Well hon you did open Pandora’s box on this issue.” Denise, his wife said calmly.

David turned to look at the fire. “How many counties are we talking about?”

Joseph looked at the Sheriff questioningly.

Erick began. “As of last count we have a total of nineteen counties; seven from southern Oregon and twelve from northern California. There’s another three: Sierra and Lake counties in California and a Lake county in Oregon that are tittering on the edge.”

David turned around. “Damn! That would almost divide this state in two. Not to mention remove a sizable chunk from Oregon.”

“Not that they would miss us.” Joseph muttered.

“Oh they’d miss us all right.” David added. “You’re talking about creating a state bigger than most eastern states.”

“Bigger than most Midwestern states David, but that is not the point.” Erick said calmly.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“What is the point Sheriff? You realize that this endeavor is sheer suicide. The Feds, let alone the states themselves, would never go along with this. NEVER!”

“Oh on the contrary my concerned History teacher. They not only will, they pretty much have.”

The group looked surprise towards the big sheriff.

“Say what?” Joseph asked.

“Ever since everything went to hell in a handcart the states have been operating pretty much independently dealing with the crisis, likewise the various counties. The hardest areas hit by the terrorist and the plagues were in the cities. That took up all of the two governors time and efforts trying to bring those situations under control. We’ve once again been left out on our own, but we haven’t been just sitting back waiting for Salem or Sacramento to get off their ass and remember that we’re here. What separates us from the rest of the state is what binds us together here.”

Sheriff Eckhart took a breath and continued. “I’m telling you that the State of Jefferson does in fact exist and is functioning. Since the federals attack on your place here David, the reality of our differences has become more than apparent. The people have rallied around the call for a free and independent state. The battle here on your homestead was Lexington Commons. They have finally had enough of being pushed around by outsiders. I’m telling you David the State of Thomas Jefferson does exist and you have been called upon to be the first governor of that state.”

Eckhart placed his big paw of a hand on the schoolteacher’s shoulder.

“You’re the best man for the job David.” He said softly.

“I’m not qualified Erick.”

“Who is?”

Eli awoke suddenly in the early morning predawn hour. The pieces had finally fallen into place. He sat up and swung his legs out of bed. When ever he had had a major decision to make or problem to resolve he abided by the age-old adage of ‘sleeping on it’. It had never failed him yet. He would ruminate on all the bits and pieces until they all the began to came together. The bits of conversation, passing remarks, odds and ends of disjointed flotsam that in and of themselves had little meaning, but put together like a jigsaw puzzle suddenly painted a very vivid picture.

“That little bastard.” Eli muttered under his breath.

He lit the oil lamp and picking up the 1911 from his boot he descended the stairs and began to put together his morning coffee. His mind was racing now as he finally knew the answer and was now running through the vari-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

ous scenarios to resolve the situation. They all contained a fitting end for his adversaries and strong elements of Sun Tzu. He had a web to weave that would trap the spider and all it's clan. It would take time, but not too much time.

His coffee tasted especially good this morning, fresh, dark and rich. He sat down in the rocking chair and lit the old briarwood after filling it with fresh tobacco. It was going to be a good day, yes a very good day.

Chapter 72 - A Rude Awakening

*The preacher man say's it's the end of time
The Mississippi river, she's goin dry
The interest is up, and the stock market's down
You only get mugged if you go down town
I live back in the woods you see,
My woman, my kids, and my dogs, and me
I got a shotgun, and a rifle, and a 4 wheel drive
A Country boy can survive
And a Country boy can survive*

Pepper Cardwell bent down and scanned the hard soil for sign, at the same time just a few feet away Deuce sat high in the saddle and kept his eyes busy carefully inspecting every movement and shadow on the hillsides around them. He'd had an eerie feeling that they were being watched for at least the last twenty minutes or so and couldn't shake it. His right hand lightly gripped the ol' trusty 30-30 that lay across the pommel of his saddle ready on a moments notice.

"Well Deuce, it had to have come this way, but I'll be danged if I can spot any sign of it." Pepper remarked as he stood up and stretched his back out.

"Yeah, well that may be, but I swear that. . ."

Suddenly something moved on the opposite hillside that caught Deuce's eye.

"H-O-L-Y S-H-I-T PEPPER! There it is!" Deuce uttered in a hushed breath as he pointed across the narrow valley to the opposite ridge just below the military crest.

The great-stripped cat moved effortlessly up the side of the ridge and quickly disappeared over the top. Both men's jaws hit the saddle and bounced a couple of times before they caught their breath and then looked at each other.

"Did I just see what I think I just saw?" Deuce asked in utter amazement.

"If you just saw a fucking big ass tiger waltz over that ridge . . . then I'd say you see just fine . . . just fucking fine!

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Just what in the Sam Hell is a cat like that doing here Pepper?”

“Beats the hell out of me Deuce, beats the hell out of me.” He answered dryly as he mopped his forehead with his sleeve before putting his Stetson back on. “But I sure hope this doesn’t mean that now on top of everything else we’ve got deal with we have to start worrying about Lions, Tigers and Bears!”

“Oh my” Deuce added sarcastically.

“I’m not kidding Deuce. If some stupid bleeding heart idiot cut those critters loose from the San Diego Zoo we could have some serious trouble on our hands.”

Deuce suddenly realized the full implication of Pepper’s last statement.

“You don’t seriously think that anyone would be that stupid . . . ?” He let the thought trail off.

Pepper swung himself up into the saddle with practiced ease and gently pulled the reins across the big buckskins neck and started to turn the gelding for home.

Deuce looked at his old Winchester 30-30 and then back to the ridge the large tiger had just disappeared over. “We’re going to need bigger guns Pepper . . . lots bigger!”

Jonathan scanned through the reports racing across the screen of his laptop. So far the execution of The Plan had been virtually flawless. There were a few untidy strings here and there, but they were being quickly resolved and not to be unexpected. Within the next week he would hold the strings that controlled the executive, legislative, industrial, and economic power of the entire country. He would be the authority behind the throne.

No longer would the process of civilization be left to the fickle whims of the ignorant multitudes or the political aspirations of self-serving, self-centered shallow bureaucrats. Such governmental designs were wasteful as well as not profitable. They were not an efficient utilization of resources and if there was anything that Jonathan could not stand it was waste; wars were wasteful, civil strife was wasteful, elections were wasteful. To squander vital finite resources for non-productive endeavors was an abomination. The Board would correct those discrepancies in short order once they became the supreme power brokers across the world.

The Board had hoped that the current actions that Jonathan and others were undertaking on their behalf would not be necessary. Such extreme measures were inherently wasteful and non-productive during the initial phases, but they were necessary. Much like running a plow through virgin soil. Such upheaval to the strata and status quo were necessary to prepare the field for production. There would be a one-world government, just not along the idealistic visions that the globalist politicians, romantic visionaries and futurists had portrayed. The future belonged to the super citizens, the corporations that now spanned the globe and controlled much of the world’s economy already. Recent events would assure their rise power and cement their authority.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Jonathan looked at the turbulent events of the past several years as necessary housecleaning and restructuring that happens with every hostile corporate take over. He sat back and reveled in the vision of a borderless future without nation states. The world ruled with cold, calculated, efficient economic logic. The power of human kind harnessed under the effective leadership of directors on the boards of the mega corporations. The plight of man no longer left to petty governments and idealistic fools. Smooth, efficient, and forward looking they would eliminate poverty, waste, war, and all the petty frailties of human kind that caused unnecessary pain and expense.

Jonathan looked out his window at the deep blue-sky overhead. His thoughts drifted to his vision of humanity moving beyond this frail planet and taking their right full place in the universe.

‘First we restructure the planet and then . . . we take on the universe.’ He muttered to himself as his attention moved back to the computer screen.

Izzard’s Revenge limped through the tranquil waters inside the coral atolls. It had survived the pounding of a typhoon, the loss of a crew member and now sought a safe harbor to rest and repair itself. Ian was at the helm and under his stern eye the battered Izzie slowly edged towards the Fishery Cooperative shops in Malakal Harbour on the Caroline Island of Palau. They weren’t much as repair facilities go, but Ian was sure that the workshops there could accomplish the necessary repairs.

He was a little worried about getting through customs with the heavily armed Marines on board. Also the fact that they didn’t have any passports would be a little difficult to explain. He just hope that having been a protectorate of the UN after the Second World War and administered by the US before their independence in the early nineties that they remained friendly towards the wayward Yanks that he had on board.

Ian had tried to raise the port authorities on his radio before entering the harbor but couldn’t raise a soul. He had to assume that his system was somehow malfunctioning even though all the checks indicated that everything was fine. The loss of communication was worrisome, but not unusual considering the beating they took in that storm. And it’s not like they would deny him access to repair his boat. No harbormaster could refuse a vessel in such a condition. Still, he would have felt better had he been able to raise anyone on the island.

The harbor was strangely quiet for this popular tropical paradise. He had sailed several times to Palau and couldn’t shake the feeling that something wasn’t quiet right. Then it hit him . . . there were no boats moving about anchorage, no movement of people on the shore, nothing in fact was moving.

It was SSgt Larkin that spotted the first hint of trouble. He was glassing the harbor when something caught his attention.

“Ian . . . this doesn’t look good.”

“Yeah I know what you mean mate. Some’em’s not quite right ‘ere.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“There are no people about . . . wait . . . what the hell is that?” Larkin leaned forward as if that would make the binoculars see any better.

“Ian . . . there are bodies in the street.” He pointed towards the shoreline.

“Say WHAT?”

“You heard me. Ian I can see bodies out in the open . . . SHIT! What the hell have we sailed into?”

“I don’t know Marine, but we bloody well can’t just turn around. The ol’ Izzie’s pretty badly beat up and we’ve got to put in to make repairs. It’s not like we can just roll down the road to the next island.”

Stacy was standing nearby on the center deck. “What’s the matter Trevor?”

“Stacy take a look and see what you think.” He handed her the bino’s. “Over there just up from the docks.”

“My God! There are bodies all over the place!” She exclaimed.

Mark Bennett followed Jason, the grandson of the old couple, as he trudged into the thick woods behind the house. Jason was making the rounds of his morning chores and Mark had volunteered to lend a hand. It was the least he could do to repay the hospitality he had been given over the last two weeks since Jason had brought him home more dead than alive. In the last couple of days he finally felt like he had gained back some of his energy since his harrowing flight from the senator’s house. What bothered him the most was the lack of information and the inability to communicate with anyone outside Jason’s immediate family. The Harcourt’s didn’t have a television, the telephone lines were dead and the radio was strangely silent except for the emergency broadcasting systems periodic messages repeating the President’s message regarding the state of emergency, martial law, etc., etc., etc.

The National Public Radio reporter was suffering from serious news starvation and couldn’t understand the lack of interest by the Harcourt’s in worldly events. He had mentioned his concern to Jason as they headed toward the upper pasture.

“Well you see Mr. Bennett. . .”

“Mark, please call me Mark.”

“As you say . . . Mark. Such things just don’t affect the folks around here.”

“How can you say that? Of course it affects people here. It affects you, your grandparents, world events affect everyone.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Well that might be as you say in other places, but not down here. Those folks up in D.C. and the rest of the world do a lot of talking but when it comes down to putting beans on the platter . . . well . . . we do that ourselves. IF we waited for them to help us . . . we’d have starved along time ago.”

They had arrived at a small barn that sat in one corner of a large field. As they neared the barn several grazing steers lifted their heads up and marked the two men’s passage before resuming their munching on the rich pasture grasses.

“And any time government people come around these parts it’s always to try and sell you something that you don’t need or want.”

“Like what?” Mark asked.

“Well there’s been a big push to get small farmers to stop farming and put their land aside. The government will pay you not to farm. Now that don’t make any sense at all. Getting paid not to work!” Jason shook his head in disgust.

“Well it actually makes a lot of sense Jason. They’re just trying to conserve our nation’s resources and avoid flooding the market with excess products.”

“Yeah . . . I seem to recall them saying something along those lines.” He said as he added water to the trough.

“But then they have to inspect your property to see if it qualifies for their program. Ol’ Melvin Tullis did that a couple of ridges over and the next thing he knows its against the law for him to farm his own land at all. Some sort of environmental impact report says he’s got a rare plant in his fields and woods and some endangered salamander in his creek and he can’t even cut fire wood to keep his house warm now. They said if he goes into his very own woods that his family has been working for over a hundred and fifty years that he’d have to pay a huge fine for trespassing! TRESPASSING ON HIS OWN LAND!”

“Well Jason we have to protect the diversity of our natural flora and fauna.”

“That may be Mr . . . er . . . I mean Mark, but that . . . what did you call it? Flora and fauna? That flora and fauna has been around these parts for a real long time and was never hurt by anything the Tullis’ done before. Heck a poor man can’t even gather firewood on his own land anymore.”

“But Jason can’t you see that these steps are essential to protect the biodiversity of . . . ”

“Yeah, we heard that too. But what about protecting the folks that have to make a living scratching in the earth. You rich city fella’s with your fancy college degrees come down here spouting all your impressive words and telling us what we should and should not do, when you don’t have a clue what our lives are like. You get all upset because you can’t find a double latte espresso locally. Mister, we’re just trying to put food on the table.”

Jason handed his rifle up to Mark to hold. Mark took it and held it like it was a poisonous snake at arms length. Jason then picked up salt block from just inside the door of the barn and walked through the gate out into the

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

pasture to replace the nearly dissolved lump there. That done he secured the gate, reclaimed his rifle which he cradled in his arm and headed out into the field to inspect the twenty or so head of cattle.

“Not too familiar with rifles I see.” Jason commented as he ran his right hand across the shoulder of one of the steers.

“Well I . . . I never really saw the need for such weapons.”

“And now?” Jason asked.

“Now?”

“Well after your experience at the senators place I just figured that you’d have changed your mind.”

“Why would that have changed my mind?” Mark asked.

“Well I don’t know about you Mark. But when someone takes to shooting at me, I think that I’m more than a little obliged to shoot back!”

“But that’s what police are for.”

Jason laughed and spooked a couple of cows. “You are so citified my friend.” He chuckled. “They must of breed all the common sense out of you.”

Mark was quickly becoming irritated. “Citified or maybe just civilized.” He shot back.

“Well that may be that we’re not civilized like you folks, but then we’re not starving out here like they are in the big cities.”

Mark opened his mouth to reply and then abruptly closed it. They were starving in the cities. The cities were utterly dependent on the limited shipments of food that the government was sending in. The Harcourt’s didn’t seem to lack for putting food on the plate. He had seen their pantry, the gardens, greenhouses, the springhouse and the huge root cellars. He had tasted the smoked ham that had been raised, butchered, smoked and cured all without ever leaving the Harcourt homestead.

Granny Harcourt had her pantry walls lined with canned and pickled produce that could easily last them through one if not more seasons.

Mark’s status and connections had seen him through the lean times of late. But he suddenly realized that he was utterly dependent upon others for his wellbeing. Here on this land the Harcourt’s took care of virtually all their personal needs. Jason’s work clothes might be old with patches covering the worn out spots but they were clean and honest, the patches solid and earned. These people had shared everything they had with a complete stranger without regard and even refused his offer of payment.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Mark stopped and looked around the field that he was standing in. Jason had walked ahead and was checking on a cow and her calf. Mark was thinking about just who he was. He was a city boy, born and raised, university educated, the Senior Environmental Reporter for National Public Radio and yet he really didn't know how to survive outside the protective bubble that was his view of civilization. He had thought food came from a grocery store until his grandfather had taken him to a real farm when he was twelve. The idea of eating something that came out of the dirt had been a shock to his young brain. The thought of drinking something that squirted out of a cow had turned him off milk for nearly a year.

Mark realized that he and Jason lived in two entirely different worlds. Mark might as well be from a different planet they had so little in common. Yet, somehow these last two weeks had been the calmest period in his life. He had always been on the go, a mover and a shaker, reporting events around the globe, rubbing elbows with celebrities, dignitaries and national leaders. But he had never actually taken any time to listen to the sound of the wind blowing through the trees. During the first week of his convalescence he had sat on the Harcourt's porch and just watch the day go by. Too exhausted to do anything else he had been forced to slow down and standing there in the middle of the pasture he suddenly realized that he actually enjoyed his vacation from the rat race.

His vacation came to an abrupt end later that evening after dinner. Mark and Jason had just finished cleaning up the table for Granny Harcourt when two military vehicles came up the half-mile long driveway. Mark was just about to go out the door onto the porch when Jason's hand stopped him.

"We best hold back and see what they want." Jason cautioned.

"What the hell are you talking about Jason? They could be my ticket out of here . . ."

Jason grabbed him harder by the shoulder and pulled Mark back away from the door.

"Follow me." Jason ordered and pulled Mark along as they retraced their path through the kitchen and out across the back porch into the night.

"Hello folks, do you live here?" The soldier asked.

"All my life." Grandpa Harcourt answered from his rocking chair on the porch.

"Anyone else live here with you?"

"Not since the kids were all raised up and moved on. Just Mother and I."

"Well Sir, I'm Captain Taylor of Homeland Security and we're notifying everyone in this area that we will begin relocation efforts for you folks over the next two days."

"Relocation?"

"Yes Sir. By Executive Order and United Nations Mandate this region is to be evacuated beginning tomorrow morning."

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Really?”

“Yes Sir, really.”

“And just where are we to be evacuated to young man?”

“Well your final evacuation sites will be determined at the relocation and sorting centers.” The officer was now standing at the base of the stairs leading up to the porch that Grandpa Harcourt sat rocking on.

Jason and Mark quickly made their way around the back of the house across the garden and into the equipment barn by the back door. While Mark listened to the voices across the gravel driveway Jason was busy behind him opening up something.

“Well I appreciate your effort to put out the word son.” Grandpa Harcourt began. “But I’m a little too old to be gallivanting around the countryside on the whim of some executive order, so if you don’t mind Mother and I will take care of business here.”

“No Sir I don’t think you understand. You MUST begin evacuation by tomorrow morning.”

“Son.” Grandpa took a long drag on his pipe. “I understand just fine.”

“Well then Sir, if you could give me the complete names and ages of everyone living here we can start the paperwork and we’ll be back in the morning to pick you up with your traveling bags, which by the way will be limited to twenty-five pounds per person. Limited space you understand.”

“Your name sir?”

“No.”

“Excuse me?” The officer looked up.

“I thought that my response was clear enough young man . . . NO!”

“Come on Sir. You realize that this is not a question of choice. The evacuation is mandated and must be complied with. You wouldn’t want me to have to place you under arrest would you?”

“Why not?”

“Sir aren’t you a little old for this nonsense. It’s been a long day and I still have several more houses to visit before I can call it a day. Now if you would . . . Your name and age.”

“NO!” Grandpa Harcourt looked hawkishly at the young officer. “Are you hard of hearing son? Neither Mother nor I are about to abandon our home and leave with you. So if you have more folks to upset then I suggest that

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

you go about your business and don't bother coming by in the morning unless you plan on giving me a hand feeding the chickens."

The officer looked about fed up with the old man. He stepped up on the first step of the porch and signaled for the other soldiers with him to disembark from the vehicles when suddenly he froze. Old Man Harcourt had been sitting on the porch with a blanket across his lap as he rocked and puffed on his favorite pipe. As the soldier started up the steps he pulled the blanket aside to reveal his old twelve-gauge trench gun being raised up into the young officers face.

"Son, you're trespassing on private property and mandate or not, me and the misses are not about to abandon our home for you or anyone. Now before someone gets hurt I suggest that you and your little soldier boys get back in them there vehicles and get off my land."

Mark could not believe his ears or his eyes. Several soldiers had just started to emerge with their weapons when the officer froze under the gaze of the twelve-gauge shotgun less than eight feet from his face. Suddenly the silence was broken by the unmistakable sound of a large rifle being charged . . . CHA--CHINK! Mark looked to his left and Jason had the biggest rifle he had ever seen up close poking out the small barn window in the direction of the two military vehicles.

"What in the hell are you thinking!" He exclaimed.

Mark had heard of a Mexican Standoff, but had never in a million years guessed that he would be smack dab in the middle of one. He burst from the barn door in attempt to defuse the situation.

"Hold on officer, HOLD ON!" He briskly walked forward with his hands raised.

The troopers that had just stepped out of the HumVees locked their weapons on Mark as he walked into the porch light.

"This is all a mistake Officer. These people are decent folks. I'm sure there's been a mistake somewhere."

"Just who the hell are you!" The officer demanded to know as he backed away from the old man with the shotgun.

"I'm Mark Bennett, Senior Environmental Reporter for National Public Radio. These folks.." He gestured with his raised hands. "Rescued me after Senator Eli Simpson's house was attacked by terrorist two weeks ago! I've been recuperating here until we could get in contact with proper authorities. Thank God you've finally shown up. I need you to call . . ."

The mood suddenly changed.

"You're under arrest Mister Bennett." The officer barked as he walked away from the porch.

"What?" Mark stopped dead in his tracks and looking left and right began to back away.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

The soldiers now began to converge on Mark who was totally exposed and out in the open.

“Mark Bennett you are under arrest for High Treason.” The officer stated as he kept one eye on the old man and the second on Mark who was desperately trying to retrace his footsteps into the barn.

“OLD MAN I WILL DEAL WITH YOU IN A MINUTE FOR POSSESSION OF A FIREARM - AFTER - I DEAL WITH THIS TRAITOR!”

The next couple of seconds became a blur as someone fired the first shot and the night exploded in flashes and loud concussions! Something smacked Mark in the leg and right shoulder as he desperately back peddled his way towards the barn. He lost his balance and crashed into the door with his shoulder. Splinters leapt from the old wood and hot angry hornets stung past his head just missing his head. Mark twisted sideways into the darkness of the barn and landed on his face where he began his scramble across the powdery dirt in a panicked low crawl until something burned across his backside and he virtually leapt horizontally into the nearest stall.

The old battle proven BAR bucked against Jason’s shoulder as he sent his third magazine worth of rounds into the soldiers and two vehicles in the driveway. The armor piercing 30-06 bullets ripped through the soft skin vehicles as well as through the Kevlar vested soldiers like shit through a goose. It was point blank range and elbows and assholes as the soldiers found themselves caught in the crossfire between the shotgun and the BAR. The firefight was over in a matter of seconds.

Jason locked in a fresh mag and proceeded out of the barn. Two more shots were heard as Mark tried to get to his feet. His fanny burned like someone had lit a torch across it and he could feel something wet and warm in his fingers as he probed the wound. His right leg felt strange and weirdly numb but took his weight as he staggered out of the barn.

The drive way was a mess with several bodies laying about in painfully contorted fashion. Grandpa Harcourt was standing on the porch his shotgun in hand looking like a vulture scanning over the dead as his grandson Jason inspected the bodies.

“What in the hell have you done!” Mark exclaimed.

Jason looked up from the last body. “Just saved you from the execution squad.”

“You’ve murdered innocent . . . WHAT?”

“You heard me. That stupid move back there damn near got us all killed!”

“But I could have gotten this whole situation squared away.” Mark answered angrily.

“Mark you’re a very nice guy.” Jason began. “But you are the biggest horses ass I’ve ever seen! That stupid move of yours would have gotten all of us a bullet in the head.”

Mark stared at him blankly.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Do you think that you’re the only one to have escaped the massacre at Simpson’s place? They’ve had troops all over the area for the past two weeks and anyone that escaped and anyone that had had any contact with those escapees have suddenly disappeared.”

Mark’s jaw dropped. “You’ve known all the time?”

“Just because we live out in the sticks doesn’t mean that we don’t have a clue about what is going on in our neck of the woods.”

Mark suddenly felt funny. He wouldn’t remember hitting the ground as he passed out. But a strange song was playing in his head when we regained consciousness the next morning. Some about “a country boy can survive”.

Chapter 73 - The Enemy of My Enemy

Every thing was quiet as Rich completed the last rounds of the night before turning in. It had been a long day, another one of many in a long line since the collapse. He quietly made his way through the house making sure everything was in order. He checked each bedroom looking in on the kids and the various members of his newly extended family that now resided with them. Beside security he also made sure all electrical systems were shut down and not wasting valuable battery power. This made him feel like his father who always went around turning off lights behind his six kids. Rich chalked it up to the burden of parenthood.

As he continued his rounds he checked every window to ensure that the heavy metal window shutters were closed and locked. With a small rechargeable LED flashlight he had constructed he illuminated his passage through the dark house, he checked that both front and rear doors were secured and barred. Val, his significant other, initially thought he had gone a little overboard on the construction of the doors. Well maybe he had, but he was pretty sure it would be far easier for someone to bust through the wall than to try and break down either door, and he liked it that way.

Rich paused at each door and looked through the peephole. His hand felt for the switches beside the door. The motion detectors were armed, as were the infrared. He hated the drain on the batteries caused by these necessary precautions, but they had saved their bacon more than once, so allowances had to be made. The constant routine of extreme caution that now permeated their lives sometimes got to Richard. Nothing was simple anymore, nothing was easy, and it had happened all so quickly. First there was terrorist attack out of the blue. Then came the sudden and deadly plague that seemed to be everywhere at once. He had been on deaths doorstep with it himself, but somehow had managed to recover, but his wife and two of his three children hadn’t. Then the whole world began to breakdown. The society that he had known all his life followed as services dropped away one by one and then two by two and so on as the system staggered under its enormous weight. What he didn’t understand was why the government suddenly started cracking down on its own citizens as if somehow they were responsible. It just seemed so insane, so wrong and he didn’t, couldn’t, understand it no matter how hard he tried.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

If it hadn't been for Jeremy, his son, and running into Val and her menagerie he probably would have just quit, laid down in the dirt and let nature take her course. Some how, some way Val had provided the energy and support he needed to pull himself together. They leaned on each other in different ways and their bond had grown. He often thought of her as the unsinkable Molly Brown, or as his unsinkable Valerie Brown. The two women were not related she had assured him, but somehow . . . he didn't believe her. She was certainly a tough ol' bird.

The door was solid as he leaned against it and peered into the night. He had begun the construction of the doors by gluing, nailing and bolting two by four framing studs together. He then ran half inch threaded rod through predrilled holes every foot and a half down the length of the door and secured each end with a large washer and nut torquing them sufficiently into place. After creating a massive wooden door over three inches thick he then sandwiched the two by four wooden core between two metal plates and held the whole mess together with massive lag bolts, their hexagon head peened over like rivets. The outer door skin was cut from road construction plates that he had scavenged. The kind used to cover ditches that vehicles could ride over until the work was completed. It had been a real bear for him to man handle those large plates into the back of his pickup and then home, but when it was done and both doors were finally hung he stepped back and felt the pride of solid workmanship. These were some seriously badass doors!

The genius of the two doors was in how he hung them. The weak areas of most doors besides the flimsy door-frames were in the hinges and the handle lock. He's seen enough cop movies to know that using a door buster battering ram at the lock or special shotgun rounds at the hinges it was relatively easy to bust your way in through the front door. Placing any kind of window in a door was another incredible stupid thing to do in an item that was intended to ensure your security . . . like glass could stop anyone focused on gaining access. He compromised with Val and placed a peep hole in lieu of a window. Instead of the normal two hinge system Rich totally did away with that concept and pivoted the massive doors on truck axles mounted top and bottom about six inches in from where the hinge side of the door was usually located. This allowed the hinge side of the door to actually butt up against the solid four by four door frame that he installed verses the flimsy one by four shell that is usually constructed around a door, and then shimmed into place. An added advantage was as you opened the door it gave you a nice shooting slot for a second person on the inside. Something he hadn't expected on or planned.

The lock and door knob was a major concern for Rich, how do you make it secure and yet easy to use? After all the idea of a door was to be able to get in and out of your home with relative ease. He studied the various door-knobs and door locks that he had disassembled on his workbench. He also considered a hatch like arrangement he had seen on naval vessels. Then there were the multiple locking arrangements used in his gun safe. In the end he came up with a compromise between several different types of security measures. The strangest part of it was that the central idea of the locking mechanism he had seen used to secure filing cabinets. In essence it consisted of making a large heavy duty piano hinge that would run nearly the length of the door. One flap of the hefty piano hinge lock was anchored to the doorframe with large lag screws every six inches. The flap on the other side of the hinge was allowed to swing freely and had two tie rod bars attached to secure the hinge in the closed position locked against the door. The tie rods were linked together and upon being swung across and secured. They formed a solid blocking plate the length of the door.

To be absolutely sure the door was secure he added a feature very common in store glass doors. Using tie rods again he fashioned upper and lower pins that actuated via a quick throw lever from the inside only and moved upper and lower tie rod pins into the floor and upper doorplate. When security was light a simple door lever

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

opened the door with only two dead bolts to concern yourself with. At night, like now, or when anyone suspicious was seen in the area the hinged plate was thrown over the door and both levers and pins locked down. An invader could beat on the door all day and never get it to budge an inch.

Rich had also used the same heavy road plates to create unique shutters for all the windows. He got the idea while watching an old Clint Eastwood movie, one of his favorites, “The Outlaw Josey Wales”, where Wales had arrived at the old women’s son’s homestead and fought off the bounty hunters. Taking that idea of the shutter with shooting loops and the basic design for Venetian blind type window shutter usually put on bathroom windows, he created a heavy duty type that could be open a little to allow air to flow in or locked solidly down to defeat any type of entry. One of the lower plates could be independently raised thus creating a horizontal firing loop. Dropped down it created a solid shield of thick steel plate.

Their house was a fortress and Richard planned to keep it that way until sanity returned to the world, which he feared would be a very long time the way things were going. Still, he and Val had done pretty well for themselves considering the state of the world. Their “homestead” had been constructed from scratch out of the rubble and looted remains of a small town they had stumbled upon after the exodus to the camps. Rich considered their most valuable find to be the junk and scrap yard on the edge of town. The looters didn’t see any value on such items. The hardware store in town had seen some damage but the important things, basic tools; fasteners (nails, bolts, screws, etc.) had been ignored. After all who steals light bulbs and buckets?

Rich had become a super scrounger in the preceding months. Sifting through the remaining detritus left behind by the human locust he had fashioned a remarkable homestead out of the ruins. Unlike many men of the modern era Rich had always been a tinkerer. As a kid he enjoyed taking things apart and THEN trying to put them back together again AND if possible, getting them to work. The remarkable thing was that he usually was successful. Now those skills had become invaluable! His second most valuable skill was his ability to teach himself just about anything from a book. His second concentration for scrounging in this little town was the public library. Any and every book he could find on building, electronics, gardening, farming and on and on. If it could enhance their survival chances Richard snatched it up. Val would moan when he brought home another armload of books. It was her job to catalog and find a place for them and that was becoming more difficult as time went on. But she knew just how valuable this information was and despite moans and groans she went about her tasks with the thoroughness that her man did at providing for their well-being and safety.

She was so thankful that she had literally stumbled on to this eclectic throwback to an older age. Val had never been married, not that she hadn’t tried or wanted to. But the pickings were so slim. She had little respect for the kind of men that society seemed to be turning out these days. Every one of her friends had been married and divorced at least once, and some several times. Her traditional Italian heritage demanded something a bit more substantial than the flakes that had presented themselves to her. She knew that she was not a raving beauty queen . . . OK, her looks were . . . well, she wasn’t ugly. But anyone that knew Val and really got to know her found that she was so much more than the plain vessel that her spirit resided in. Full of energy, good nature and fun it was impossible not to really love the person she was. But the “Shallow Hal’s” of the world never got past the first impressions and waltzed off to find their “10”. Which is difficult to do when you consider that most of them were something well less than a perfect “10” themselves. But they still tried.

So Val weathered her twenties, thirties, and now plunged through her forties as the greatest aunt that her many nieces and nephews would ever know. Val loved kids, lots of kids. Having grown up with nearly a baker’s dozen

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

of siblings the whirlwind of handfuls of kids that usually surrounded her only served to stoke the parental fires that drove her. The collapse nearly destroyed her world as she watched so many of her family fall by the wayside due to disease and violence. A God Parent to over twenty children, when she ran into Richard she had eight of her little and not so little nieces and nephews in tow not to mention another five or six strays that she had collected along the way. Adding Richard and his son Jeremy to her traveling menagerie was the natural thing to do.

Skirting the roving vandals, gangs, and government troops they arrived deep behind “enemy” lines. The area had been swept clean by Homeland Security troops and the locals sent off to relocation camps to take better care of the surviving citizens in centralized locations. At least that was the “shpeel” the posted bulletins spouted in the town as well as the few radio stations that still operated at night put out. Another acquisition to their menagerie was an elderly retired couple that had been “Snow Birds”. Traveling in their motor home they spent the seasons in different parts of the country depending on their whims and climate. Caught out on the open road when everything fell apart they had been hiding off a back road when Rich and Valerie stumbled upon them. Broken down, out of fuel and nearly out of food they were more than happy to join the growing clan.

Grandma “G” and Poppa Ed brought a bounty of knowledge. The octogenarians had grown up in the Great Depression on subsistence farms and were a virtual gold mine of survival information from that period. Poppa Ed had fought in World War Two. He had survived Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain, North Africa, “D-Day” and the air war over Germany. Fighting first with the Canadians early in the war as a good number of American pilots had and then crossing back over to the American Army Air Corps once the States joined the battle. He had flown Hurricanes then Spitfires before crossing over to eventually pilot P-51 Mustangs protecting the Flying Fortresses. Shot down twice he made it back via the French underground to England once and Allied lines in France after D-Day. To say he was a tough ol’ bird was a major understatement. He had continued to fly until age and time finally caught up with him. He was a fiery stick of an old man and she a plump and always smiling matronly grandmother. Together they were quite a team.

The latest addition to their growing clan was a young couple, actually kids. Rebecca and Theodore, or Becky and Ted as they preferred were both in their late teens. Boyfriend and girlfriend from a town over a hundred miles north of here, they had escaped one of the relocation camps and out run their pursuers to be found by Richard as they wandered into the ghost town below them. Both were in pretty poor shape, starving, sick from drinking contaminated water, and ragged. Val and Grandma G had nursed them back to health and had proved to be a wonderful addition to the clan.

His rounds completed and the homestead secure Richard sat at his desk under soft flow of an oil lamp as he organized and made notes for the next days work. Val was snoring softly behind him. Canning season was coming up quickly. The fresh produce that was now coming in was a great boon to their diet. All the kids were doing well. The twins finally had their front teeth starting to show through. At first all the children had overwhelmed him but somehow Val always kept them in order and they had really been a great helping hand. Each one had a specific job and responsibility . . . chores . . . that were their total responsibility. There was no such thing at computer games or TV to baby-sit the tykes, and there was too much real work that needed to be accomplished. While Rich and Ted did the heavy work of initial preparation of the soil for the huge gardens that Val had insisted upon, each of her little monsters had their own section of the garden or animals to tend. There were also the two fish ponds made from old above ground swimming pools that Richard and Ted had scrounged and set up, the rabbits that supplied meat for the table and manure for the worms that fed the fish, the goats that needed to be milked, the growing herd of sheep, chickens, ducks and geese that made up the production part of the

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

homestead. Most of the livestock had been feral stock that they had to recapture and tame. But as with the kids, Val had a way with animals. She had even picked up tamed a few stray pets that had gone wild, a one-eyed cat “The Mouser” and the German Shepherd’s had a litter due any time now and would be a great boon to security once trained.

All in all they had done pretty good for themselves considering the conditions that they were being forced to live under. As long as they were left alone and they didn’t have any major emergencies they would do all right. He wondered as he closed the journal if this is how it was when Rome fell.

Was it all of a sudden or gradually in incremental steps? He undressed and washed his face and hands before climbing into bed. He thought of something at the last minute and scribbled a note on the pad by the bed.

He scribbled a quick list.

- See if Betty has extra canning lids?
- Would she stud Patton her Rottweiler to Cleo?
- Trade ironwork for fruit tree seedlings

A litter of German Shepherds and Rottweiler’s would be a valuable asset to be sure. Betty had been a good neighbor two ridges over. He wished they were closer, but this still worked. She lived with a Hispanic family that protected her and her homestead with a vengeance. It was good to have good neighbors in these dark times.

Mark Bennet, senior field environmental reporter for National Public Radio awoke to the smell of homemade sausages, hotcakes and eggs that drifted into his back room just off the kitchen. He was lying on his stomach and when he tried to roll over to get up he was suddenly hit with an electric shock of pain from several parts of his body all at one time. He gasped at the sharpness of it. Then the memory of the previous night came flashing back to him. HE HAD BEEN SHOT! He suddenly recalled the firefight that he literally walked into as he attempted to defuse the confrontation that was taking place in the driveway. The next thing he knew the Homeland Security officer was calling him a traitor and had started towards him in an attempt to arrest him for treason. Then the night exploded. Mark remembered back peddling into the side of barn as something slugged him in the shoulder and the thigh and then falling into the darkness of the barn when he suddenly felt like someone had cracked a hot whip across his arse. So now he was back in bed once again.

“Good . . . you’re finally awake.” Jason said matter of factly.

Mark careened his neck to look back over his left shoulder at the farm boy and grandson to his caretakers. Jason was standing in the door in a tee shirt and coveralls just shaking his head at Mark.

“How bad did I get hit?” Mark asked with a worried and concerned voice.

“Mostly just pride as Grandpa would say. Your leg was a clean through and through nothing serious there. You’re going to be sitting mostly on your right cheek for a while with that shot through your ass. Grandma says that your shoulder is the worse for wear. The bullet chipped some bone going through so that arm might be a bit stiff once it heals up. But she got you cleaned and sewed all up and gave you a big shot of the hogs penicillin.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Jason stepped into the room to help Mark out of bed and up on to his feet. “Actually you’re pretty lucky considering the stupid move you made getting into the middle of that pissing contest.”

“Aaaaaggh!” Mark let out as Jason lifted him up. “Damn that HURTS Jason!”

“Well it ought to!” He replied as he held him up. “Stupid should hurt!”

Mark tested his legs and wobbled a little bit as he tried to find his balance through all the screaming that various parts of his body were inundating him with.

He scowled at Jason for his last comment. “I wasn’t being stupid! I was trying to defuse the situation before it got out of hand.”

“Oh . . . you did a good job at that didn’t you? Damn near got yourself killed. Oh and not to mention the rest of us, thank you very much.”

“You opened fire on those soldiers first!”

“Like I had a choice after your dumb ass move.” Jason gave Mark’s arm a squeeze.

“Aaaawg! Well how the hell was I supposed to know that they were going to arrest me on some bogus charge!”

“And you call yourself a reporter. What the hell do you report on . . . fairy tales?”

“I report on environmental issues not the military.” Mark angrily shot back!

“Those people were not military!”

“WHAT? . . . Then what the hell are they?”

“That’s a good question Mark, a very good question. We can discuss this after breakfast. Grandma’s got food on the table and it’s getting cold while you bellyache.”

“I’m not bellyaching.” Mark scowled at Jason. “I’m complaining.”

Jason gave him a look that told him that it might be best to keep his comments to himself and get to breakfast. The pair staggered across the back utility room and into the kitchen without another word passing between them.

Granny slyly looked up from the table. “Glad to see you boys getting along again.”

The pair looked at each other with a bit of confusion and Jason helped Mark into the chair with the pillow on it. It was not the most comfortable position that Mark could be in. But then it was better than being dead.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Mark lowered his head as the rest of the family said grace. He was indeed thankful that he had now survived two life-threatening ordeals in as many weeks. His head was swimming with disconnected thoughts as he tried to make sense of the insanity that he now found himself in. 'Just what the hell was going on!' in his previously orderly world he didn't have a clue. He did have a lot of questions, which he would try to pry from Jason as soon as breakfast was over. He was tired of being in the dark.

The battle had lasted for over an hour, yet there was not supposed to be any resistance this far south. But here it was and incredibly stiff at that. Col. Ernesto Fuentes was surprised by the tenacity of these Gringos. He had been lead to believe that the entire state had been pacified and disarmed. Well here was another damn intelligence SNAFU. But what really surprised him was the stiff resistance from the Hispanic quarters. His own people were resisting? He had assumed that they would be welcomed with open arms from the Mexican American community. While some of the more idealistic expatriates did welcome them but then things turned bad. The barrios suddenly exploded into a death trap.

Now he and his staff were crammed into an alleyway while the battle raged all around them. His airborne brigade of shock troops was slowly being whittled down. The attack against the lone sniper just days ago had cost him nearly a company of crack troops. They had never expected such defiance to obviously superior odds. The gringo had not only nailed any troopers that so much as stuck up their head, he detonated an entire apartment complex upon the remaining company as he died. If his soldiers ran into much more resistance like this he would be forced to return home in disgrace and shame. Such a thing he would not allow to happen.

Raphael cleared the block wall and hit the ground running. The Mexican troopers were hot on his heels. He and members of his street gang had just pulled off a classic road ambush and taken out several vehicles of elite Mexican troops with Molotov cocktails and pipe bombs. Felix was just steps ahead of him when the rounds started to rip past his ears. The supersonic shock wave cracked all around him. Several sickening "Thawks" were heard and Felix let out a gasp and was driven into the ground where he landing like a dead sack of potatoes. Raphael dove across the hood of the parked car and rolled off and into the blacktop beyond. He was rewarded with a badly banged shoulder and a nasty road rash on his elbow. Seconds later rounds slammed into the opposite side of the car as he hid behind the left front tire and fortunately for him the engine block. Glass exploded as rounds slammed into the windshield.

Jack lifted his M1A's front sight up and aimed just below the top edge of the concrete wall that the Mexican troopers were hiding behind as they poured fire at the fleeing teenagers.

"I've got the three on the right." He said under his breath.

Beside him his partner nodded. "Two on the left . . . on your mark."

Jack took in two quick deep breaths and held the last one. His vision suddenly became just a touch more focused and sharp as he squeezed off the first volley of rounds. The 7.62 millimeter rounds exploded out of the classic Springfield Armory M1A and closed the distance between the shooters and the intended targets less than fifty yards away in milliseconds. The full metal jacketed thirty caliber rounds blasting through the cinderblock

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

walls modestly deformed upon impact nearly doubled in size as they spun through both sides of the hollow blocks and impacted with the soft flesh of the invaders on the far side.

Raphael couldn't believe how his luck had gone from bad to worse as he suddenly found himself now stuck smack dab in the middle of a raging crossfire. It was several seconds before he realized that the new assault was being directed not at him but at his pursuers. He hazarded a quick glance over the top of the car he was hiding behind and was shocked by the damage being wrought THROUGH the block wall by his unseen protectors. He stared in disbelief as he witnessed the wall disintegrate under the steady stream of fire coming from between the two houses across the street of the cul-de-sac.

He looked down at Felix laying on the lawn just feet from his protection. He didn't know if he was dead or alive but he wasn't going to leave his best friend out in the open. Gathering up his nerve he raised his AK and let off two short bursts in the direction of the wall and ran to his friend in a low crouch. Grabbing Felix's arms he unceremoniously dragged him back to his cover behind the car as his rifle banged against his back and side in its sling.

Jack emptied his third magazine when he saw the kid race out to pull his friend to cover.

"Brad cover the kid!" He ordered.

"Got it!"

Brad double tapped his FN until his breach locked open. With practiced ease he dropped the empty mag and locked in a fresh one. Just as he was lining up his next shot Jack signaled with his left hand for him to hold. The pair waited and watched, but nothing moved behind the far wall.

"Your turn buddy." Jack whispered.

"Yeah I know, I know." Brad picked up the empty mags at his feet and slipped them into their pouch. "Piece of cake."

Brad swung around the house to his left, ran across the backside and around the far corner. He crossed the street quickly as Jack provided overwatch and covering fire. Brad arrived safely and now commanded the right corner of the house on the left across the street from Jack. Brad could clearly see the damage to the far side of car the two teenagers were hiding behind. It was a mess. Brad gave Jack the signal and watched him pull back and complete the same maneuver in the opposite manner as Brad poured on the covering fire into the now silent wall. He now targeted his shots against the bottom of the wall where he suspected any survivors would be hiding.

Jack veered in his dash across the road and joined the two teens behind the car. He could tell without trying that the one that had been dragged into cover was gone but he checked for a pulse anyway. Raphael looked at the stranger as he checked Felix's neck for a pulse. Felix was dead. Raphael knew it, but he just couldn't believe it. Felix was his best friend . . . his best buddy. Now he was gone. Raphael felt numb and angry all at the same time.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

The stranger looked at him and spoke rapidly. “Your friend is dead and we’ve got to get the hell out of here!” As he grabbed Felix’s weapon and ammo.

Raphael just stared at him blankly.

Jack grabbed the young Hispanic teenagers arm and pulled him up. The kid responded in a daze, but he responded, as Jack lead him back across the street to safety. Brad let up on the fire and listened. Not a sound was coming from behind the wall. But just to be sure he reached into his musette bag and pulled out a pipe bomb and lit the fuse. Waiting almost too long he lofted it high and over the corner of the house and onto the other side of the block wall. The concussion blew out a chunk of wall and ended any fight that had remained on the far side of the wall. Brad quickly stepped through the smoke and evaluated the devastation wrought with the homemade explosive.

“Man those BB’s do a job!” He muttered to himself as he inspected the damage and gathered up any usable arms and ammunition.

Jack now back across the street and covering his partner watch his best friend staggering across the street under the load of weapons and web gear.

“We’ve got to get the hell out of here and you’re collecting souvenirs!” Jack growled.

“He who dies with the most toys . . . WINS my friend!” Brad responded. “Besides better in our hands than theirs.”

He slung down the weapons and began to hand half of the load to his partner.

“Oh, now you expect me to carry half of your booty?”

“No . . . you can keep your hands off my ass thank you very much! Here carry these and I’ve got the rest. What about him?” Brad nodded to Raphael.

“Hey kid, you going with us or do you want to stick around and deal with the Federalies when they find this mess? Hmmm!”

Raphael looked blankly at the anglo. “Sure whatever.” He turned and looked back at his friend. “Can we at least bury Felix?”

Jack stood up hefting his load. “Kid that wouldn’t be very wise just now. Maybe later when things quiet down a bit, but I don’t recommend sticking around here for very long unless you want to end up like your friend back there . . . I’m sorry.”

Brad put his hand on the young mans shoulder. “Son, if we can, we’ll come back and bury him proper. But right now we’ve got to get the hell out of here. You can stay or go as you choose it’s a free country . . . more or less, but you’ll live a lot longer if your get with us, savy?”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

The trio got up and began a slow jog away from the immediate carnage. Raphael looked back once and promised Felix he'd be back to bury him proper. For now he had joined a new gang. He thought to something he had heard in a movie once. "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." These two had killed the soldiers that had killed his family and best friend. For now that was good enough for him.

Chapter 74 - A Different Perspective

Yesterday we obeyed kings and bent our necks before emperors. But today we kneel only to truth, follow only beauty, and obey only love. - Kahlil Gibran

Only kings, presidents, editors, and people with tapeworms have the right to use the editorial "we". - Mark Twain

When all government . . . in little as in great things . . . shall be drawn to Washington as the center of all power; it will render powerless the checks provided of one government on another, and will become as venal and oppressive as the government from which we separated. - Thomas Jefferson, 1821

Mark Bennett had been on the road with Jason Harcourt for eight days, or more accurately on the back roads, alleyways and trails. Jason was determined to persuade Mark the error of his "ignorant city-fied ways" and to that end had challenged the senior public radio field reporter into joining him on a little adventure to discover the "real America" as soon as Mark was well enough to travel the "Low Road".

The preparation for the journey was intense and to Mark rather unnecessary, silly and at times a little scary. Jason had insisted that Mark learn basic marksmanship and firearm safety before they hit the road. The two argued long into the night the ethics of firearm possession in civilian hands. It was like two granite walls talking to each other. Neither would budge, but Mark had already agreed to do what ever Jason felt was necessary to get the "scoop of his career", as he had called it. Their hottest discussions were over the foundational documents and their meanings as set forth by the founding fathers. Mark had been a political science major at the university before switching over to journalism and environmental technology. He believed the Constitution and the Bill of Rights were "Living Documents" and should change as society changed, it would adapt or be adapted as necessary to meet the needs of the society over time. Jason, on the other hand, saw the Constitution and the Bill of Rights as "Foundational Documents" that established firm guidelines from which to operate within very expressly defined borders. "Rights were rights" and did not change over time or due to public whim. Mark had to admit that Jason, with only a common high school diploma was at least his equal at logic and debate and definitely knew his issues. Both men were powerful and independent thinkers. He sometimes felt like he was in the middle of a second Scopes "Monkey Trial" the issues were so volatile, though rather than Creationism vs. Darwinism the issues were in the sovereignty of the individual and states vs. the authority of the central government.

While Mark could see no problem with a one world government and a borderless classless society across the planet and that certain rights had to be forfeited for some to provide security for all. Jason was adamant that such an illusionary status would destroy and oppress the rights and privileges of all people. Time and time again Mankind had demonstrated its inability to conduct itself responsibly for the betterment of all. Power was an in-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

toxicating addictive drug that should not and could not be trusted even with checks and balances such that the Constitution had in place.

Too more stout loggerheads Grandma Harcourt had never seen. Both men put forth strong arguments and could stand behind their stalwart convictions with full hearts that they were in fact treading staunchly upon the road to truth. By the time it came for them to depart and set out upon their journey Grandma was a little apprehensive that she would see either of them again. The issues they wrestled with were vast and seemingly insurmountable. Both were right to some degree and yet neither could fully appreciate the others platform. It would be an interesting journey ahead of them to be sure. Very interesting.

Eight days into their odyssey Mark was amazed at all the effort made by the multitude of purveyors of this modern Underground Railroad to stay off anything that remotely resembled a major travel thoroughfare. He could easily visualize himself a runaway slave from the mid-eighteen hundreds fleeing through the underground and hiding from an oppressive master as he escaped towards a fabled land of freedom somewhere just beyond the horizon. He had for the first time in his life come to realize that there was another America, a different America, and a vast and thriving culture that lurked just out of sight, below the visible surface of his mundane world. These may be “common people”, but they were a strong and defiantly independent people. Despite or perhaps because of the violent changes that had been wrought over the past couple of years these people had risen up and assumed the vast responsibilities of self-government with a defiant vengeance.

He found it strange that they would choose such a harsh subterranean existence rather than accept the charity of their own government. Mark soon learned that what he viewed as a helping hand from a benevolent government, they saw it as an oppressive handout with freedom robbing hooks attached and refused to accept such degradation to their honor and self-esteem. Truly he had entered another world far and away different from what was seen on the nightly six o'clock news.

What struck him was how little of this world was really known or at least projected through the mainstream media. It was as if two worlds existed side by side but only one knew of the other, and the realities of this world were much more stark and in your face. In a small hamlet that resided outside the Federals control since the plague had swept through and decimated the population the first sight they viewed as they came into town was the rotting corpses on the public gallows at the edge of town. Above the victims dangling forms were signs nailed to the post announcing their crimes. The first was labeled a rapist; the second a thief and the last two were identified as traitors. Whatever thoughts a visitor might have it would not be of breaking what ever the laws were of this little village. Yet for all the violence displayed on the gallows Mark found the hamlet serenely peaceful and reassuringly calm.

He was a little disturbed at first by the causal open carrying of weapons by many of the villagers, even women. He noted a group of seven or eight young boys 12-15 years of age that appeared to be headed out town for perhaps a day of hunting on the fields and woods that surrounded the village. At least they didn't have the appearance of a street gang to Mark. Yet each openly brandished a variety of small caliber rifles and shotguns. Jason was quick to point out that all the weapons actions were open and barrels pointed safely away from anyone. There was absolutely no horseplay with the weapons.

Despite the peaceful nature of what he saw Mark was not impressed. Peace at the point of the gun was not peace he quoted to Jason. Two days later he would regret having uttered those words.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Jonathan walked into the Oval Office and stood quietly in the center of the room taking in the aura of power that seemed to emanate from it. Secretary of the Commerce Jonathan Norman Thompson would soon assume the position of acting President of the United States.

‘With very little emphasis on the ACTING part.’ Jonathan smirked to himself.

The Coup-D’etat was nearly complete. It had been messy but such things sometimes are necessary in the face of progress. Jonathan as Secretary of Commerce was in the tenth position in the sequence of Presidential succession. He did regret the need to eliminate so many members of the political upper management. There were some very talented individuals there that would have been extremely useful in the coming months and years. However he had been a corporate headhunter in the cutthroat world of big business for far too long to lose any sleep over . . . spilt milk. It was simply the cost of doing business. He walked behind the Presidential desk and looked out the window to a partially illuminated city.

“Now we would bring some order to this mess.” He mused.

On the opposite side of the country stood a far different man in a strikingly similar situation, only the citizens of the surrounding region had rightfully elected him to the office that he now held. David McMillin stood on the porch of his battered homestead and watched the evening sun disappear beneath the western ridge of the valley. He still couldn’t believe the whirlwind events of the past month. The count was final, the people had spoken and here he was now the elected governor of a state that technically didn’t exist in a country that was falling apart at the seams. He had no budget, no infrastructure, and no lieutenants, none of the bureaucracy that is necessary to run a government . . . or did he? After all what was really necessary?

“Well Governor McMillin, how does it feel to be dragged kicking and screaming into the seat of power?” Sheriff Erick Eckert boomed as he walked out onto the porch.

“Erick, knock that shit off!” David responded.

“Governor, such language from an elected official?” The big Sheriff placed his hand over his mouth in a shocked manner.

David ignored his mocking attempt at humor.

“Erick, I might as well be the Governor of nothing.”

“David you are the duly elected Governor of the Great State of Jefferson. This election was not a joke or a ruse. The people of this region are tired of being ignored and . . . ”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Erick you can’t just carve up two states to make a third! I’m the Governor of a state of nothing.” David spun around angrily. “The entire country is totally fucked up right now and this little election isn’t going to resolve anything! We’ve got nothing other than a figure head and I’m not very happy about being that, not one little bit!”

Erick put up his hands in a sign of defense. “David you are the duly elected Governor of this state. Like it or not the people choose you!”

“Well I quit!”

“You can’t!”

“Like hell I can’t!”

“David . . . David . . . David.” Erick put one of his big paws on David’s shoulder. In a lowered and calm voice he began.

“Like it or not you were picked. The people choose you, not anyone else to lead them out of this mess.”

“But Erick . . . I can’t..”

“Can’t get anything done without help . . . Right?” The big sheriff looked sternly at him. “You are not expected to. Leadership is not about being able to personally fix everything. It’s about guiding the rest of us in fixing everything. You’ve got a good solid head on your shoulders; people listen to you because you make sense. You listen, you think, you reflect and most of all you care. That’s why ninety percent of all the people in the nineteen counties picked you.”

“Ninety percent?” David said with a stunned voice.

“Yeah, can you believe that!?”

“What about the other ten percent?”

“A smattering of small candidates nobody every heard of and some that wanted to remain with the current system.”

“How could that many people even know just who the hell I am? Hell I don’t even know who I am or if I can even do this job!”

“You’ll do just fine. OK Governor what are your first instructions?”

David stepped away and looked out over his homestead. There was so much to do, too much to do. Where was he to start?

“Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs” David muttered.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Eckert looked at David with confusion written on his face. “Who’s what?”

“Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. It’s a theory on the primary needs that have to meet in order to be humans to thrive. The first order of business is to see to the Physiological needs of the state, essentials such as Air, Water, Food, and Shelter. The next is to ensure the Safety of the state. That’s where you come in . . . General Eckhert.”

“What! General . . . now wait a minute - I’m no General!”

“Well I’m no Governor, so that makes us even . . . General.”

“Shit!”

The knock on the door startled Eli. The elderly statesman from Georgia had been alone in his small hunting lodge since his arrival weeks ago. He had survived the ambush at his Senatorial estate. Made the trek from his burned out estate through the Georgia woods across the county to his hideaway over the course of nearly a week. He had seen no one since that time.

He instinctively grabbed his M-1 and prepared to defend himself. He could hear voices on the other side of the solid oak door. He eased forward carefully testing every footfall so as not to announce his presence to who ever was outside. After listening for a few seconds he was pretty sure it was not government assassins on the other side of the front door. They would have blown the door by now and sprayed the room with submachine gun fire. No, they weren’t government forces, but just who they were he wasn’t certain so he continued to listen.

“Are you sure ol’man Jacobson got it right?”

“He said he was sure the Senator was back at his old lodge. Said he came into the store last week and picked up some supplies and headed back up here. Says he’s got a beard now and dresses like the rest of us folks around here. He was sure it was him.”

“I don’t know Frank, this might not be such a good idea. If’n the commander finds out we came here without his OK, we could be in serious shit!”

“Gentleman.” Eli said as he suddenly swung open the front door.

The two “Real Tree” camouflaged Georgia militiamen standing on the front porch were caught off guard and jumped back a step.

“SHIT!” They both exclaimed and then quickly removed their camouflaged ball caps almost apologetically as they recovered.

“Ah, Sir . . . Senator. We’re . . . ah . . . awfully sorry to disturb you . . . Sir.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Would you boys like to come in for a cup of coffee? I just made a pot and it will help to shake the morning chill off of you.” The Senator asked the pair in a most [casual manner?].

The old man turned and retreated back into the cabin. The pair wiped their feet on the doormat and then stepped inside.

Twenty minutes later the three good ol’ boys were sitting around the table on their second cup of Joe.

“So’s you see Senator things are pretty messed up. We’re holding our own and keeping the foreigners out but things are getting . . . well, we’re getting mighty thin on most stuff.”

The old politician leaned back in his chair and took a deep sip of the rich brown liquid before he leaned forward and put down his cup.

“Boys.” He began as he got up to pace the kitchen. He did his best thinking while walking. “Things are pretty bad everywhere. You know, I’m sure what happened at my big house on the other side of the county is happening all over.”

The two militiamen nodded in acknowledgement.

“Those bastards burned down my home, killed most, if not all, of my guests and staff, and tried pretty hard to plant me in the ground. I’m an old man now, too old to be living and fighting out in the woods like you youngsters but not too old to be of some use.”

He turned away from the pair and looked up and closed his eyes as if praying. “I believe I know who and what is behind all this traitorous affair.” He paused. “Gentleman . . .” He turned back and picked up his M-1. “I think it high time for me to meet your Militia Commander and take this war to the Real Enemy.”

The old Korean War Vet walked across the small living room and retrieved his loaded web gear and slowly pulled it on. Then with his rifle at the ready, forty-fives holstered he stepped out the door into the morning mists quickly followed by the two militiamen. He was going to war once again.

The Governors of both Oregon and California stared at the official looking letterhead that had just been delivered to their desks.

“Greetings. Be it known to all who shall see these presents that as of the forth day of the eighth month in the year of our Lord, we the people of the Free State of Jefferson do declare and make our will be known that from this date forward we are resolving [dissolving?] any and all affiliations and relationships with the respective states of Oregon and California. It is by our own self-determination and inalienable right to create a representative government, which will satisfy the unique desires and the needs of people to which IT serves. Your respective state establishments have failed to do so for countless decades and we now and forever declare ourselves independent and free from your authority.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

We hereby establish the Constitution and Bill of Rights of the United States of America to be the supreme and sovereign law of the Great State of Jefferson. We revoke any and all previous laws, levies, debts, and relationships between the free citizens of Jefferson and your respective states. All properties, lands, equipment, and chattels physically residing within the boundaries so established and previously held within your respective state establishments are now forfeit to the Free State of Jefferson and its duly appointed representatives. All debts, liens, and mortgages between the citizens of Jefferson and your respective states are hereby and forever absolved.

Gentleman, do not test our resolve to defend our sovereignty by any and all means necessary. You have by your actions past and present indicated your total lack of concern for the citizens of this region. Therefore we have found it necessary to secure the blessings of liberty and welfare for ourselves by our own hand and divorce any and all relationships that might have existed between our two peoples.

Sirs, with respect

David McMillan

Governor, State of Jefferson
Commander in Chief, Jefferson State Militia.

Their single unified response in both state capitals was . . . “SHIT!”

Chapter 74 - The Learning Curve

Socialism in general has a record of failure so blatant that only an intellectual could ignore or evade it.
- **Thomas Sowell**

If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be. - **Thomas Jefferson**

To live, man must hold three things as the supreme and ruling values of his life: Reason - Purpose - Self-esteem. Reason, as his only tool of knowledge - Purpose, as his choice of the happiness which that tool must proceed to achieve - Self-esteem, as his inviolate certainty that his mind is competent to think and his person is worthy of happiness, which means: is worthy of living. - **Ayn Rand**, "Atlas Shrugged"

Mark Bennett stood in the command tent surrounded by grim looking militiamen. He wondered just what the hell Jason had gotten him into. In his quest to see the “Real America” Mark felt as if he had suddenly been dropped into the old Bosnian like conflict. Here he was in the heartland of the South and it appeared that he was in the middle of a second civil war . . . or . . . maybe the continuation of the first, he didn’t know for sure at this point.

Jason was at the moment in a heated conversation with the field commander over their presence here among these “domestic terrorists”, at least that was the way they looked to the ultra liberal NPR reporter. Mark was not

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

comfortable standing among so many camouflaged and heavily armed men and women. Yes, there were women here as well in the commando camp deep in the Georgia woods. He as a bit confused by their presence at what appeared to be a full on military campaign, but Jason had assured Mark that they were more than capable in exercising their Constitutional rights, which included the second amendment to the hilt and that he should tread carefully when interviewing them. Many had suffered under the oppressive yoke of government troops and had a very bad taste in their mouths with anything that smacked of sentiment towards the present imperial regime.

Suddenly a militiaman burst into the tent and ran over the commander and Jason. What ever the message was it resulted in instant action. Jason motioned for Mark to follow him as they exited the tent.

“ALPHA TEAM UP!” The Georgia Militia Commander Frank Redway yelled.

A group of a dozen or so men quickly assembled in from of the commander.

“We’ve spotted government infiltrators in sector twenty-seven. It’s a hunter-killer team by the looks of it. Sergeant Creek?”

“Here Sir!”

“Take your team, find and eliminate the threat! Leave no trace behind.”

“Understood Commander!” The militia sergeant barked as he turned abruptly to his team. “Flankers out, hasty assault - combat packs only . . . NOW!”

The militiamen moved as one and disappeared to grab the necessary gear before they too became hunter killers in pursuit of their prey.

Jason grabbed Mark by the arm. “Drop your extra shit and get ready to move!”

“What?”

“If you want to see what this is all about get your ass in gear!”

An hour later and out of breath Mark leaned against a tree stunned at what he had just witnessed. The militiamen had arrived almost too late to the scene of the ambush. As they crossed the ridge top the first firefight was underway. It was brief and vicious. Cautiously the group made their way through the forest to just inside the tree line. Mark could hear the insults being screamed at the lone militiaman standing in the clearing. The dark cammied Homeland Security Trooper was ranting and raving and then began to beat and kick the man. At the height of his rage the trooper shot at something several feet away from the lone man and then went to shoot the militiaman when suddenly the trooper was jerked to the ground and the forest was once again filled with the loud reports of rapid gunfire.

Mark didn’t know much about guns, but he did recognize a good shot. It seemed that with nearly every shot a dark trooper folded up or was slammed into the ground. They desperately tried to return fire but the shooter was up on the ridge and their fire was ineffective. He rained Holy Hell down upon them and soon several reckless

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

troopers broke and ran . . . right at Marks group hidden in the tree line. The lead trooper was T-boned from behind as he ran and was slammed face first into the long meadow turf by the shooter on the ridge. Three steps later the remaining troopers just yards away from perceived safety were cut down in mid stride by the hidden militiamen. The firefight was over.

Mark could not believe the intensity of the brief struggle. The small valley was littered with bodies bleeding out their contents into the earth. Then slowly a howl began from one side of the battle line and grew in force. An evil deep guttural wail that seemed to spew hellfire from the vocal cords of militiamen that surrounded him. The hair on the back of his neck stood up then on his arms. It sent a chill down his spine . . . and then it became louder, blasting forth from each of them and then just as quickly it ended. They seemed to wait an eternity before the first militiaman stepped out of cover and began to walk slowly out to his injured comrade now on his hands and knees in the center of the glade. There was no movement from the ridgeline.

Jonathan walked behind the Presidential desk in the Oval Office and looked out the window to a partially illuminated city.

“Now we will bring some order to this mess.” He mused.

It had taken many years of very careful planning and deception to reach this point. He marveled at how through insidious manipulation of citizens, politicians, markets and businesses it had been so easy to maneuver the population into demanding more and more government intervention at each step of the way, until like a drug they had become addicted to their own slavery. The counsel had successfully employed the Achilles heel of American capitalism . . . Greed, to cascade minor events into the present situation. It had been simple really. He first stumbled onto the methodology during his college years. In fact his MBA thesis had virtually outlined the process. That was when the council first became aware of Jonathan’s many talents and subtly began the grooming process that would eventually place him here on the throne of American power.

Prior to World War Two the American public had been a frugal lot. Oh the rich had always been decadent, as they always are, but the run of the mill citizen had been independently minded and extremely frugal. The long depression had made Americans extremely cautious and tight fisted. This all changed after the years of rationing during the war. With the literal explosion of consumer goods that hit the market following the war the surviving soldiers and their new families quickly became addicted to the glut of goods that flowed from the factories. As factories converted from their wartime production of guns, tanks and planes over to automobiles, refrigerators, and televisions the starving masses demanded more and more. At each step of the way greed pushed the limits and broke the rules of common decency.

Of course the demand for consumer goods brought abuses, greed has a way of doing that, and to stem the tide against this mounting gluttony the good citizens of this nation demanded that the central government to exercise its control through ever expanding regulations. At first these new rules made sense and brought reliability to products produced for the consumer market. After all the government was looking out for us, big brother was good. Thus began the slow and insidious invasion of ever expanding bureaucrats and reams of new laws and regulations into the American way of life.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

The brilliance of the “Method” was to let loose the “Dogs of Greed” upon the public. Through subtle manipulation of key individuals in the ever-expanding corporate hierarchy by first feeding and nurturing their greed, then removing the restraints of government regulations. They created a feeding frenzy of ravenous voracity. It was too tempting, too easy and in the end oh so successful.

At each step the piranha of corporate greed would expand devouring everything in sight until the consumers screamed for government intervention. Politicians of course were all too happy to step in as knights in shining armor to save the poor weary victimized constituents and remove another layer of responsibility from the public domain. Slowly, carefully this formula was repeated again and again, until the first outcry heard in any news worthy event was “Why doesn’t the government do something about this?”

Soon an individual’s own stupidity would bring down a plethora of new laws and regulations. John-Q-Public was no longer allowed to be responsible for their own actions. If you spilled a cup of hot coffee in your own lap because you were stupid enough to put it between your legs and then attempt to drive a car . . . well it wasn’t your fault, it was the people that sold you the coffee.

Bit by tiny bit the government took over the thinking responsibility of the American public. An ever expanding wave of social engineering and centralized responsibility permeated the schools, communication, and business and so on until there was virtually no facet of American life not touched by some form of government control. It wasn’t very long before the people began to demand that they be controlled and looked after. They had been led to believe that it was their right to be protected from all manner of ills and all they had to give up was their free will. It had been so easy.

In the final steps everything deregulated came back under even harsher controls. The break up of Ma Bell, resulted in utter chaos for years until the public demanded government intervention. Now the government controlled all forms of communication. A few manipulated gas crunches and new regulations were brought forth and more government control instigated. A few massive power black outs here and there every so many years and soon the government controlled all power. The terrorist threat was a real gem fed by the council and then plucked when perfectly ripe. Through years of the most inane U.S. foreign policy one could imagine the war was finally brought to American shores. Despite the grief and destruction that it now wrecked upon the nation the centralization of power within the country was now complete. The final peg had just been nailed home and the Imperial Presidency was now a fact.

Jonathan sat down in the well-worn leather chair and marveled at the long road that brought him to the position he now held. He was the first American Caesar and he considered the historical significance of his position as well as what had happened to the original Caesar of Rome. He would do everything possible to ensure that a similar fate would not happen to himself. To that end he picked up the presidential pen and began writing his first executive orders.

“Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. It’s a theory on the primary needs that have to meet in order for humans to thrive. The first order of business is to see to the Physiological needs of the state, essentials such as Air, Water, Food, and Shelter. The next is to ensure the Safety of the state. That’s where you come in . . . General Eckert.” David gave his sheriff and newly promoted general an evil grin.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“What! General . . . now wait a minute - I’m no General!”

“Well I’m no Governor, so that makes us even . . . General.”

“Shit!”

“Shit is right Erik and we’re deep in it!” David began. “Right now we’re in a state of war, or will be soon. We’ve got people out there starving, cold, and without shelter. Have you thought of that? Who is friend and who is foe? How many people are actually with us and how many are Tory?”

“Tory?”

“U.S. History Erik! 1776. Revolutionary War. George Washington, ring a bell? God man didn’t you learn anything in your high school history class?”

“Well of course I did, but Tory?”

“The point I’m trying to make is that everybody is going to assume that we can pull this off without any delays or problems. All those voters that cast their ballots with us now expect us to produce the goods . . . INSTANTLY!”

Erik looked at his friend and now Governor in stunned silence. The point had hit home.

David was calming down and caught his breath. “We don’t know what were working with here. What exactly are our assets? How many people are we talking about, what are their needs? We don’t have any command and control structures. No communications.”

“We’ve got comms.” Erik reminded him.

“But nothing secure. Right now we’re on our own, but soon . . .” His voice trailed off as he stepped down off the porch.

Senator Eli Simpson followed the two Georgia Militiamen through the woods in route to meet their mysterious civilian militia commander. His eyes were cautiously scanning left and right, his ears sharp for any sound that was out of the ordinary, his Garand locked and loaded ready for action. He was back on patrol in a war that ended decades before his young guides had even been born. Eli was not happy with the casual attitude of the pair leading him. While they did dress the part of paramilitary militiamen they certainly were not soldiers by virtue of their conduct. They casually strolled along the dirt path smoking and joking, paying no attention to their surroundings. They were not ready, not prepared as they yakked their way along the trail.

“REMFs.” he grunted under his breath. “Wannabes.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

The morning mists hung tight to the valley bottom as the trio followed the well-worn trail along the edge of the woods. The day was going to be a hot one to be sure. Eli could taste the moisture in the air and knew that another hot and muggy Georgia summer day was ahead of them. They had traveled several miles when the forest suddenly became very quite and the hair on the back of Eli's neck stood up. His old combat instincts were still there after all these years. Without saying a word the old warrior sidestepped off the trail as the guardsmen continued on casually walking down the trail unaware of the mounting threat to themselves that was signaled in the silence surrounding them.

Eli dropped to one knee and listened as he scanned the shadows for any movement. The normal sounds of the forest had disappeared suddenly as when the forest holds its breath when a predator stalks through the underbrush in pursuit of a meal. Something was out there he could sense it. He had that same sensation the night his mansion was attacked and he had been forced flee into the woods. He had failed to heed the ancient battle senses and as a result his bodyguards, two good and trusted friends that had served the old senator for many years had paid the ultimate price for his inattention. Eli willed his breathing to slow as he concentrated on the living world that he was now trying desperately to become attuned to. He could hear and feel the pounding of his heart in his ears. He knew that there was something or someone deadly nearby, something in the very air, he could sense it.

Slowly the natural sounds of the forest returned behind him. What ever it was was up ahead further down the trail in the direction that the guardsmen were headed. Slowly in a combat crouch he moved deeper up hill and into the tree line to began his own stalk. He knew his two escorts were somewhere well up ahead of him had yet to realize his absence. Heck they probably wouldn't become aware of anything until they realized they were dead if they were lucky.

Eli was determined not to fall into a trap a second time and if he could he would try to pull those two young men's bacon out of the fire as well. An old memory passed quickly through his mind. It harkened back to his initial trial by fire during the fighting in Korea, a war that never was in the collective memory except for those that were there. He could hear his platoon sergeant's comment following a pitched battle where several GI's were found dead without their combat boots on was still vivid in his memory. The slain soldiers had taken off their boots to sleep in their foxholes and when a larger North Korean/Chinese force jumped their battalion they died trying to run to their fighting positions in stocking feet. The grizzly old lifer just looked down on the dead men and said to no one in particular and yet to everyone within earshot.

"Stupid should hurt!"

Eli now concentrated his focus to the mission at hand. What ever it was that was out here he had to out flank and hopefully cut off before the pending ambush. He mentally resisted the urge to rush blindly into the woods and try to get ahead of the event, maybe had he been thirty years younger but not now. He couldn't afford to cash checks that his body couldn't cover. He did; however, pick up his pace a bit yet still remained cautious and ready for action.

Suddenly the near silence was broken by the report of gunfire. It was brief and heavy, like a pan of popcorn in hot oil; a few sporadic pops and then all hell broke loose and just as quickly as it started it dwindled off and died. Eli felt a sick sour taste in his mouth as he swung to the left and ascended the ridge to put himself above and behind the firefight. Occasionally through the foliage he got a brief flash of the two fools that had walked

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

into to a small open meadow. One of them was now down on the ground in a fetal position while the other stood tall frozen with his hands raised, weaponless, as several dark forms moved out of the shadows towards them. Eli's blood suddenly ran cold. He didn't know just who those wraith like soldiers were but he recognized them as having crawled out of the same fetid pond as the bastards that had attacked his home. Eli looked quickly around for a vantage point. Those two kids didn't deserve to be rescued but he wasn't going to leave them to these hell spawn.

The black clad trooper gloatingly walked up to the surrendering militiaman whose partner was curled up on the ground alive but bleeding out slowly from the multiple wounds he had suffered.

"Well, well, well, what have we here?" The dark trooper slowly circled the motionless militiaman.

"What have we caught in our little web? Heh?" He said as he jabbed his steel-toed combat boot into the wounded militiaman.

"Ooooooh" The wounded man pitifully moaned as he was prodded.

"Hmmm it looks like two traitors. Two terrorists!"

"We ain't no traitors or terrorists mister, we're Georgia Militia."

The black clad trooper pounced on the militiaman and nailed him with a vicious butt-stroke to the right kidney dropping the standing man to the ground in extreme pain.

"You're what I say you are asshole!" The specter screamed as he stepped up to the fallen man and kicked him in the face. "And I say you're a mother fucking terrorist!"

The trooper suddenly spun around and pointed his battle rifle at the wounded and bleeding man that lay moaning quietly in the tall grass a few feet away. Without hesitation the trooper sent a burst of 5.56 rounds slamming in to the side of his head.

Turning back he roared. "Now you traitorous son of a bitch you're going to tell me what I want to know or I'm going to give you some of the same! DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?"

The surviving militiaman looked up through his ruined eye at the dark animal that stood gloatingly over him and realized that his life was all but over except for the pain. This atrocity of some sick bastards demented creation meant every word he said and the militiaman had no doubt that he was dead no matter what he did. All that remained was the expedience of his departure. A tiny tear began to form in the corner of his good eye.

The wraith like trooper became even more enraged as he witnessed the emotional collapse of his victim.

"WHAT?" He bellowed at the crumbling militiaman. "ARE YOU FUCKING CRYING!"

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

He strutted around the fallen man and bellowed at the top of his lungs. "YOU FUCKING COWARD!" And then suddenly and brutally as he went to let loose another vicious kick something slammed into his chest and snapped him like a bungee cord into the weeds half a dozen feet away.

Seven more times the battle proven M-1 bucked against the old senator's shoulder before the classic "PING" of an ejecting clip announced its need to be fed again. With a practiced and familiar ease eight more deadly thirty-ought six rounds slammed into the breach and disappeared as the bolt slammed home. Three dark troopers dropped under the first deadly volley and another four joined them before the hungry Garand was fed again. Eli quickly shoved in the next clip and shuttled sideways at the same time. The old knees ached and groaned but held as they tried to keep up with a mind that in the heat of the battle refused to recognize the physical limitations of the decades that had passed since the last time it had been in the fury of battle. The Garand pointed as if possessed and coughed three more rapid volleys into the enemy below. Another trooper screamed and then dropped to the ground. Suddenly the remaining wraiths bolted from the firefight in full retreat.

Before the second trooper had made it half way across the clearing Eli pinned him to the ground with two tight rounds through the center of his back. As he was taking aim on one of the remaining black clad troopers the tree line opposite Eli's position exploded in a vicious rain of hot lead and dropped the fleeing government thugs like hot rocks.

Eli ducked and rolled to his side. Looking out between the tree trunks he scanned the forest glade below. For what seemed like an eternity he waited, not moving, barely breathing. Waited for who ever was in the opposite tree line to move first. It there was anything Eli had learned in all his years as a congressman it was patience, so he waited. Silence returned to the battlefield and nothing moved except the badly beaten militiaman. Then on one end of the tree line it began. Eli wasn't sure just what the hell he was hearing, but it was some how eerily familiar. The sound exploded from the trees like a demon yell straight out of the bowels of hell. Up the slope towards Eli it rushed with a ferocity and vengeance until it burst in his face. It sent a shiver down his spine. Then it was gone. More time elapsed before quietly a dozen Realtree clad and heavily armed men stepped from the shadows. Eli hoped it was the cavalry or this was going to get real nasty . . . real quick.

He steadied himself and hunkered down for the coming fight. He was too old to run and too stubborn to surrender. Well if it was going to be a fight to the finish, here was as good as any. He took sight on the lead man and waited.

Chapter 76 - Seeds of Change

*. . . In the Carboniferous Epoch
We were promised abundance for all,
By robbing selected Peter
To pay for collective Paul;
But though we had plenty of money,
There was nothing our money could buy,
And the Gods of the Copybook Headings said:
"If you don't work, you die." - R. Kipling, "The Gods of the Copybook Headings"*

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Drop a grain of California gold into the ground, and there it will lie unchanged until the end of time; drop a grain of our blessed gold [wheat] into the ground and lo! A mystery. - Edward Everett

Seeds of faith are always within us; sometimes it takes a crisis to nourish and encourage their growth. - Susan L. Taylor

Jonathan sat down in the well-worn leather chair and marveled at the long road that brought him to the position he now held. He was the first American Caesar and he considered the historical significance of his position as well as what had happened to the original Caesar of Rome. He was determined to do whatever was necessary to ensure that he did not suffer from the original fate that befell the original Caesar. To that end he picked up the presidential keyboard and began tapping out his first executive orders.

The first order of business was to consolidate his power base. He would then deal with the rabble . . . harshly. There had to be order brought to the chaos that had ravaged the country even if the draconian measures he was contemplating went to the extreme. There would be pockets of resistance to be sure, but separated, disjointed, and independent from one another they could be easily addressed one at a time and wiped out. The Council had assured Jonathan that UN support and UN Peace Keepers, if necessary, would be available to supplement American enforcement of his/their policies.

It was essential that the air of American individuality be now and forever removed from the American psyche. Community and cooperation with the status quo would take its place just as had been accomplished in the European Union. Security and freedom from want were the key issues to be resolved. After centuries of multiple wars sweeping across the European continent the people there had hungrily longed for peace and security at any price. The surviving inhabitants saw the socialization of Europe as a good thing. Freedom from want, guaranteed security at whatever the cost was paramount in their minds. So slowly almost imperceptibly they gladly surrendered their freedom for security. Group cooperation took the place of individuality. The status quo became the standard. 1984 was upon them before they even realized it and they didn't care.

Now after the ravages of the terrorist attacks, the plagues and civil strife that had ravaged all across the country the American people, who for far too long had sat fat, dumb and happy with their gluttonous lifestyle, were getting a taste of deprivation and want. They cried for order, security and safety and Jonathan was going to give them just what they begged for. He would bring order from the chaos. Impose security and provide safety to all who joined him under the umbrella of his regime. To those that would oppose his establishment . . . well the less said of them the better. There were already camps in place for them and they would not survive long enough to be a concern behind the strands of barbed wire and electrical fence.

The pioneer spirit had passed a long time ago into the myths of Americana. It was the collective group that would survive now, not the individual and he, the President of the United States would see to that. This was a new icon of the American ideal that would be brought forward. The new socialized American would be the cooperative American looking out for the common good and insuring the security of all in this war against poverty, greed, want, and worst of all decadent individualism.

The stage was set. The audience seated. The orchestra was beginning to play as the curtain began to recede into the side stage. A new era was opening and Jonathan sat in the forefront center stage. He felt the pressure of destiny weighing down upon his shoulders. His regime would last a thousand years and usher in a new era of hu-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

man advancement. No longer would petty governments squander the resources of the world. No longer would individualism misdirect the efforts of mankind. For the first time in man's history a single elite Council would direct the entire energies of the planet. Cooperatively working towards a common goal and the supremacy of mankind in the universe.

His fingers flew across the keyboard. He would put the country back upon the right track. These and subsequent orders would take the place of the Constitution and fabled Bill of Rights. As he signed each new order he envisioned them being preserved under glass in the great halls of government in the far future. Icons for the new age they would usher in, and this was only the beginning.

As the line of dark clad troops moved closer with each passing second, the air it self seemed to press in upon the haggard defenders. Rumbling armored fighting vehicles dark and ominous, all most beast like, lead the way with turrets scanning back and forth in search of targets of opportunity. Damian watched hidden behind a large pile of rubble that blocked one side of the street. The troopers and their menacing vehicles continued to roll towards them like the rising tide moving up the beach. All he could see in the crowded streets were machines and soldiers closing upon them. This was not going to end well if they continued, not well at all.

Just then seven objects gracefully arced through the air from the rooftops of the five story walkups on either side of the narrow street. Smoke trailed the napalm filled Molotov Cocktails as they wickedly descended upon the vehicles and troops that now filled the streets below. Suddenly one of the two lead vehicles and the first squad of troopers were engulfed in flames. Damian lowered his eye to the rifle sight and picked up his first target of opportunity. The buck of the big BM59 surprised him as he sent the lunging thirty caliber round south to meet soft flesh and brittle bone. The walnut stock continued to buck against his shoulder as dark invaders fell one after the other under the steady hail of copper jacketed rounds.

The world suddenly exploded as Free Citizens and Homeland Security Storm Troopers viciously clashed in the streets. Under a steady haze of smoke, flash of explosions, bright tracers and small arms fire cracked all around the old section of the Chicago suburb. It was a vision, or actually more aptly described as a nightmare image, reminiscent of the bitter street fighting of World War Two between the Germans and the Russians. The outskirts of the city became an image of the latest form of twenty-second century Dante's Inferno.

Damian emptied his second magazine before he ordered the withdrawal of his militia from their first fighting position. In organized leaps and bounds the defenders slowly methodically pulled back laying down a deadly hail of constant fire upon the invaders. Then like cockroaches fleeing the light the men and women of the Chicago Free Militia scattered amid the ruined buildings forcing the invading troops to follow them into the maze of alley's and back streets. In this deadly war of attrition it was to the defenders went the advantage. Storm Troopers were constantly swept by deadly fire from every nook and cranny. There was no safe place to be, except far from the battle line. Every foot of the way was blocked with trips, traps, and debris. Every window, every doorway, every street drain and sewer opening held a sniper or worse some form of insidious booby trap ready to take a limb or life if possible.

The battle ebbed and flowed back and forth as the antagonists fought for every square foot of city. From the streets the AFV's pounded the buildings with wicked twenty-millimeter armor piercing and high explosive

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

rounds. The invading Troopers quickly learned that fire seemed to be the only way to push the defenders out of the ruins. But this old section of the city had faced a firestorm once before over a century ago. Now every building was built of stone and brick. Not much to feed a fire, but the contents did burn brightly. Even after fleeing from the engulfed buildings the defenders fought with the tenacity of badgers for every square inch of ground. The assault was into its second hour and the fighting had been so wicked that the advancing forces had already suffered nearly thirty percent casualties. Yet for all their effort the Homeland Security Forces only controlled couple of blocks into the city.

The defenders owned the deadly warrens of the inner city. The back streets, side streets and alleys were their homes. For over a year they had survived plagues, famine, chaos, marauding gangs, disease, government indifference and later government round ups, and now they were engaged in defending the homes they had built out of the ruins of the old city with their own sweat and blood. They had survived and even prospered under the harshest conditions. For the first time in nearly two hundred years they had become a community in every sense of the word. They had built a self-sustaining infrastructure out of the detritus of a dying civilization. Life was actually looking up for the inhabitants as a result of their hard work when two weeks ago that all changed, as word had been sent in from the outside world, a world that had totally ignored their existence until now. The word came in the form of a Presidential order for all survivors to leave the city for designated relocation camps. There they would be screened, quarantined and later reassigned to work camps to rebuild the devastated country. Those that didn't voluntarily comply with the new Executive Orders would face direct military action. It was a total surprise to the administration when not a single person left the city for these promised "safe" camps. The commander of the Homeland Security Forces that had been assigned to receive the throng of complacent surviving population had instead received a single slip of paper. Its message was a echo from the past, simple and succinct, it simply said: "NUTZ".

High up on the ridge Eli steadied himself and hunkered down for the coming fight. He was too old to run and too stubborn to surrender. Well if it was going to be a fight to the finish, here was as good as any. He took sight on the lead man and waited. The lead soldier walked calmly forward into the glen and checked the unmoving militiaman that had been shot. He signaled to the line of soldiers waiting just inside the edge of the forest, silently two moved forward. They quickly rigged a poncho litter and gently lifted their dead comrade into it and hefting the dead weight between them disappeared into the tree line. The first soldier by this time was giving water and administering aid to the militiaman that had endured the beating and was nearly assassinated him self.

Eli carefully gathered up the M1 clips scattered around his position from the battle and then slowly he stood up and brought his weapon to port arms. He carefully scanned the surrounding hillside and as much of the forest as he could. It appeared that none of the Homeland Security Troops had survived the counter ambush. Slowly with aching joints Eli made his way down the hillside to the glade.

He was tired and needed to rest, but first there was business that needed to be attended to. He was not sure what kind of reception he would receive at the hands of these militiamen. Frankly he didn't care, what he needed now were allies and if he couldn't find any then he was a dead man anyway. So he slowly began to pick his way down off the hillside.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Mark could not believe his eyes when the rifleman that had commanded the deadly high ground and decimated the Homeland Security Forces finally appeared on the opposite side of the meadow. His jaw nearly hit the ground. It was the Senator! Old Eli Simpson himself! He looked like something out of an old World War Two movie as he slowly walked forward to meet with Sergeant Creek of the Georgia Militia in the center of the meadow. But there was something different about the old politician. Mark couldn't quite put his finger on it, but there was something different.

The Senator still holding his battle proven Garand in his left hand put out his right to greet the Georgia Militia Sergeant before him.

"You'd be a Creek from the other side of Restin Ridge?" Eli asked

"Yes Sir, Jeb Creek is my daddy."

Eli rubbed his chin. "Jeb . . . Jeb . . . well then your grand-daddy would be Jonas Creek, son of a blacksmith over at twin forks?"

"Yes Sir, yes sir indeed. Jonas was my grand-dad."

"You favor him well young man. I knew your granddad well, good man. Did a bit of hunting and fishing together back when we were wild young bunks. Yep . . . was you say. Hmmm sorry to hear that. Sure could have used him on this here hunt."

"Excuse me Senator." Mark stepped forward. "You may not remember me. I was at your house the night of the attack. Mark Bennett from NPR . . ."

"Yes I remember. So you made it out alive - any others?"

"I'm sorry to say I don't know sir. All I remember is running and getting shot at. I was found a few days later by Jason Harcourt." He pointed to Jason. "And he and his family doctored me up."

"Harcourt! Now there's a crusty ol' fart if I ever knew one. How's your daddy doing these days Son.?"

Jason stepped forward. "Speaks poorly of you Senator ever since you went and became citified."

Eli busted out laughing and clamped his massive hand on the young man stout shoulder.

"Well let me tell you son, there's nothing civilized about Washington D.C. believe me. You'd be safer in a den of hungry lions." Eli began to walk. "Now lets get the hell out of this clearing and see that commander of yours 'Young Creek lad. I've had about enough of this Homeland Security garbage to last me a life time."

"Sir what about the . . . bodies?" Mark asked.

"What bodies . . . oh those traitors? Animals and worms gotta eat. I'd say leave 'em to the buzzards."

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Sir, my orders are to leave no trace.” Sergeant Creek nervously interrupted.

“Hmmm no trace you say?” The Senator looked around the meadow at the bodies scattered there. “Well then . . . carry out your orders son.”

Val visited her husband; at least that was how she thought of him. There had been no formal ceremony, no license received from the city hall, no preacher to say the solemn vows. They had simply stood before their growing clan of friends and family and spoke the words that would bind them together in this life. That was good enough for them.

Rich was deep in his workshop in the junkyard working on another of his projects. He was always working on one project or the other, usually several at one time. She felt lucky to have found herself such an incredibly industrious man, totally unselfish in his devotion to her, their growing adoptive family and their small community. He was her renaissance man. She often joked that had he been born in the middle ages he probably would have been an alchemist and most likely an apprentice of the mighty Leonardo DiVinci. To which Richard always replied that it would be the other way around and that he could have taught Leonardo a thing or two . . . well maybe.

“What are you working on today my husband?” She said as she looked for a clear place on the workbench to sit down his noon meal.

“Oh . . . Hi Dear.” He looked frantically around the cluttered workbench. “I’m working on another windmill for the Davies’. Now were did I put that screwdriver?”

Val picked up the nearest one. “This one?”

“No . . . er . . . yes, that’s it, thanks.”

“Is that another one of the brake drum mills?”

“Yeah. I’m using a design by a Scotsman named Piggot’s (<http://www.lindsaybks.com/bks3/bdwind/>). Matt liked the other two so well he ordered two more.” Rich answered as he dived into mechanism.

“What did you trade for this time?”

“Oh . . . um.” He looked around the bench top, grabbed a pair of vice grips. “An orchard.” He answered matter of factly.

“An orchard?” Val looked astonished. “A real orchard?”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Rich stopped and looked up. “Well sort of. He’s going to come over and provide some grafted seedlings and help us plant an orchard. And in the mean time until our trees start producing we’ll get a small share of his fruit. All I have to do is keep his wind generators up and running. I thought it was a good trade.”

Val gave her husband a bear hug. “IT WAS A GREAT TRADE! Finally some fresh fruit!” She turned away and began to make mental notes to herself.

“I’ll have to get more canning jars and lids. Imagine fresh fruit in the middle of winter!”

“Now, now, Dear, it will be three to five years before our trees even begin to produce fruit.”

“But we’ll have some fruit from trees he’s loaning you, won’t we?”

“Yes, we will. But its only a couple of trees.”

“That’s better than what we have now, a couple of wild crab apple trees and that lone pear tree that is on its last legs . . . or would that be trunk?” She smiled mischievously at her husband. “ Hmmmmm . . . now who shall we assign to take care of the trees?”

“Oh and I also traded your next batch of scented soaps for that small bag over there.” He pointed with sandwich in hand.

“MY NEXT WHOLE BATCH!” This did not sit well with her. “Do you realize how much work goes into that? And I was going to save that for the next market day . . . ” Her voice trailed off as she looked into the small bag.

Inside the lunch sack sized brown paper bag were several small boxes. They looked like ring boxes the kind you got from the jeweler when you purchased a ring, hinged on one side.

“You traded my soap for rings?”

“Open them.” He answered flatly.

Inside the first one was a small plastic zip lock bag stuffed with cotton and a dozen small dark seeds.

“Are you Jack-in-the-beanstalk now?” She asked confused.

“Those my dear are tomato seeds.”

“Tomato seeds, but why in a ring box?”

“Those are not just any seeds. Nope, those few precious seeds are from Denver.”

“NO . . . really, are you sure?”

“Those seeds cost Matt a pretty penny, or should I say junk silver.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“And he gave them to you?”

“Well they are not free, I can assure you of that.”

“But Honey are you sure they’re genuine? You know how many junk seeds are out there being passed as resistant to ‘The Brown’?” She looked skeptically at the tiny round objects in the center of their discussion.

“Well, we’re as sure as one can be. When Matt received his shipment they were sealed and signed by Chavez himself.”

“Oh I hope these are genuine. Imagine having tomato sauce again and . . .” She held her breath for a moment. “. . . and fresh tomatoes.”

“And that’s not all Val, there’s six green bean seeds, almost a dozen corn and wheat seeds, five squash and a mix of carrot, radish, and turnip seeds in there too.”

Val’s mouth dropped in astonishment. If these seeds really were from Denver and the fabled grower A.M. Chavez . . . the man who discovered and grew the only truly Brown resistant seeds in the entire country. She closed her eyes and gave thanks to God.

The couple sat down to lunch and began to discuss the future plans of their orchard and garden. It had been a little rough at first after first the plague and then the ‘Brown’ had passed through the region. Somehow they had managed to hold on by their fingertips on what already processed stores they could scavenge and the few wild plants not affected by the dreaded plant virus. Here and there Val had managed to coax a few seedlings to survive but it was always hit or miss, but more often it was a miss. They wild-crafted for much of their greens and had survived. If these seeds were truly from the magician from Denver then she would nurture every single seedling. From those few seeds they could build a real garden and ensure a real future. Those few delicate seeds were more than worth all the silver they had. After all you can’t eat silver.

Chapter 77 - The Third Continental Congress

A right without an attendant responsibility is as unreal as a sheet of paper which has only one side. - Felix Morley

Don't go around saying the world owes you a living. The world owes you nothing. It was here first. - Mark Twain

Blaming "society" makes it awfully easy for a person of weak character to shrug off his own responsibility for his actions. - Stanley Schmidt

It had been over two hundred and thirty years since our forefathers had came together in the First Continental Congress to address their grievances against the crown and its ministers. They had felt, and rightly so, that they

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

and their interests were not being given the full measure due by the ministers back in the mother country and that they were not being treated as Englishmen should. From that meeting the tidal momentum of freedom and independence began to rise, and as with all tidal flows if you wait long enough . . . the tide always returns.

Two hundred and thirty some years later in the midst of national chaos and calamity a third historic assemblage of delegates from across the country was slowly coming together. Like moths to the flame of liberty they traveled towards a fifty-first state that had unexpectedly arisen in the west.

This new light of independence had sparked fresh hope among a tired and frightened people. Meanwhile the news out of Washington was full of continued strife and oppression. A storm was gathering in the west and the newly elected governor of the state of Jefferson felt like he was sitting dead center in the middle of it.

David stood on his porch with mixed feelings and watched another sunset. He wondered if the sun was also setting on the greatest nation this planet had ever known. As a scholar of history he fully recognized the fragile zone that they were entering into. When the first self-proclaimed delegates arrived he thought it was surely a joke or an idle gesture of desperation on their part. But now . . . he was beginning to become seriously worried. Representatives were arriving from pockets of resistance scattered across the western states. Small towns, fragments of surviving cities, rural communities that had banded together to survive the insanity surrounding them had sent delegates to what was being called the Third Continental Congress. They were angry, disillusioned and wanted change now! They were fed up with lies and promises. In ones and two's or small groups they were arriving daily, a steady incoming flow to the newly found State of Jefferson. The tide was rising and David was already knee deep in it and wondering when it would stem?

The following morning David had stepped off his porch and approached the lone figure coaxing a small fire to life. There were nearly a dozen sleeping forms surround the small fire pit.

"Governor McMillan," The fire starter said as he looked up.

David waived an extra mug of freshly brewed coffee at the man, which was quickly accepted.

"Good morning?"

"Whitecloud, Governor, Joshua Whitecloud, Turtle Clan of the Four Corners region."

"Mr. Whitecloud? I trust you slept well."

"Yes sir. Thank you sir."

"Please, its David."

"David, yes, thank you and please call me Joshua."

The pair stood in silence observing the gray predawn slowly giving rise to the new day. The aroma of freshly ground coffee and morning dew filled the air between them. The valley was quiet, yet already there were faint

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

hints of stirring among the scattered campsites that had sprung up, up and down the valley. In silence the pair stood witness to the arrival of the new day.

No official announcement for the gathering had ever been made. David wasn't sure where it started. But slowly, imperceptibly they started to arrive within weeks of the word getting out of the existence of the newly formed state of Jefferson. At first it was just a few individuals, then small groups and finally large numbers of delegates from as far away as Alaska and the western edge of the Appalachian Mountains. David could well imagine how difficult the journey had been with both martial law and rampant disorder spread across the nation and yet they came and were still coming.

The pace of the day's events were becoming routine. Shortly after sunrise the delegates would be up and about their business. It was interesting how the biological clock had taken over when the power went out. Benjamin Franklin's adage of "Early to bed and early to rise" was well in effect. What followed over morning coffee and a Spartan breakfast were informal meetings held by the warming early morning campfires. David was reminded of the Boy Scout jamboree's he attended as a kid by the unfolding scene around him.

"Governor?"

David snapped out of his daydream. "Yes, er . . . excuse me. I was thinking back to a simpler time." David shook his head to clear the image and turned to give his full attention to the Native American standing beside him.

"I'm sorry Mr. Whitecloud."

"Joshua please. There is no need for an apology my friend. I too, long for a simpler and saner time when the weight of the world was far from my shoulders."

David placed his free hand on Whitecloud's shoulder and gave it a pat or two. "Don't we all . . . don't we all." David paused. "Walk with me as I make my morning rounds. I think better when I'm moving."

The pair stepped off towards the barn as David began his morning routine.

"I'm amazed that a man of your statue still works the earth?" Whitecloud commented. "It is a good thing to be close to the mother."

David chuckled. "A man's got to eat regardless of the position he's thrust into. I hope the day never comes that I think I'm too good to get my hands dirty." They both chuckled.

"I have heard that you didn't want to be governor of this new state. Is that true?"

"Hell yes its true!" David turned back. "It's a thankless job in a no win situation. No matter what I do. No matter what we do or what we meant to do, it will be wrong . . . in someone's eyes." David grabbed bale of alfalfa and clipped the wires.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“We’ve turned our nose up at the local state governments and thrown down the gauntlet to the federal government. This gathering . . .” David began to flake the bale and toss it into the crib to feed to the goats. “Will be considered high treason by the powers that be. We are about to reach, maybe have already reached the point where we must now fully embrace revolution. And Whitecloud,” He turned to face him. “That a one-way highway straight to hell that we must win or die trying. I fear that we are quickly reaching the point where there will be no turning back.”

Whitecloud nodded in agreement and noticed that a small crowd was beginning to gather nearby, just within earshot.

“But what are our choices David?” Whitecloud rubbed the head of the nearest Nubian goat. “How much more can a people be expected to take from a government that has lost touch with them? No longer does Washington listen to the voice of the people. For us it never did.” Whitecloud added as a sidebar. “But now instead of listening to the troubles and woes, and being truly concerned it dictates and threatens. I do not even need to mention the abuses my own people have had to live with for generations!”

David and the growing crowd nodded in agreement.

“I was sent here along with representative elders from every major clan and tribe in the Four Corners region to determine if there is sufficient iron in this gathering to justify risking the very future of our existence. The mere fact that the State of Jefferson exists gives us hope.”

David looked at the ground for a moment before he spoke. His voice was deep and resonated sincerity. “Whitecloud . . . I don’t know what the future holds. But the path we now tread is fraught with risk and danger. I fear the present regime will not change; it will not bow to the will of the people. It has forgotten that the people gave it its power and the people can take it away. But there are many that still believe in the old ways, the old empire, any change will be terrifying to them, and so they will resist it. Not because they believe in the old system, but because they don’t know any other.”

“But what are you offering them David? That is what we’re here for. To find out what our choices will be.”

David now noticed the gathering around them. He looked deeply into all the faces growing crowd. Every eye was upon him and he felt really uncomfortable.

“What the hell have I gotten myself into.” His inner voice chided. He was a teacher, not a politician. He had studied history not psychology or political science. He spoke from his heart and more often than not, it got him into trouble. He drew in a deep breath and cleared his thoughts. He was unsure just what to say . . . but he said it anyway.

The battle for Chicago was into its third day and appeared to be shifting in favor of the Homeland Security Forces. Slowly but surely the ring was tightening up on the defenders. The fighting had been fierce and valiant, but the tide was beginning to turn.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Damian followed the progress on a large street map in the fortified basement of the citadel. Slowly but surely his forces were being ground down and pushed back deeper and deeper into the city. With the introduction of artillery and helicopter gunships his defenders ability to move freely about the city had been checked. Still there had to be a way.

“If’n you cuts off de head of de snake . . . de body will whither ‘n die.”

“Huh?” Damian turned around to see his Grandfather standing in the doorway.”

“You must change da way you t’ink in order to survive dis war boy.” The elder Washington stepped into the room and up to the war table. “You t’ain’t never gonna win dis battle fighten toe to toe. Yor feet not big enuff Damian.”

“We can’t just surrender!”

“Hell no boy!” The old man slammed his wrinkled fist onto the table. Wez don’t surrender, wez nev’r surrenders. But we can be clever likes da fox.”

Damian looked at his grandfather like he had finally gone over the edge.

“Looky here boy. Dey gots bigger and more guns den us. Right?”

Damian nodded his head.

“So you can’t out gun dem can you?”

Damian shook his head.

“You can’t out run dem can you?”

Damian shook his head.

“So now you gots to out t’ink ‘em boy. You gots to out t’ink em!”

The old man sat down slowly and winked at his grandson. “You been fight’n face to face and getting sorely whooped. Why you do dat? De odds is again’s’t you. You don’t play de odds, dat is a deed horse. You got’s to bush wack dem when dey ain’t looking. Dat’s whats you got to do.”

David took in a full breath and then another to relax himself. He looked around at the crowd of faces, some he recognized. Most he didn’t.

“I’m not quite sure where to begin. I’m standing here feeding my goats and I get the feeling you are looking for some special revelation from me. You are looking for answers to your questions and I don’t have any.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

David bushed his hands off and some of the chaff clinging to his trousers. He walked away from the pen and into the crowd of some thirty delegates.

“Many of you have come a long way to seek answers to your problems. All I can offer you is more problems. There is no easy way out of the predicament that we are now facing. So if you are here expecting easy answers . . . well . . . perhaps you should pack your bags and head back home.”

A rumble passed through the group.

“The time has come to put our irons in the fire and see what we have. But here and now is not the time nor place. So I will ask each of you to pass the word through out the encamped delegates that tonight we will begin the discussions that you have come so far for. Bring what food you have to contribute to a potluck dinner this evening that we’ll be holding here on this lawn. Then afterwards we will hold our first council meeting with all the assembled delegates. It’s time we got this business going.”

David turned and walked away from the crowd and continued his morning chores. He signaled for Whitecloud to join him and the pair disappeared around the corner of the barn. David stopped quickly when they were just out of sight of the crowd.

“Are they still there?”

Whitecloud peeked around the corner. “They are breaking up and some are headed back to their camps.”

“Good.” David started to walk away. “I don’t know what the hell they expect from me?”

“Leadership.” Was Whitecloud’s reply.

Malcolm Danielson and Kevin Jorgenson were enjoying warmth of the morning fire when Buck, Kevin’s son bounded into camp.

“There’s going to be a big meeting tonight! And a Potluck!” He exuberantly blurted out as he came to skidding halt kicking up a fine cloud of dust.

“Tonight?” Malcolm and Kevin asked in unison.

“Yeah tonight after the Potluck. I’ve got to spread the word. Everyone is supposed to be there. We’re going to have a huge council meeting too.”

“Whose on the council.” His father asked trying to pull coherent information from the excited young man.

“We all are!” He said as he dashed off to spread the word. “Hey everyone, there’s a big meeting tonight after the potluck and everyone”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

The pair looked at each other.

“Well it’s about time don’t you think Professor?” Kevin asked.

“I suppose so. We’ve been here for over a week and the valley is getting pretty full.” He took a sip of herbal tea. The coffee had run out over a year ago, though he had heard that if you were a sharp trader there were beans to be had but they were not cheap. Malcolm missed his morning ritual cup of java, among other things. But he considered himself the most fortunate of survivors and counted his blessings every single day. It had been over a year since his escape from the detention camp. A harrowing journey half way across the country with two little kids under his wing and a narrow rescue at the end of his journey that ended with the kids reunion with their relatives in a wintry Colorado mountain community. He was now an integral part of the community and that was the reason for his presence here today. The talk was of a Third Continental Congress, a reformation of the original intent of the founding fathers. Once he had explained the historical significance of this event to his townsmen the next thing he knew he had been voted, volunteered and assigned to the delegation representing his newfound community. Someday he would learn to keep his mouth shut.

Kevin Jorgenson was his partner on this expedition. Kevin and his family had dropped into their niche in the community with a bloody bang as they lead the fight against brutality of the Homeland Security overlords that had ruled the rural village with an iron fist. There were now three upper and two lower communities tied together in a self-defense pact that had proved too strong for the surviving government troops to break. They had managed to remain free and independent for the better part of a year and a half and found that they liked it. Together the pair had been sent as representative delegates to pursue that end and it looked like things were finally actually starting to happen.

Assault Team Leader Devon Lee, late . . . Lieutenant Lee of the Homeland Security Force, had been an officer of the very force that he was now hunting. Carefully he looked out of the storm drain opening at street level. They were now well behind the battle lines, in the rear and about to go looking for trouble. Mayhem was on their minds . . . and evil was their intention.

A dozen shadows crept out of the manhole cover of the side street. Breaking into three man teams they moved silently down the empty streets. Lee paused and held a monocular up to his right eye and scanned the street ahead. There was no sign of active night vision devices, no IR signatures, just empty windows and rooftops. He replaced the device into its padded pouch and signaled the teams forward. Two and a half hours later they were in position.

‘The fucking idiots haven’t budged an inch’ Lee thought to himself. ‘Stupid!’

For another hour the teams slowly inched their way into position. Each of the four three-man teams moved to specified section of the perimeter, planted their breaching charges and waited for their cue. Lee waited. He knew the routines, the habits. This had to be a clean strike, no survivors, and no mistakes yet at the same time it had to be vicious and devastating. They were about to decapitate the head of the snake. The only problem for Lee was, that he knew many of them. He had switched sides and now he had prove himself to his new allies. He

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

knew this moment would come, when the rubber met the road. He took a deep breath and pulled the pin on the hand grenade and inched forward.

He squelched twice on the captured squad radios and waited. He knew that at that moment eleven other pins were being removed from eleven other hand grenades and a second wave was being made ready. Seconds ticked by like hours and he held his breath. He squelched twice again, paused and then once more. The first grenade was heaved as high and deep into the perimeter as he could. Lee quickly grabbed the second grenade and pulled the pin, he set up and then with his best quarterback throw spiraled the second grenade into the security bunker in front of him and started to run . . . towards the bunker.

The first series of grenades detonated with a flash and explosion that even caught the attacking Chicagoans off guard. Lee was almost too close when the first bunker went up blasting hot gases into his face. Chilling screams erupted in the night all across the compound as overwhelmed wounded and bleeding soldiers rushed out into a wicked crossfire's of breaching charges and small arms from the three man shadow teams. They were quickly cut down in mid stride as the teams penetrated the outer defenses. In seconds three of the four teams were inside the perimeter and running amok among the rear echelon penguins that are usually found around headquarters sections.

His lungs burned as he pumped his legs faster and faster towards his intended target. A shape suddenly popped up blocking his way. There was no time for Lee to bring his rifle to bear, instead in a blinding instant he flashed up his rifle snapping a horizontal butt stroke across the face of a Homeland Security trooper that had just stepped unprepared into the carnage. Lee could hear and feel flesh and bone crunch-giving way as momentum overwhelmed them. By the time unconsciousness and the ground met the falling trooper Lee was over twenty feet beyond him.

Combat boots beat a staccato rhythm as training took over and the hunter killer team that Lee lead cut down soldier after soldier as they ripped a wide path through to the command tent. Skidding to a stop in front of the target his hands automatically feed a fresh magazine in to the AK that he was carrying and he subsequently locked the trigger down spraying deadly 7.62 x 39 mm full metal jacket rounds through the rubberized cloth walls of the temper shelter. A second magazine added to the carnage before he entered the shredded flaps to inspect the damage he had wrought.

The fighting had been vicious and wickedly nasty. It had also been extremely one sided. Lee and his teammates walked through the debris of the tattered command tent. They had been caught flatfooted, totally unprepared and they had died for it. Lee recognized the Commanding General of Homeland Security Central Command sprawled out in the corner of the command tent. The Bastard hadn't even had the time to put on his trousers before his career was cut short. Crumpled in the corner in his boxer shorts it somehow seemed a fitting end for the bigoted asshole. But across the tent was Lee's old Colonel. Lee stood over him and felt like weeping. He had been a good man, a fair and honest leader, but he had been on the wrong side of a stupid line in the sand. Lee turned and walked away.

Stepping out of the tent he looked up at the night sky. There were subtle hints of dawn trying to edge its way forward at the edge of visual perception, yet it was still solidly night. Lee took in a deep breath and tried to calm his nerves. The shakes were beginning to take over and he could ill afford them at this time. He and his teams were still deep within Indian Territory with only half of their mission completed. It would be long night yet to

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

go. He was down two members of his assault team. One walking wounded and one dead, the enemy had lost its command structure up to the regional commander and ninety-six staff officers and troops in the raid.

He knew this attack would cripple the assault on the inner city and thus save thousands of lives on both sides. But somehow it all seemed so wrong, so very wrong. Americans shouldn't be fighting Americans, it just wasn't right. But when a government goes bad someone has to pay and in a way . . . everyone does.

Lee caught himself and took in a couple of deep breaths. His nerves were quite once again. Spinning around on his right foot he headed out to gather up his team and finish their mission. It was going to be a long and bloody night. Long and bloody.

The meal had been spectacular. But now it was time to pay the tab. David looked out at the flickering faces lit by the large bone fire. Gathering his courage and his thoughts he began.

"I think we need to consider the current situation that has brought us together here in this place at this time. It is truly sad when you finally realize that the idea of freedom that our nation was founded upon has become so twisted and convoluted that those forces that should be the champions of the American dream have become instead, oppressors against it."

"Our country was begun with an amazing idea . . . that of liberty and freedom. But such ideas are a two edged sword my friends. For with liberty and freedom must also come responsibility and honor. That is what has been lost. Slowly but surely over the last two hundred years we have forgotten our responsibility and surrendered our honor. We have allowed others to determine the limits of our liberty and freedom because we have refused to act responsibly and with integrity and now we are paying for it."

He could feel the crowd leaning forward.

"We know the difference between right and wrong, after all it is a simple equation. But we want to bend the line to suit our every whim and desire. We want just that little more than someone else and so began our troubles. Our laws became clouded and then convoluted . . . and then insane. We allowed our leaders to lie to us, cloud our vision with false promises of safety and security, but at what cost? What did we give up?" David looked around the growing group.

"We gave up our individual sovereignty . . . and then we gave up our regional sovereignty and finally . . . we have given up our national sovereignty. We gave up quality of life for quantity of life and greed became our watchword, and money our god. We allowed a thing to actually have more rights and less responsibilities than a human being! What is that you ask? Think about it. In our search for even greater greed we created a creature that can't be held accountable. Its amorphous form spans continents and oceans and now threatens our very freedom as human beings. That creature has become known as Global Corporations."

Heads nodded now in agreement.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“I am not proposing that we reinvent the wheel. The wheel was solidly built along time ago and can still function to this day. I am merely proposing that we put new tread on it and get it back on the right track!”

There were cheers erupting all around him now.

Jonathan was enjoying his breakfast when the news arrived. He stared at the message and nearly dropped his jellied toast. “How could this happen.” He said to no one in particular. “How the FUCK COULD THIS HAPPEN!”

He stood up quickly and jolted the small breakfast table knocking the orange juice over and flowing across his waffle. He remembered his thoughts from the other day. ‘The first order of business is to consolidate my power base, then I will deal with the rabble.’

He stormed off to his dressing room. “That damn rabble has just destroyed my Central Command!”

He pushed an aide out of his way “Get me the Pentagon, I’ll teach them a lesson. I’ll take the entire fucking city off the fucking map.” He spat out and he disappeared behind the dressing room door.

Chapter 78 - Aztlan Rebuked

I would rather . . . have a nod from an American, than a snuff-box from an emperor. - **Lord Byron**
(1788-1824), English poet.

God is not on the side of the big battalions, but on the side of those who shoot best. - **Voltaire** (1694-1778)

War is the remedy that our enemies have chosen, and I say let us give them all they want. - **General William T. Sherman**

Hector looked through the scope of the battle scared old rifle and settled the crosshairs center chest on the Mexican soldier moving up the street several hundred yards away. He said a small prayer for the sin he was about to commit and slowly squeezed the trigger. The firing pin stabbed forward as it had hundreds of times before on three different continents during the numerous wars of its lifetime. Pushed forward by the firing pin the Berdan primer cup compressed the volatile pellet within and began its self-immolation sending a blinding flash through the two small primer openings into the main chamber. The chemical mixture that had been formed into tiny pellets of potential energy had waited patiently in the dark recess of the brass-enshrouded chamber for just this moment. The reaction of molecules suddenly and violently released from their bondage pressed in all directions trying to escape.

For several micro-milliseconds nothing happened, nothing until a sufficient number of the billions of escaping molecules breaking their bonds in a flash of heat and pressure reached the critical mass, then something began

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

to budge. The releasing flame not yet traveled half way through the chamber igniting the dormant powder when one end of the constricting chamber began to move. For the escaping molecules it seemed to take an eternity for the copper jacketed plug to begin its transition down a long dark tunnel ahead of it. The plug gathered speed and began spinning as it was gripped by the spiraling tunnel walls. An instant later the expanding gasses pushed the metallic plug beyond the speed of sound and then released it into the open atmosphere. No longer constrained by the heavy steel spiral tube the conical metal plug, buffeted by a slight breeze, and pulled towards the center mass of the planet across whose surface it now flew, ended a journey that had been begun in a European factory nearly half a century earlier. Its gentle arch through the atmosphere was suddenly and violently interrupted by soft flesh and hard bone before it lodged solidly encapsulated within living flesh. Living only for the next few seconds as shock from the impact spread throughout the organic system.

Hector worked the bolt action of his German K98 Mauser and fed another 8mm round into the waiting chamber. The battle had begun.

He had come to this country as a young man. Braving the hot desert wastes that created a boundary of desolation and death that had to be crossed in order to seek a future for himself and his young pregnant wife. For years he struggled to master the language and worked hard to provide for his growing family. He was a proud man who believed in the American dream. His hard work paid off when one of his employers offered to sponsor he and his wife for that most coveted prize sought by every “wetback” . . . citizenship!

Maria took to the strange language and American studies better than Hector, but together they struggled through the required text towards their goal every night. As their first child began public school, Hector forbid them to speak Spanish. Though he was proud of his own Aztec heritage his children would be raised as Americans. After all they had been born in the land of the free. This would be their country. Not the desolate, dirt poor and futureless land of their ancestors.

The Oath of Citizenship

I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen; that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I will bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by law; that I will perform noncombatant service in the Armed Forces of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform work of national importance under civilian direction when required by the law; and that I take this obligation freely without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; so help me God.

Hector Ortiz-Mendez could still vividly remember as if he had just stepped from the judge’s chamber where he raised his right hand as millions of immigrants before him had done and swore an oath of allegiance to his new country. That was the proudest day of his life. When both he and Maria became Americans. But with citizenship came responsibilities and duties. And that day finally came for the Ortiz-Mendez family. The day they paid for their citizenship in full. The day a young Marine in his dress blue uniform handed Maria the American flag that had just draped her first-born son’s coffin.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Anthony had not hesitated to answer the call to arms when he came of age. All his life he had understood that he was different from other people. He was first generation American and that meant something to him. It meant that his family had a duty to prove that they were worthy of the title American. Hector had been so proud of his son when he joined the United States Marine Corps. Anthony excelled under the arduous training and soon was moving rapidly up through the ranks. His boot camp graduation picture stood in a place of honor on the Mendez' mantel.

Even though Hector insisted that all his children master the language of the land of their birth, Maria equally insisted that they learn the language of their heritage. As a result their seven children grew up speaking both English and Spanish fluently. For Anthony this added advantage gave him more than a slight edge during the numerous military assignments south of the border. His name was always first on the list when his unit traveled to Honduras and Panama for training. Here he got to see first hand why his father had worked so hard to get to the United States and become an American. It pulled at his heartstrings to see the overwhelming desperately poor people of these South American countries. Struggling against disease, desperate odds, degradation and poverty while a few elite owned and controlled most of the world about them.

Then came the invasion of Grenada and Panama, where his true metal was tested severely in bitter fighting. It was during the last action that Anthony received his mortal wounds. True to his upbringing he died putting others well-being before his own while trying to save several of his buddies that were wounded and pinned down under enemy heavy fire. For his bravery under fire and his ultimate sacrifice he was awarded the Silver Star with Valor.

When Hector came to this country he knew that he could expect to sacrifice much of himself to become a full citizen. He never imagined that such a sacrifice would involve the loss of his first-born. But at the same time he felt proud of his son. Several of the Marines of his son's unit had escorted the body home. There in their perfect dress blue uniforms with tears in their eyes they told the family of the ultimate sacrifice of their son and brother. Two of the young Marines insisted that had it not been for Sergeant Ortiz-Mendez valiant sacrifice they wouldn't be standing there today telling them this story.

Pride swelled in Hector's chest as the young Marines told how his son had rushed into the blistering firefight and dragged several wounded Marines to safety. Time and time again he defiantly braved the searing heat of battle and dashed to the next fallen comrade. Twice wounded he continued the fight by fiercely manning the squad's M-60 machine gun and laying down a wicked sheet of covering fire before finally falling victim to his wounds.

Lance Corporal Marcus Larkin had been with 'Tony' when he died. Marcus choked back his emotions and gathered the hands of Hector and Maria together.

"Tony told me to tell you that he loved you both. And he wanted to thank you for always being there for him." Marcus sniffed. "His last words were 'Semper Fi'."

Tears gushed from the stoic Marines and the gathered family members and they joined together in morning for their fallen son, brother, cousin, and comrade.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Hector pulled the trigger again and again channeling fresh rounds after each shot into the ancient Mauser. His thoughts were on his dead son and the rest of his family. Beside him were two of his other sons as they defiantly manned the barricade against the invading army.

Earlier that morning before the battle he had had a heated discussion with one of his sons. “But why are we fighting the Mexican Army Poppa?” His second son asked. “Aren’t we Mexican?”

Hector could feel the heat rising up within him. He answered gruffly in his thickly accented English. “Your mother and I did not work our fingers to the bone, travel all those hundreds of miles on foot and struggle our entire adult life to be peons again. NO Ernesto, we are Americans.” Hector looked fiercely into his son’s eyes. “Your brother Anthony died an American in an AMERICAN UNIFORM! I swore a scared oath to protect and defend this country and by the Holy Virgin I will do just that!”

“But aren’t they just like us?” He innocently asked.

Hector thought a moment. “No . . . no, they are not just like us.” His voice became calmer and he placed his rough-hewn hand on his son shoulder. “They were satisfied with their condition or too afraid to change it. We are Americans now. We fear nothing and no one. No man is our better. No one can tell us how to live or what to believe.” The rage was beginning to subside after breaking through his usually stoic demeanor. “And no one, Ernesto, no one invades our country!”

The meeting between the Georgia Militia leader and the Senior Senator from the Peach State was anticlimactic after the firefight in the woods.

“Welcome Senator what brings you into our neck of the woods.” Frank Redway the Georgia Militia Commander began.

“Well Commander I thought I do a little hunting. I hear skunk is in season and there’s a passel full of them hereabouts just raising cane with the local folks.”

The two men shook hands and measured each other. Their grips were firm but not antagonistic.

“Senator would you like to sit a spell and tell me what you have in mind?” Redway asked.

“That would be mighty kind of you Sir. I’ve had a bit of a walk this morning and I do believe these old dogs could do for a rest.”

“I understand you did a little more than just walking Senator.”

“That is true, yes, that is true. Thank you.” Eli accepted a steaming cup of Joe from one of the Commander’s aides. “

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“It seems that two of my constituents came to my door this morning and felt that I should come on over for a visit with you.”

“Why was that?”

“Well, I guess they felt that I could help in some way with the present situation.”

Redway eyed the Senator cautiously. “That would depend Sir on which side of the creek you are standing on.”

So there it was Eli thought. There was no politicking around this one. It was time to fish or cut bait. Up until this point he could straddle the fence and perhaps talk his way back into the good graces of whom ever was in power in Washington. But once he stepped over the line here, well . . . there would be no turning back.

“Commander.” Eli set down his coffee and slowly, painfully stood up and stuck out his right hand. He chose his words carefully and let them take their good Georgia time in coming out. His gentlemanly southern drawl seemed to be a little more pronounced and formal as he answered the Commander's question. “I don't take too kindly to someone burning down my home . . . killing my friends and guests . . . and taking pot shots at me. I know I'm a cantankerous old politician and I've created a few enemies during my long political career. But I think its time to draw the line when someone starts making it this personal.”

The growing gathering of militiamen seemed to lean forward to hear the Senator's next words.

“Commander, however I may be of service to you Sir. You may count on me.” He paused to look around the group. “However I will beseech you to remember that I am an old warhorse and may be of limited value to your efforts.”

Redway grasped the Senator's hand with both of his. “Senator that's not what I have heard from my troops in the field Sir. Apparently your eye sight and marksmanship are anything but limited.”

“Well Commander that is to be understood. After all I am a Georgian, and as a son of the Confederacy, rebel blood does flow through these old veins.”

A whoop and a holler rose up among the militiamen around them. Then for the second time today the Rebel Yell was heard once again emanating out of the Deep South.

Two shadows faded back away from the council gathering and skirted the large crowd. Together the pair moved off to a safe vantage point before speaking in hushed barely audible tones.

“What do you think Sequoia, is this for real?” Todd Curry asked his older friend.

The converted tree hugger cocked his head and thought about the question and what he had heard and seen over the last week. He had dropped out of university in his second year but recalled much of his Early American His-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

tory class and the fiery professor that taught it. Unlike the majority of his colleagues that taught from a liberal viewpoint only, old Maximillian Branton was definitely a firebrand of a teacher. More Libertarian and independent than his teaching cohorts his classes were alive with debate and discussion. Old Max was sharp and not a man to fence with if you didn't have all your ducks in a row. Sequoia had learned that more than once the hard way.

Max presented history from several points of view at the same time and forced the students to try and figure out where the truth lay in the process. Revisionist points, traditional points, conservative and liberal as well as extremist views of events were all brought forward and piled on the student's plates.

Max thoroughly enjoyed demolishing idyllic and naive students' world views with a flash of erupting wisdom. If nothing else was learned in his classes it was to always question the status quo and the propaganda fed to young minds on a daily basis.

"Everyone has an agenda." Was one of his famous sayings. Sequoia now focused on the recent events before answering.

"Yes I think this is very real. Up until now there has been no focus, no unity and no direction to the revolt. Just pockets of resistance here and there. That places the advantage to the established status quo. If these people here can truly come together and present a united front." He thought about it for a moment. "Then we will have a second Revolution of Independence."

"So there's more fighting ahead."

"A lot more I'm afraid. But then," He paused. "everything could just collapse if enough momentum suddenly presented itself." Sequoia shook his head. "Hell Todd anything could happen."

Just then Sequoia froze. Todd had heard it too. They were several hundred yards away from the gathering around the bonfire deep within the shadows of the night part way up the ridge that overlooked the McMillan homestead. It wasn't so much a sound that they had both heard as much as it was a sudden absence of the normal sounds of the night. There was someone above them on the ridge trying to be incredibly quiet.

Without a spoken word the two disappeared into the surrounding darkness and silently moved in opposite directions. Like a slowly rising fog they drifted in unison up the side of the ridge moving only inches at a time. Utilizing every sense they scanned the surrounding terrain for hidden intruder.

Todd heard their breathing first, one off to his left and a second slightly above and closer. Cautiously he inched painstakingly closer for what seemed like hours and then caught a glimpse of the faint glow of a night site device and the face behind it. Coming from underneath, hidden by the chaparral scrub and looking up the steep ridge Todd could just make out the outline of the device mounted on the rifle. Black where should have been stars.

How they hadn't seen his and Sequoia's arrival less than fifty yards below them seemed incredible to Todd. Now the question arose in his mind as to whether these were friend or foe. He inched closer and strained his

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

ears for any hint. He didn't have to wait very long before he was rewarded. He caught just wisps of their whispered voices but it was enough.

" . . . which ----- is he?"

"----- third ----- to the left."

"Dark sh-rt?"

"No ---cked sh-rt."

"Take --- now?"

"No ---t till -- stands."

There was a slight noise off in the distance further up the ridge above them. Todd was now within virtually inches of the pair of snipers. First one and then the other turned in the direction of the faint sound and that was when Todd attacked. He had wound himself up like a coiled spring as he had crawled closer and now he released himself. His right hand pulled his machete out of the sheath that hung from his left hip in one fluid motion and just as the big blade cleared the edge he flicked it out and caught the first man across the front of his throat nearly severing his head in the process. While still in mid air Todd violently twisted his upper body and delivered the slicing death blow just above the eyes of the second man embedding the heavy blade deep into his forehead. Two bounding steps and a swan dive into the sage bush just seconds later and nearly ten feet away Todd rolled and came up on to his stomach with this Beretta ready.

It was late as the gathering finally began to break up. David had felt that while it was productive there were still a lot of issues yet to be ironed out. No wonder it took so many years to go from Declaration of Independence to the Constitution. He shook his head as he walked up towards the steps of his home. Sheriff, now General Eckert, accompanied his friend back for a late night cup of coffee with perhaps a spot of the Irish in it when one of his men came running frantically forward.

"Sheriff, Sheriff, you won't believe what we just found!" The deputy blurted out.

"Now calm down Ken. Take a breath and tell me what you've got."

"Ah . . . well, er . . . ah. SHIT Sheriff er I mean General, you won't believe . . . you gotta look at this!" He pointed off to the corner of the McMillan porch.

David and Erik picked up their pace and reached the cause of the deputies excited chattering. There hog tied to a supporting post was a man looking well the worse for wear. David's eyes followed the Deputies flashlight down to the man's feet where two heads sat next to a snipers rifle along with a small note.

Erik bent over and retrieved the note and read the handwritten message there.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“There are traitors among you. Here are three. Ask this corporal of Homeland Security anything you like. If he doesn’t tell you what you want to know, just leave him out tomorrow night.”

Erik looked at the stunned face of his friend and governor.

“Looks like you have guardian angels looking out for you Dave.”

“No shit!” Was his response.

Colonel Ernesto Fuentes pulled himself from the burning wreckage of his command car and rolled away from the carnage. He lay on his back panting and tried to fill his lungs with precious air, but the dark smoke from the burning tires made breathing difficult and painful. Slowly, painfully he managed to pull himself to his feet and stagger away into the shadows. In the last seventy-two hours he had witnessed his entire division mauled into oblivion. Not by regular forces but by mere civilians. The further north he drove his forces the more resistant became his opposition until he had hit a wall trying to climb out of the Los Angeles and Pomona Valley basins. In the foothills as the choice of routes narrowed the Norte Americano’s finally put up a defensive perimeter he could not just roll over. Then from all sides and angles the Yankees came out of the cracks and crevices and cut his men down with a vengeance. There was no quarter given or taken. It had been a blood bath on both sides, but the number of Mexican Special Forces troops was finite, while there never seemed to be an end of the white devils . . . and even his transplanted cousins, fellow Mexicans illegally hiding in Southern California for decades also stood up against his forces. There seemed to be no end to the treachery. What was to become a shiny addition to ol’ Mexico reclaimed, the fabled Aztlan had become a nightmare and a death trap.

The Colonel could hear footsteps running in his direction. Shots suddenly filled the night, coming from area of the burning wreck he had just abandoned. Those damn Gringo’s and their traitors would leave no one alive. Deeper into the night Fuentes pushed, deeper into the soft velvet of darkness he moved as silently as he could. If he could only get home now, there he would be safe. There he could lay down his head and sleep. Then a chilling thought crossed through his mind.

‘If I still have a home.’ He paused in the bushes of a Spanish looking house. “The Americans will never forgive Mexico for this invasion.” He muttered to himself in his native tongue.

‘Weak as they might be now,’ He thought. ‘we have failed. And he knew that the Norte Americano’s would never forgive his country for this attack. He thought back to a famous military leader from another time and from another country. It was the words of Admiral Yamamoto that echoed back across the canyons of time and now brought a chill to the Colonel’s spine.

“I fear we have awoken a sleeping giant.”

If this raid north to reclaim the fabled property of Aztlan was viewed by the American’s as another Pearl Harbor . . . The air rushed out his lungs. Then we’re doomed. The American’s had not hesitated to drop nuclear weapons on Japan. Even though they only had two. Now they had hundreds if not thousands.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

A bright light suddenly hit Colonel Fuentes in the face. HE WAS FOUND!

Behind the light came the sound of familiar words that asked him if he was an “Aztlán liberator?” The accent was familiar and reminded him of his home province.

“Si, Si!” He replied quickly. He started to relax as the thought that he had luckily found an ally crossed his mind. Then the flashlight suddenly became brighter and something heavy landed on his chest. But he was standing up? Then the pain registered in his brain as he realized that he was falling and falling and falling as the light faded away.

Marie Ortiz-Mendez stood over the remains of the Mexican Colonel and jacked another round into chamber of the pump shotgun.

In slightly accented but perfect English she muttered. “That was for my son.”

She sent a second twenty gauge buckshot round into the quivering mass sprawled out before her and ended the last vestiges of its struggle for life.

“And that was for my country!”

Chapter 79 - Welcome Home

Research had been done to determine the longevity of many of the great civilizations, which have existed in world history. The conclusion was that those great civilizations had endured for an average close to two hundred years.

The historical cycle of great civilizations first progressed, then regressed as follows:

*All civilizations began in bondage, then proceeded;
from bondage to great spiritual strength,
from great spiritual strength to freedom,
from freedom to abundance,
from abundance to complacency,
from complacency to apathy,
from apathy to dependence,
from dependence back to bondage - from Bound to be Free by L. Arthur Womer, Jr., Ph.D.*

Where do you think we (America) currently are in that cycle?

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

They had been listening to the short-wave intensely over the last couple of weeks. Zipper had virtually glued himself to the headset 24/7, to ensure that nothing important was missed. Things were not going well back in the states as they had suspected. There was civil unrest at home, which was bad enough but now the airways were filled with the news of an invasion of the Southwestern United States by forces unknown from south of the border and the Marines on board Izzard's Revenge were intensely on edge over the news.

Ian had originally intended to sail up the Mexican coast and into the port at San Diego where he hoped to discharge his cargo of lost Marine puppies, collect a fat reward for his efforts and head home a hero. But now . . . all bets were off. There was no way they would go anywhere near the Mexican coast and anything south of Ventura was a battle ground from all radio reports. Even though Ian flew the Australian flag over his catamaran he had no intention of testing the waters of international diplomacy or of getting within two days sailing of the Southern California coastline under these highly questionable circumstances.

"So what are our options Skipper?" SSgt Larkin asked Izzard's skipper.

"Well mate, the 'hole southern end of the state is total bollocks." The Aussie began. "Zipper tells me 'ere's a new state up in the north called Jefferson, or Washington or something."

"Washington is already a state." Sgt. Stevens corrected.

"It's Jefferson." Yahzee added.

"What's Jefferson?" Chavez asked.

"The new state." Yahzee added again.

"Can they do that?" Chavez asked

"Wh't e'ver gents. It's not important, what is important is that we have some place safe to pull into. And we ain't pulling into the middle of a war zone. Not wit my boat."

"No one is asking you to do that Ian." Kat calmly stated. "Besides we're hardly big enough to stage an amphibious landing with just six Marines."

"And one doggy." Zipper added quickly and then just as quickly ducked and backed out of Kat's immediate elbow range.

"OK, OK, that's enough Marines." Larkin attempted to regain order.

"Ian's right, we've got to come up with a plan here. We're less than a week out and I don't want to be fighting our way ashore after all we're already been through just to get here." Larkin argued.

All the heads nodded in agreement.

"Now . . . Zipper, what's the scoop on this new state?" SSgt Larkin asked.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Zipper stepped back into the circle around the chart table with a map of the California coast.

“Well as you know things have sort of gone to shit while we were gone. There’s been at least two plagues, or the first coming back around, that have severely whacked the sandcrabs,”

“Sandcrabs?” Ian said under his breath with a puzzled look on his face.

Larkin leaned over and whispered. “Civilians.”

“Ohhh.” He returned his attention to the their radioman.

“Some folks are saying this stuff is worse than the Spanish Influenza and the Black Death. I don’t know about that, you’ll have to ask Kat on that stuff. Anyways then there was a third kind of plague that doesn’t do anything to people but instead just about killed all the major crops all across the country.” Yahzee looked over to their Army Medic. “Black Death? Spanish Influenza? I thought we could treat that kind of stuff now a days?”

Kat shook her head. “Why do you think I gave you all that shots when we were on the island?”

All the Marines grimaced and several rubbed their arms with the memory still very fresh in their minds.

“I don’t know what killed all those people back on the island, but it wasn’t like anything I had ever seen before. That’s why I wouldn’t let any of you go into town. There is no way of telling just what the hell we’re dealing with here.”

“But the Black Death, wasn’t that like a long time ago in the Middle Ages?” Steven’s asked.

“No it’s never really ever left. It’s just easy to treat now with penicillin. But the Spanish Influenza was a virus, a very deadly virus and antibiotics can’t touch it. But if some sicko has come up with a new disease . . . we could be in a lot of trouble.” Kat said flatly. “A whole shit pot full of trouble.”

Zipper looked around the group and continued. “Then as if that wasn’t bad enough, it now sounds like there was some sort of attack on our leaders in Washington too. It took out most of congress including the President and a bunch of higher ups. So now we’ve got some guy named Thompson acting as the President and everything is falling apart everywhere.”

He took a breath. “So it sounds like everyone is on their own. Except where the Homeland Security Forces are in control.”

“Well at lease someone is doing something.” Kat interjected.

“Oh no . . . that’s not good, not good at all!” Zipper continued. “It seems that HSF’s are rounding up all the people that have survived and are putting them into, quote “Relocation Camps”. But all the talk on the different freq’s is calling them concentration camps or work camps. It must be bad because people are actually fighting the HSF’s. It sounds like there’s a fricken war going on all across the country.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Fighting?” Several voices spoke up at once.

“Yeah. The President has declared martial law all across the country and even asked for UN forces come in and put down the “Rebels”.

“That’s bad, that is definitely bad.” Larkin commented.

“Yeah, everything is in a major shit, Staff Sergeant.”

”They say the Constitution and the Bill of Rights have been suspended. All civilian guns are outlawed and the government has shoot on sight orders for anyone caught with a weapon. There’s a dusk to dawn curfews across the entire country. Food rationing, starvation, it’s like totally insane.”

“Bloody bollocks, Zipper is there any good news?” Ian asked.

“Well, I’ve been listening lately to several different stations, when I can get them, from what is being called the “Free State of Jefferson”. I guess California has split, oh and Oregon too.”

“Oregon? What’s Oregon have to do with California?” Steven’s asked.

“I’m not sure, but parts of, I think southern Oregon and parts of northern California have joined together to make the State of Jefferson.”

“Is that Thomas Jefferson or Jefferson Davis?” Stevens asked.

“Ahh, Thomas Jefferson from what I’ve heard so far.” Zipper answered.

“Does that make a difference, it’s like every thing is totally screwed up, man.” Chavez grunted.

“It makes a big difference,” Kat stepped into the conversation. “Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, and was a major influence on designing of both the Constitution and Bill of Rights, not to mention one of our first presidents. Jefferson Davis was president of the Confederacy fighting to keep slavery during the Civil War.”

“War of Northern Aggression, Kat, and slavery was just one of the issues of that war.” Larkin interrupted. “It’s all a matter of perspective depending on where you’re standing.”

“ENOUGH OF THIS SHIT! WHERE THE HELL ARE WE GOING TO GO?!” Chavez yelled.

Larkin gave his angry Lance Corporal a chillingly stern look.

“No disrespect Staff Sergeant, but I got family, or maybe had family in L.A. We don’t know shit about what is going on back home and you want to argue history!” He stomped away and leaned cross-armed and disgusted against the main mast staring back with an angry scowl on his face.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Larkin looked back stunned, then angry, then he began to relax. “Chavez is right. We’ve got to concentrate on the mission.”

“What mission?”

“To get back home and protect and defend the Constitution of the United States. Remember that little thing call ‘The Oath of Enlistment’?”

“But on whose side Staff Sergeant, everything is mixed up.”

Zipper stepped back into the conversation. “Heeeelllllooooo, can I finish here?”

Everyone looked back to their radioman.

“Thank you. Like I was saying, I’ve been listening to a lot of radio traffic and from what I’ve heard this State of Jefferson IS going along with the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.” Zipper began to count off the various points on the fingers of one hand.

“They are not going along with the “INVASION” of the Homeland Security Forces. They don’t recognize the illegal orders of the federal government and they have formed a state militia that has defended them against the black shirts at least twice. And they have freed all the ‘Relocation Camps’ in their area.”

“Hmmmmmm.” SSgt Larkin was deep in thought. “So where are our military forces?”

“Not a clue Staff Sergeant, not a fricken clue.” Zipper replied.

Larkin looked around the chart table and the faces of the motley crew of the Izzard’s Revenge. He was in charge of the Marines on board, senior to the Medic and could legally and lawfully order them to go wherever he felt they should. But this decision had to be democratic. They were going to have to choose sides when they landed and it was not going to be an easy issue to decide under the current situation. Larkin began to tear up a sheet of paper until Kat put her hand on his.

“Trevor, we’re big people here and we’re a team. Let’s have it out and in the open.” She said quietly.

Larkin looked around the table. Even Chavez had stepped back into the debate. They all agreed. Larkin looked first to his squad machine gunner, Sergeant Stevens.

“I like the idea of defending the Constitution Staff Sergeant. I don’t like concentration camps.” He looked around the table. “I vote Jefferson.”

“Zipper your next.”

“Jefferson sounds good to me. I’ve met some of those Home Shit Fuckers . . . and they’re all assholes.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“I grew up on the rez . . . I don’t like camps of any sort. Jefferson.” Yahzee answered.

Kat looked around quickly. “Jefferson sounds good to me.”

Every one looked at Ian, who gave a flabbergasted look back. “I’m not part of your bloody invasion. I’m dropping you crazy yanks off and then I’m cutting out of here for someplace saner like the middle of the bloody ocean.”

Chavez was next. “I say we find out who the ‘pootah’s are that invaded our turf and kick their ass.”

“What if they are Mexican or South American?” Kat asked.

“FUCK THEM! It’s me barrio, not their barrio.”

“So your vote Chavez?”

“I go where the Staff Sergeant goes. Just as long as we kick some ass!”

Larkin was the last to vote and all eyes were on him.

“Well I guess it’s down to me then.” He paused. “I have to say I don’t like any of the choices. I like things clean and clear cut, but that’s not going to happen here. It sounds like we’re walking, excuse me . . . sailing into a pissed off hornets nest. We don’t really know who’s on which side. We don’t know where our own military is or what they are doing. Frankly . . . we don’t know squat, but we’ve got to land somewhere.”

Larkin stood up and stretched his back. Several vertebra popped. Then he drew in a large breath and scratched his head.

“For right now . . . I vote we head towards this State of Jefferson. Zipper I want those radio’s manned around the clock. We all take turns. I don’t want to miss anything. Write everything down.” He turned and took two steps away from the group and looked out over the mild swells rolling across a deep blue Pacific Ocean.

“In the mean time we will go through every single piece of equipment and weapon we have, and I mean everything. Clean it, oil it, test it, and get it ready.” He looked around the group before him. “We’ve got a landing to prepare for and someone somewhere is not going to like it, so be ready . . . for anything.”

“Ooo Rah, Staff Sergeant, Semper Fi!” Stevens barked and was quickly joined by the other Marines.

There was still the sound of sporadic gunfire in the distance. The hollow pops of which echoed through the destroyed city. Damian looked over the carnage that had been wrought and the bodies that still littered the empty streets and the piles of rubble that had once been homes and businesses. It was all such a waste. If only the government had continued to ignore them and leave them alone. They were making it, they were actually making it.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

After all the heartache and death from the plague. Defeating the roving gangs of vermin that seemed to flood out of the darkness of the human soul. After fighting back starvation, disease, death and the destruction of the very world they had always known. To be forced to defend themselves against their very own government was the final straw.

Thank God, the lightening raid against the head of the invading snake had taken the wind out of the Homeland Security Forces attack. Ambush, booby traps, and tenacious defense had won the day, but at such a high cost that Damian felt sick just thinking about it. The stench of death was everywhere. It's sickeningly sweet odor hung thick in the air and there was no way to avoid it.

They would rebuild he was sure of that. The government troops had only penetrated the outer defense ring before being thrown back. But the artillery and mortar fire had burned or destroyed nearly half of the reconstructed inner city. Over half of their fields had been destroyed and nearly as many warehouses. It was going to be a long and very cold winter and they had little time to repair the damage before it set in.

Damian had been hearing rumors of a new free state forming out in the far West. He liked what he had heard about it. They were said to be defiantly constitutional and that idea sounded really good to him. There had also been rumors and stories of free zones popping up in the Colorado mountains; Idaho, up in Michigan, Wisconsin and down south in the Bible Belt. It seemed that all across the nation the people were finally starting to stand up for themselves and take back their country. He hoped the rumors were true. Perhaps, just perhaps they could pull themselves back together.

High overhead two Air Force jets flew towards their intended target. They had just received the designated codes to engage their nuclear weapons on the newly acquired target. Lieutenant Colonel Anderson looked back down at the message screen.

"YOU'VE GOT TO BE SHITTING ME!" He said in utter disbelief.

Chapter 80 - The Darker Side of Twilight

Robert J. Oppenheimer, an American physicist was instrumental in the creation of the atomic bomb of which he said, when viewing the test, (quoting Vishnu) "We have become Death, the destroyer of worlds".

There is a limit to the practical application of democratic methods. You can inquire of all the passengers as to what type of car they like to ride in, but it is impossible to question them as to whether to apply the brakes when the train is at full speed and accident threatens. " - Leon Trotsky

The proverb warns that; 'You should not bite the hand that feeds you.' But maybe you should if it prevents you from feeding yourself. - Thomas Szasz

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

LtCol. Edward Anderson couldn't believe his eyes as he re-read the message crossing his command screen. He was being ordered by the President of the United States to drop a nuclear device on American soil; on Americans for that matter. He rubbed his eyes again and then asked his REO for confirmation.

"Dale am I'm seeing this right?" He exclaimed. "Confirm this Dale, request immediate confirmation!"

"Roger Skipper, order is confirmed and activation codes are verified. The order's legitimate!"

"LEGITIMATE MY ASS!" Anderson shouted. "We are not nuking an American City! This has to be bullshit! Request that verification AGAIN!"

"Joker One this is Joker Two . . . Joker One this is Joker Two - over."

Anderson swore under his breath. "Roger Joker Two this is Joker One copy."

"Interrogative Com Link One Target?"

"Hold Joker two, we're requesting verification of Com One target."

Anderson shook his head. 'That damn tight ass, rank grabbing, academy puke . . . ' He thought to himself. 'He can see the order just as clear as I can! Damn it Dale hurry up!'

The seconds ticked by - but felt like hours in the passing.

"Skipper it's real. Verification authenticated times two." Came the reply from Anderson's back seat.

The mission commander shook his head. 'Just what in the hell are they thinking in DC? This is insane!' "Dale There's no way Washington can be ordering this! Some one down there has seriously fucked up!"

His REO shook his helmeted head in agreement. "But Colonel . . . what are we going to do?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?? You can't be serious! Those are orders from the Boss himself! You just can't ignore orders." Dale questioned.

"The hell I can't. I'm the mission commander. I can't and I won't believe these are lawful orders." Anderson raised his visor and rubbed his eyes.

The world had gone from just plain miserable to beyond stupid in the last two minutes.

"Joker Two this is Joker One . . . Abort, I say again, Abort and return to base."

"Interrogative Joker One, say again all your last?" Major Jack Jamison replied as he flew off his CO's wing.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

‘Just what the hell was going on over there?’ Jamison thought to himself. The orders were clear. They had been ordered to waste Chicago, for whatever reason, by the Commander In Chief himself and now the old man was losing his nerve. Well Jamison had never liked the ol’ fart. Anderson was a Mustang after all, and just a bit too friendly with the troops for his liking. ‘Too touchy feely with the non-coms and all, just not a proper officer, and now he didn’t have the nerve to carry out the hard orders.’ Jamison banked slightly away from his CO and began plotting the final run in to the target.

Anderson caught the movement out of the corner of his eye and repeated his orders.

“Joker Two you are to ABORT! I SAY AGAIN! THE MISSION IS SCRUBBED! ABORT! ABORT! ABORT!”

Jamison came back calmly over the headset to Anderson.

“Mission is confirmed. Target acquired. Codes loaded and weapons hot. Now on final vector to target.”

“JAMISON ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR FUCKING MIND! THOSE ARE AMERICANS DOWN THERE! THIS HAS TO BE A MISTAKE, ABORT! ABORT! ABORT! THAT IS AN ORDER!”

“Negative on abort Colonel. Mission confirmed and verified. Proceeding to target.”

Anderson banged his head against his ejection seat, then spoke quickly to his REO on the cabin interlink.

“Dale get us weapons hot NOW!”

“The nuke too Sir?”

“NOT THE NUKE! EVERYTHING ELSE! IF THAT FUCKING IDIOT DOESN’T TURN AROUND WE’RE GOING TO DROP HIM OUT OF THE SKY!”

Anderson switched back to the combat frequency. “JAMISON THAT IS AN AMERICAN CITY! WE DO NOT DROP NUKES ON OUR CITIZENS! NOW YOU EITHER ABORT THE DAMN MISSION OR I WILL ABORT YOU MYSELF!”

“Negative Colonel. Mission is go per orders of the President of the United States.”

“JAMISON YOU JACKASS, THOSE ORDERS CAN’T BE LAWFUL! No President of this country would drop nuclear bombs on his own people. THINK MAN! THINK!”

Jamison did think, he thought about the promotion he’d get for following his orders and the court martial of man blocking his promotion to squadron commander. A sick smile broke across his face.

“Sorry Colonel, orders are orders.” Jamison paused. “We don’t make the decisions . . . we just execute them . . . out . . . Sir.” He added sarcastically and then banked hard and away from his commanding officer and began a series of erratic maneuvers.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“DAMIT!” Anderson jinked and began a snap roll to follow his wingman . . . and stop him in any way he could.
“Dale this is gonna get nasty!”

“No Shit . . . Sir!” His REO grunted against the “G’s” as the fight was on.

“So Commander, or do I call you General?” Eli asked.

“Frank will do just fine Senator.” The commander of the Georgia Militia answered.

“Then Eli suits me as well.” The senator from Georgia added. “So what kind of a mess have we gotten ourselves into son?”

“Well Sir. . . er . . . Eli, I would put us somewhere between a rock and a very hard place.”

“Oh that's good.” Eli took another sip of his hot coffee and leaned back in his chair. He was tired, so very tired. But he knew that there was a very long and difficult road ahead of them and he was more than willing to do his part, but just what that part would be he didn't, at this moment, have a clue.

“And getting better by the minute. Best guesstimates are that a full one third, possibly as much as one half of our fellow Americans haven't made it through this far.”

Eli's eyebrows rose at the thought of such a disaster.

Redway continued. “Between the plague, disease, starvation, civil strife, riots, nationwide blackout and anything else you'd like to throw into the mix including several thousand A-rab Jee-hadist that started this shit in the first place, we've now got the White House and over Half of the Congress either dead, missing, or in hiding!”

Eli bolted upright. “I thought it was just me they were after?”

“You sir and anyone else that might oppose the new order that is being put into power right now in Washington.”

For the next several hours Commander Redway debriefed his State's Senator on just what the Militia had been able to garner in the way of intelligence from across the nation since the American Holocaust had begun. To say that the color rose in the elder statesman neck and cheeks would be a gross understatement.

The pieces of the puzzle were finally beginning to fall into place for Eli. Not all the pieces, but enough that a very frightening picture was beginning to come fully into focus. He had been duped! He and so many others had played right into the palms of the power brokers behind all this. Vague images of faces were forming on the edge of his thoughts. Faces without names; names without faces, agendas hidden within agendas. Finally the elderly statesman could stand no more.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“How in the Sam-Hell could you know all this? I’ve barely known half of what you’ve been telling me for over the last hour and I’m on the inside of some of the most prestigious and classified congressional committees in the Congress!” He bellowed!

Redway stood his ground and looked squarely into the senator’s eyes. “Then tell me I’m wrong Senator.” He said flatly.

Eli stomped and kicked the ground. “Hell no you’re not wrong! Dammit all the pieces fit. BY GOD ALL MIGHTY WE’VE BEEN HAD!” He spit in anger.

“God had nothing to do with it Eli and you know it.” Redway answered sternly.

“Why the hell do you think I’m so mad? We did it to ourselves. TO OURSELVES!” He tossed the half empty coffee cup across the command tent. “We knew better, WE KNEW BETTER and still allowed ourselves to be sucked into the middle of this mess!”

The Senator was on a roll and Redway let him go.

“Those sly little bastards just led us along the primrose path and we sucked it all up. AND NOW WHERE THE HELL HAS THAT GOTTEN US?!?” The anger was burning and rising all the higher the more he thought about it. Suddenly he turned and narrowed his eyes. There sitting in the corner was that newsman . . . from . . . where? Oh yes.

“BENNETT GET YOUR LIBERAL YOUNG ASS OVER HERE SON!” The senator roared.

As if pulled by some invisible string the NPR reporter jerked and stood up in shock.

“Yes . . . Yes . . . Sir . . . er . . . ah . . . Senator, Sir!” He stuttered.

“Bennett I’ve got a job for you lad, and you’re going to do exactly as I tell you, understand?” Eli grabbed the young man by the shoulder and gave it a not so friendly squeeze.

Mark Bennett’s head jerked in affirmation like a bobbly-headed statue on four-wheel drive’s dashboard going down a washboard road. He didn’t know what he had to do but he was not about to disagree anyone that could drop you dead in the dirt at five hundred yards in the blink of an eye. Besides which he had been listened intently to every word between the two men and was still in shock that Eli Simpson confirmed nearly every thing that came out of the Georgia Militia Commanders mouth. It was too much, just too much to even consider that everything he had ever learned, known, seen or heard about his government and country was so skewed in the wrong direction.

Bennett’s head was swimming as the congressman began to map out his plan and Bennett’s part in it. Never was Mark asked if he was willing to be a part of this strategy . . . some how he had been volunteered . . . or perhaps drafted would be a better word. He continued to bob his head in affirmation barely keeping up with the senator. The reality of the situation suddenly came crashing down on him and he sat down gasping for breath.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Eli looked at the stunned face of the young liberal reporter and suddenly realized that he was hyperventilating. He quickly pushed Bennett's head between his knees and ordered the young man to push back against his hand and to take slow deep breaths.

"Redway get me a paper sack . . . quickly!"

Someone thrust a brown lunch bag into Mark's face and held it over his mouth and nose. Mark started to struggle and tried to push the sack away but the booming voice of the Georgia Senator penetrated his foggy thoughts and reluctantly he obeyed.

After several minutes Mark felt better and through the bag asked if he could put it down and sit up.

"Sure son, but you just hang on to it for a little bit as I'm not done talking." Eli warned him.

Mark was shaking his head as he thought over what the Senator was planning. It took him a few minutes but he finally pulled up enough courage to speak his mind.

"Senator you really can't be serious Sir?"

"And why not?" Eli looked at Mark in disbelief.

"But Sir you are talking about taking over the federal government . . . Sir that's . . . that's . . ." Mark caught his breath. "That's treason . . . isn't it?"

The color was beginning to rise in the elder statesman's neck again. "Son, you forget . . . I AM THE GOVERNMENT. There are . . . were," He corrected himself. "Were over five hundred of us DULY ELECTED that were the government. We're called Senators and Representatives. But that's not what's sitting in the Whitehouse right now. That man and the people behind him were NEVER ELECTED! And it will be a cold day in HELL, before I stand by and let this country be taken over by the likes of them. NO SIR-REE! NOT THIS SENATOR FROM THE GREAT STATE OF GEORGIA!"

Very quickly the mission went from routine to insane to totally insane as the two aircraft were now locked in mortal combat at mach speed. Both pilots were graduates of the Air Force's Red Flag combat training program and strapped into the most advanced fighter/attack aircraft in the world with weapons hot and throttles locked.

Anderson was staying glued to his wingman's tail as the pair ripped through the northern Illinois autumn sky. Sonic booms thundered across the landscape as they maneuvered in and out of speed each trying to get a piece of the other's action.

"JAMISON IF YOU DON'T ABORT RIGHT THIS SECOND I WILL REMOVE YOU FROM THE SKY! TINSDALE IF YOUR PILOT WILL NOT ABORT YOU BETTER PUNCH OUT BECAUSE I'M SHOOTING THAT PLANE DOWN!" Anderson screamed into his mike one last time . . . in vain.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Jamison broke away and twisted the F/A-22 Delta Raptor in a manner that would have ripped the wings off nearly any other jet in the world. Kicking the big Pratt and Whitney's in the backside and vectoring the thrust at the limit of the airframe he finally managed to break away from the vicious pursuit of his squadron commander.

Anderson realized that he couldn't hold his trailing position and couldn't gain tone in time decided to snap rolled away from the pursuit and began to jockey for a second attempt. Both planes broke the sound barrier again as they squared off for the second round of the battle.

Suddenly Anderson got a flash of inspiration. "Dale, send out our position and get ready to pickle the Arrow!"

"WHAT?" His REO replied in total shock.

"AH, ah, Ed your can't jettison our nuke!"

"Like hell I can't. It's essentially inert until we arm it. We might get a broken arrow but we won't, can't, set it off by dropping it now. And Dale suck up the externals as quick as you can and pickle them . . . NOW GET ON IT! We need all the edge we can get . . ."

Suddenly the missile lock on warning screamed in the cockpit. "HOW THE HELL?"

Jamison was moving in for a kill shot and Anderson had seconds to make the right move.

"TONE! WE'RE LOCKED! SHIT ED SHIT!"

Anderson put all of his twenty-three years of experience to the metal, or actually titanium, composite and plastic, spinning his bird away from the advancing missile.

"FLARES, FLARES, FLARES, FLARES!" Dale screamed as he began launching counter measures and craned his head to keep his eyes on the inbound missile. "BANK RIGHT!"

Anderson kicked it in the ass again, grunting against the excessive G's. He had an angry hornet trying to crawl up his tailpipe and shatter his reality into to a billion pieces. He jerked back the throttle and kicked the rudders hard and nearly stood the Raptor on its nose before spinning away from the missile and blasting away from the kill zone. The missile exploded sending out its deadly cone of death but Anderson wasn't there. A few fragments just tagged the tail section of his bird but he had escaped death.

It took a few seconds for Jamison to realize exactly what he had just seen, but only a few seconds. He was back again vectoring in on Anderson and this time he was sure he would end this game once and for all.

"External drained and . . ." The aircraft gave a momentary shudder as the two external fuel tanks dropped away. ". . . pickled." Dale informed his skipper. "Are you sure about the nuke Boss?"

"Give me a clean airframe Dale, I'm going hunting!" Anderson growled.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Ten seconds later the big bird shuddered again as the nuclear device began its descent twelve thousand feet to the earth below.

“I sure hope your right about that thing Sir. It just don’t seem right.” Dale commented.

“You’ll have to trust me on that kid . . . now lets get back into the fight.” Anderson could see the fabled windy city far off on the horizon. It was way too close for comfort and the Colonel knew that if he didn’t take his wingman down soon he would have failed not only his career, but his country as well. “Now get me to the church on time Dale!”

The two aircraft squared away for round two. This time they faced each other nose to nose and were converging at a combined speed nearing mach four. Jamison locked on two AIM-120D AMRAAM missiles on the converging target on his threat screen that was his soon to be ex-commanding officer. He had a mission to complete and this traitor was in his way. Anderson readied his weapons as well but instead of missiles he powered up his M61A3 Vulcan cannon. He was going to fly right at the bastard and see if he could force a couple of hundred 20 mm depleted uranium rounds down his throat.

Thousands of feet below a handful of bewildered civilians watched in curiosity the jostling aircraft overhead and wondered what was going on. Little did they know that their fate might well be determined by the outcome of the contest high overhead.

Jamison cut his missiles loose first and began to break right. Anderson’s back seat began his frantic motions across his instrument panel to activate every countermeasure he could reach and think of in the seconds that remained. Meanwhile Anderson kicked his bird into the evasive maneuvers necessary to survive the twin arrows of death and line up the big gun at the same time. His gripped the stick slightly tighter as he fired up the Gatling gun and watched it spew forth his vengeance and defiance.

Jamison suddenly realized that was happening when the first rounds punched right through his port wing and one screamed across in front of his canopy! “SHIT!” He screamed as he contorted his bird out of the path of a hundred or so miniature meteorites.

For Anderson two lucky rounds impaled themselves into the lead AMRAAM missile and resulted in a fiery termination of that individual threat. But the second missile was closing in and none the worse for wear. He managed to place just enough space between him and the missile that it did not self destruct but instead suddenly turned back to run him down. Now with a death threat trailing behind and the nuclear threat of Jamison in the front Anderson kicked the Raptor hard in the seat of the pants and extended out as quickly as he could. What ever happened he had to stop his wingman from launching that damn bomb . . . even if that meant he had to ram him.

Dale scanned the sky for both the oncoming missile and his insane executive officer. ‘Boy talk about a total shit sandwich.’ He thought to himself. “SHIT! THERE THEY ARE!”

The hunt was on again. Anderson readied every missile and offensive capability he had. He was taking Jamison down, plain and simple.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

The engines burned nearly white hot as they raced on to almost certain death. Behind them quickly approaching was one of the most advanced medium-range Air-to-Air missiles in the inventory. Tracking mercilessly as it agonizingly began to close the gap. Jamison was on the final approach and just seconds away from launch when every missile-warning indicator began to go off. Anderson had him lit up like a Christmas tree. He was only seconds away from completing his mission.

Tinsdale, his REO, finally realized the insanity of the situation and punched out, without saying a single word. Jamison thought at first the bird had been hit but then he realized his back seat was no longer with him.

“COWARDS! They’re all cowards!” He screamed and slammed both the throttle and stick forward. He would take it down low and nasty; he would complete the mission if he had to pull the pin himself!

“SKIPPER IN BOUND MISSILE ON OUR LEFT! BREAK RIGHT . . . NOW!”

Anderson slammed the stick over but not quite quick enough as razor sharp shards shattered the left side of the aircraft. Most of the damage was to the underside of the plane and had to pass through the wing before making their way to the cockpit, but enough did to shatter the canopy and the soft human flesh inside.

It was everything that Anderson could do to keep the plane in the air with warning lights and flashing failure signals filling every sight and sound in the cramped cabin.

“I’M HIT, I’M HIT!” Dale screamed and he reeled from the violent explosion that was turning their multi-million dollar aircraft into so much junk.

“But the old man is still flying the bastard” Anderson thought to himself as he tried to maintain his bird in the air and get back into the battle as well. The pair, both wounded, began to act as one switching over to functional circuits as fast as they could.

‘Thank God for redundancy.’ Anderson grunted as the wounded bird shuddered under the strain but managed to keep flying.

The seconds ticked by as Raptor began to come alive again and though shaking and resisting its orders banked back into the attack. Anderson now had altitude on his wingman and bore down on him as he rode the bucking bronc in for his last chance to finish this fight.

“Skipper I can only get one missile to light up and I’m not certain it will fly. I’ve got engine warning lights up the wazoo and this bitch is shaking like a virgin that just got cornered by ship full of horny sailors!”

“Nag, nag, nag.” Anderson mocked. “Just keep me in the air for a few more seconds.”

“But what are we going to fight with. Everything’s SHOT!”

“I’ve still got guns.”

“ARE YOU NUTS? GUNS AT . . .”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“OH MY GOD HE’S STARTED THE LOOP!” Anderson yelled.

The loop was a maneuver first used by the Israeli’s to loft a bomb into a target without directly exposing the aircraft to enemy anti-aircraft fire. It is much like an underhanded softball pitch. The aircraft begins a shallow dive, gaining speed and then pulls up quickly. At just the right moment it releases the payload and lofts it several miles high overhead and into the target while at the same time completing the loop and making for home base never actually seeing the intended victim.

Anderson pushed his wounded bird forward with everything he had. His finger hovered on the trigger as Jamison’s aircraft inched closer and closer. The big barrels began to spin up and once they were at optimum rotation began coughing out the last of over two hundred remaining rounds of the dense conical shaped demons that belched forward and raced headlong towards their intended target. Had Jamison looked behind and over his left shoulder he would have seen the rain of death that was headed straight at him. The first round was just thirteen feet from the top of the canopy when the electronic signal completed its journey through the fiber optic cable and released the bomb. Jamison would never know if he was successful or not. He would not receive his promotion, nor the acclaim he felt was due him. In fact no one would ever really remember who he was. The twenty-millimeter round pierced the canopy at super sonic speed and literally sheered off the executive officers right side before punching out through the bottom of the aircraft. Jamison had less than a second before the next rounds nearly vaporized the cockpit and sealed his fate.

Anderson was deadly accurate in his last burst as the first dozen rounds shredded the cockpit of his adversary. The rest rippled down the fuselage and turned it into Swiss cheese before spewing out into open space. The bomb did not get away unscathed as several rounds that passed through the aircraft managed to take out pieces of the outer shell casing before spinning off into space.

The bomb lost its aerodynamic grace and began to spin uncontrollably.

Anderson shot past the Jamison’s disintegrating aircraft just before it completely exploded and rained down in pieces onto the suburbs below. It was then that Dale spotted the spinning dark cylinder.

“SHIT . . . HE LAUNCHED IT!! OH MY GOD!”

“WHAT?”

“THE BOMB, I JUST SAW THE BOMB!”

“SHIT!” Anderson exclaimed as he pushed the throttle forward on the wounded bird, causing it to stutter and shudder as it tried to respond clawing for airspeed to escape the inevitable spinning doom behind them.

The cylinder lost its momentum and began falling to earth.

Anderson raced his wounded war bird as fast as he dared all the time fighting the glitchy controls as he tried to gain altitude and speed at the same time. Seconds ticked by and each precious second giving him a little more needed distance, but would it be enough?

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Far short of it's intended destination the bomb crashed through the roof of an abandoned suburban home and smashed it's way through the second story floor and bouncing off the concrete slab before shooting out through the side wall and into the next house. In all it careened through several houses before finally settling in the forth house in that line where is sat motionless just waiting . . . waiting . . . waiting . . . for a small explosion to suddenly take place.

Seconds ticked by in the damaged device, then minutes until that instant. In less than a microsecond, the fireball was instantly formed and 400feet in diameter. In ten seconds it had expanded to over 5,700 feet across. Then like a hot-air balloon the super heated plasma bubble that was the core of the expanding explosion, hotter than the surface of the sun, sprang up at a rate of 300 feet per second. In just over a minute it was already 25,000 feet in the air and finally stopped giving off light. The cloud would ultimately rise to nearly twelve miles and form an expanding cloud almost as wide.

The brightest light Lieutenant Colonel Anderson and Captain Dale Petrosski had ever seen suddenly flashed behind them. They had managed to put a little over seventeen miles between them and ground zero when the one megaton nuke detonated. Anderson prayed that it was enough.

“Stand by for the shock wave Dale!”

Petrosski pushed himself back into his ejection seat as much as he could.

Five times stronger than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima the blast wave traveling at nearly the speed of sound took a little over a minute to reach the wounded jet. The small distance Anderson had managed to put between them and the center of the blast ultimately saved the two men but ended the operational capabilities of the aircraft. Both engines finally gave up the ghost and flamed out. Anderson leveled the bird out as best he could under the current situation and punched out his back seater and followed him just seconds later.

The world suddenly became quiet as the Air Force light colonel watched his aircraft plummeting towards the ground several thousand feet below while he floated down peacefully in his parachute. He hung there suspended in mid air watching the expanding mushroom cloud rising up above him and bore witness to the spreading fire-storm in the outlying Chicago suburb. Tears welled up in his eyes as he watched the spreading destruction. He had saved the city itself, but sacrificed a major section of the surround suburbs.

Some how, some way, he would survive and see to it that bastard that sent that order was hung from the highest tree in the land. Anderson swore a holy oath before his Lord. “THEY WOULD PAY FOR THIS TREACHERY! THEY WOULD PAY!”

“HOLY SHIT!” Zimmerman yelled. “HOLY SHIT! HOLY SHIT! HOLY SHIT!”

Ian stuck his head into the radio cabin. “Wha’ that ‘ell is going on Zipper?”

“Someone just nuked Chicago!”

“NO WAY?”

“DUDE IT’S ALL OVER THE AIRWAYS!” He stammered. “There’s a fricken mushroom cloud and half the city is on fire. THEY NUKED CHICAGO!”

Chapter 81 – Haze Gray and Underway

To live, man must hold three things as the supreme and ruling values of his life: Reason - Purpose - Self-esteem. Reason, as his only tool of knowledge - Purpose, as his choice of the happiness which that tool must proceed to achieve - Self-esteem, as his inviolate certainty that his mind is competent to think and his person is worthy of happiness, which means: is worthy of living. – Ayn Rand, "Atlas Shrugged"

I wish to have no connection with any ship that does not sail fast; for I intend to go in harm's way. – John Paul Jones

Hit hard, hit fast, hit often. – Admiral William "Bull" Halsey

They huddled in the cold damp dark afraid. Caught between the southern invading army, the roving street gangs, the gothic freaks, festering lowlifes, and every evil of the night. Through out it all Alex held tightly to his daughters and his wife trying to keep the family together. Before the fall he had been a computer programmer. Together they had survived the plague, the power outages, the food shortages, the evacuation, the FEMA camps, the total breakdown of their society and now they were trying to survive their escape into the dark void that was an expanding modern dark age.

They hadn’t eaten for three days and what water they had been able to find had them all suffering from loose bowels and now they were being stalked by a group of sick bastards that claimed the “turf” they had been crossing through in an attempt to reach the harbor. Alex felt that if they could get to a boat they might have a chance to escape to one of the Channel Islands and away from the insanity that the L.A. basin had become. Maybe they could go north above the battle lines.

But first they had to get away from the creatures hunting them now.

Lt. Col. Edward Anderson looked in awe at the expanding nuclear cloud as he drifted silently down. Straining he looked around for his backseat and caught a glimpse of his chute below and behind him to his left. The silence of the descent was overwhelming after the intense noise of the dogfight. He had failed. That damn bastard had got the nuke away despite all his efforts. The only consolidation that Anderson felt was that at least he hadn’t managed to drop it in the middle of the city, but the damage that he could see off in the distance was beyond horrific.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

The town below him was coming up quickly and he prepared for the shock of landing as he tried to steer his chute towards a playground nearby. The ground rose up to meet him and suddenly he was slammed into it hard enough to knock the wind out him. For several seconds he just lay there and smelled the rich earth and green grass before the tug of the chute brought him back to reality.

He released the harness and attempted to gather up the chute and then just let it go. Sitting there on the grass he made a quick inspection of his condition. That is when he found the gash. Something sharp had torn across his left calf. It looked nasty and was bleeding pretty good. Anderson opened up a battle dressing from his flight suits first aid kit and dressed the wound quickly, adding a small ace wrap to reinforce the dressing. Carefully he tested his leg and found it would hold him even though it burned like hell. He would need stitches soon, but right now he needed to find his REO [WSO?]. He remembered Dale screaming about being hit but had no idea how bad his injuries might be and prayed that he would be alive when he found him. Limping the colonel headed off in the direction that he believed would lead him to his co-pilot.

As he walked he couldn't keep his eyes off the expanding cloud in the distance. Emotion overwhelmed him and he fought back the tears that struggled hard to get out. He had to find Dale and get them out of here before the fallout began to come down. For right now it looked like they were not directly under the expanding nuclear head, but just the same he wanted out of this area as soon as possible.

Captain Jennings sat on the bridge of his ship the USS Chosin, an Aegis class Ticonderoga guided missile cruiser and looked out at the cold dark waters of the Atlantic Ocean, his mood was equally dark. The battle group had been suddenly recalled home due to the escalating mess back in the states. The message traffic over the last several months had been cautious about conditions on the home front, almost too cautious for Jennings, and then suddenly they had become especially confused. Slowly the news leaked out that there had been some sort of domestic attack on the capital. The latest information was that unknown terrorist forces had somehow decapitated much of the upper echelon of the American government. Strict martial law had been declared across the entire country and a virtual unknown was taking up the reins of authority.

"At least the chain of command works . . . somewhat." Jennings thought to himself.

The ship's 1MC intercom suddenly blared to life: "CAPTAIN JENNINGS YOUR IMMEDIATE PRESENCE IS REQUESTED IN CIC."

"Captain?" The officer of the watch echoed.

"Wha?" He had been deep in thought.

"Sir, CIC is requesting your immediate presence there sir."

"Thank you Lieutenant." Jennings responded as he swung down from the bridge command chair.

He ducked through the hatch and walked briskly down the passageway to the ladder to a second passageway and then into the Combat Information Center, or CIC, of the ship. This was battle heart and brains of the mod-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

ern warship. Jennings entered into a space dominated by huge computerized screens that monitored the world immediately surrounding the Chosin. This was where the ship was fought from should they come into harms way. There were no more ships captains standing on deck with the open air, wind in their face directing a ship in combat. It was now push button warfare commanded by sailors and officers from within the protective bowels of the ship. Some how the mystic ways of the ancient mariners was lost in the modern computerized world. Jennings felt nostalgic pangs for the old ways, but he was a man firmly anchored in the present and would lead his ship according to the tools he had at hand.

Upon entering the CIC he was accosted by a blaring radio transmission that was filled with static and background noise.

“Dale, send out our position and get ready to pickle the Arrow!”

“WHAT?”

“AH, ah, Ed you can’t jettison our nuke!”

“Like hell I can’t. It’s essentially inert until we arm it. We might get a broken arrow but we won’t, can’t, set it off by dropping it now. And Dale suck up the externals as quick as you can and pickle them . . . NOW GET ON IT! We need all the edge we can get . . . ”

“HOW THE HELL?”

“TONE! WE’RE LOCKED! SHIT ED SHIT!”

“FLARES, FLARES, FLARES, FLARES!”

“BANK RIGHT!”

The ships first officer waived his skipper forward.

“Beckers, loop this from the beginning and keep monitoring actual.”

The speckled Operations Specialist Second Class nodded and his hands flew across the computer keyboard.

The transmission suddenly ended and then began again with the same voices.

The First Officer leaned towards his commanding officer. “Beckers was scanning the stateside freq’s when he started recording this and then popped it onto the overhead. Apparently it’s a conversation between two of our Air Force pilots somewhere over North American as best that we can tell.”

“And where are we getting this from?” Jennings asked

“Via military satellite Captain.”

***The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana**, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan*

“Dale There’s no way Washington can be ordering this! Some one down there has seriously fucked up!”

“But Colonel . . . what are we going to do?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?? You can’t be serious! Those are orders from the Boss himself! You just can’t ignore orders.”

“The hell I can’t. I’m the mission commander. I can’t and I won’t believe these are lawful orders.”

“Joker Two this is Joker One . . . Abort, I say again, Abort and return to base.”

“Interrogative Joker One, say again all your last?”

“Joker Two you are to ABORT! I SAY AGAIN! THE MISSION IS SCRUBBED! ABORT! ABORT! ABORT!”

“Mission is confirmed. Target acquired. Codes loaded and weapons hot. Now on final vector to target.”

“JAMISON ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR FUCKING MIND! THOSE ARE AMERICANS DOWN THERE! THIS HAS TO BE A MISTAKE, ABORT! ABORT! ABORT! THAT IS AN ORDER!”

“Negative on abort Colonel. Mission confirmed and verified. Proceeding to target.”

“Dale get us weapons hot NOW!”

“The nuke too Sir?”

“NOT THE NUKE! EVERYTHING ELSE! IF THAT FUCKING IDIOT DOESN’T TURN AROUND WE’RE GOING TO DROP HIM OUT OF THE SKY!”

“JAMISON THAT IS AN AMERICAN CITY! WE DO NOT DROP NUKES ON OUR CITIZENS! NOW YOU EITHER ABORT THE DAMN MISSION OR I WILL ABORT YOU MYSELF!”

“Negative Colonel. Mission is go per orders of the President of the United States.”

“JAMISON YOU JACKASS, THOSE ORDERS CAN’T BE LAWFUL! No President of this country would drop nuclear bombs on his own people. THINK MAN! THINK!”

“Sorry Colonel, orders are orders.” There was a pause. “We don’t make the decisions . . . we just execute them . . . out . . . Sir.”

“DAMIT!” Short pause. “Dale this is gonna get nasty!”

“No Shit . . . Sir!”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

The Captain, First Officer and the rest of the CIC watch listened intently as the scene played out.

“Are you sure this isn’t some television broadcast Beckers picked up?” Jennings asked.

“We’ve checked and double checked before we called you in Sir. This is an encoded transmission of an exclusive military link satellite. There is no way this is an accidental transmission Sir.”

Jennings looked around the space as he listened. Two of the ships top Chiefs were over on the communications console.

“Chief Peters, Chief Vecchio talk to me men, talk to me.”

Vecchio took several quick steps towards his Captain. “Skipper, Petie and I have checked everything at least six times . . . I hate to say this but . . . it’s legit! Sir.”

“SHIT!” Becker shouted and then flicked the overhead speakers off the recording and over to the actual time transmission.

“SHIT . . . HE LAUNCHED IT!! OH MY GOD!”

“WHAT?”

“THE BOMB, I JUST SAW THE BOMB!”

“SHIT!”

There was a long delayed silence and then a sudden burst of static and the communication link went dead.

The stillness of the combat center was wickedly haunting and seemed to linger on as everyone held their breath waiting for the next transmission. Chief Peters broke the spell when he stammered. “What the fuck just happened?”

Jennings looked at his communications chief. “Gentleman . . . that is precisely what we’re going to find out.”

One of the things that Captain Jennings was noted for was coolness under pressure. He instantly began issuing orders to determine the validity of the communication they had just intercepted and notify the battle group of what he believed he had just witnessed via satellite on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean and half-way across the country that he was expecting to defend. He had a very bad feeling about this . . . very bad.

Three hours later that feeling was not any better. The battle group commander had verified the communication; Chicago had indeed suffered from a nuclear explosion. The problem was that Washington had a slightly different story and no mention of the dogfight over northern Illinois that he and his men had listened to in CIC. Jennings and the other ship drivers of the battle group had flown over to the Carrier for an emergency meeting with the Admiral in command. That meeting had shocked Jennings to his very core. There was more going on than

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

even he imagined. The flight back to the Chosin aboard his ships LAMPS helo was the longest ride of his life. The Admiral had spilled all the beans. Things back home were far worse than he could have imagined in his worst nightmare, and now he was being asked to do something that could well spell the end of his magnificent ship and its proud crew.

Thirty minutes later Captain Jennings sat at the head of the table in his officer's Ward Room. Every officer and Chief Petty Officer was there as he requested. The hatch was finally shut and locked after the last man entered and his Executive Officer nodded his head towards him. Jennings was a man that spoke best on his feet and he pushed away from the table and stood up.

"Gentleman, by now you have all heard that a nuclear device was detonated somewhere in the vicinity of Chicago. That part has been absolutely confirmed by Washington. However, who was responsible for this incident is . . . well, is up for grabs. Washington is saying it was a terrorist action and we . . . well, we heard something entirely different down in CIC."

He let that sink in, and then continued. "Now comes the sticky wicket gentleman. Washington has rescinded the recall orders for the fleet and instead sent new orders for us to return to our previous patrol assignments."

There was grumblings all around the room.

"Yeah, well that was the same response received by the admiral." He waited until the room quieted down and then continued. "In addition we have been informed that UN naval and land forces will be assuming domestic protection duties and that we . . . we have been excluded from such duties and currently are not allowed to enter our own waters by order of our very own newly appointed commander in chief."

This time it was more than just grumbling that broke out and it took the Captain flagging his arms to reclaim control of the room.

Jennings gave his men a wicked smile, a smile that they all knew too well. The Commanding Officer of the USS Chosin was a strict by the book man when it was to his advantage to be by the book. But nobody could beat the 'ol Man when it came to cunning, something he had proved time and time again in numerous battle problems and war games.

"Gentleman . . . Officers and Chief Petty Officers of the USS Chosin, it is the duty of every Officer and Sailor to follow with true faith and allegiance the lawful orders of those persons dutifully appointed over them. However, it is not your duty to obey an unlawful order." He paused to let that sink in.

"The last lawfully recognized order received by this battle group was for us to return to US waters and defend our homeland against all enemies foreign and domestic."

Jennings walked several paces into the middle of the Ward Room and looked around.

"It is the unanimous decision of the commander of this battle group to do just that."

A cheer went up from the assembled men.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Jennings waived them down once again and continued. "You must realize that by embarking on this action we are putting each and every one of our careers and perhaps even our lives on the line." He looked cautiously around the room. "We may be forced to engage UN and possibly even NATO ships if they attempt to impede our return to US waters."

"SO?" Came from the back of the gathering and garnered numerous chuckles around the room.

Jennings smiled and nodded in agreement. "Then gentlemen, make this ship ready for war. We are about to cross the Rubicon and go into harms way . . . that is all!"

"ATTENTION ON DECK!"

All the men in the Ward Room suddenly stood to attention as their Captain left the room.

As he turned down the corridor that lead to his stateroom he muttered to himself. "Alea Jacta Est" The Latin phrase allegedly muttered by Julius Caesar when he crossed the river Rubicon with his army before entering into the capital of Rome. Leading his army thus was a clear indication that he was there to confront the powers that be. "Alea Jacta Est - the die is cast." The USS Chosin was to cast the first die of defiance and lead the way. Jennings' ship and crew was to be the first to cross the modern equivalent of the Rubicon in the ocean up a head that would lead straight to the current imperial capital of the world . . . Washington D.C. The last time the seat of power in the United State was confronted directly by a military presence was the War of 1812 when British soldiers burned the White House. Jennings closed the door to his stateroom and slowly fell to his knees and prayed.

Off in the distance in the early predawn gray of morning the city looked almost normal. But as the gray of morning faded to the light of day Ian could see that the harbor they were pulling into was a mess. He carefully motored Izards Revenge past mooring after mooring and there seemed to be no end to the number of masts sticking out from beneath the shallow harbors water. It looked more like a war zone than a home for expensive yachts and cruisers. Ian had a very bad feeling that he couldn't shake. Larkin and Kat were on deck with the rest of the Marines hidden just out of sight. Everyone was loaded for bear, but kept their weapons out of sight. Everything was just too quiet.

"Well this is a fine welcome home." Larkin thought to himself. We're overseas while everything here goes to hell . . . now that's fine leadership!"

He glassed the harbor for any signs of life but saw nothing apparent. Off in the gray distance he could see small tell tale columns of smoke scattered here and there that might indicate fires burning. Whether they were cooking fires or the remains of smoldering homes there was no way to tell from this distance. But at least they were back on American soil . . . well almost.

Ian finally picked a spot out on the end of one floating pier. Easily defensible and offering a relatively straight shot out of the harbor if necessary. Larkin noted that as Ian secured the lines to the dock he kept a wary eye on

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

the rest of the harbor. Larkin too was paying attention to the slightest movement, when the first shot rang out echoing through the humid morning air. He, like the others on board, hit the deck and quickly brought their weapons to bear. A second report echoed over the water and came from further off. The gunfire was not directed at them, but somewhere off in the distance and its sound was carried on the thick morning air out to them.

“Staff Sergeant Larkin I protest.” SSgt Stacy began.

“I don’t care what you do Kat, but you are staying here! I can’t be reconning the area with a newby!”

“NEWBY!” She snarled back. “I’ll have you know I’ve got just as much time in the military as you do . . . and . . .”

“You’re staying back as is Zipper, and Stevens!”

“What?” The pair spoke almost in unison.

“Look this boat is our only way out of here if things get sticky. We have no idea what the hell is going on here. I don’t like splitting the team up but we have to find out. Yahzee can sneak up on the devil himself, this is Chavez’s home turf, and I have to try to make contact with someone in authority. That leaves you three . . .”

“Humph!” Ian grunted.

“ . . . and Ian to get this boat ready to get the hell out of Dodge if things get sticky. Zipper you man that radio and try to find out what’s going on if you can? Stevens I want three hundred and sixty degrees of security with your 249, don’t let anything get near this boat. Kat you and Ian make sure we’re ready to go and back up Stevens, I want eyes covering ever sector. We have no idea what the hell is going on here so at the first hint of trouble get out into the bay and away from here. We’ll get to you. If it gets really hot head for open ocean and well try to rendezvous in twenty-four hours. Any questions?” Larkin looked around the group. “Good, jump off in twenty mikes.”

It was getting near noon when the recon team finally took a break. The city was almost totally deserted and reminded the Marine Staff Sergeant of some of the fought over villages he had seen in the Balkans during his brief assignment there. They had come across small enclaves of humanity scattered here and there, but for the most part the city was empty.

Inside a burned out hardware store the three took a few minutes and broke out the main meal from their MRE’s. Eating them cold, eyes ever wary, they shared a conversation for the first time in several hours.

“Man have you ever seen such a mess.” Chavez began in his barrio accent. “It’s like some sick fricken sci fi flick about the end of the world . . . Man!”

Both Larkin and Yahzee nodded their heads as they scooped more MRE into their mouths.

“I heard about the Rodney King riots from some Devil Dogs that had to come up and pull security duty there. But this is far worst.” Yahzee commented. “Far worse.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“How far before we get into your home turf Chavez?” Larkin asked.

“Oh we’ve got a ways to go Staff Sergeant, we’re gonna need some wheels. That’s a lot of turf to cross and some heavy vato’s to deal with if we’re going on foot.” Chavez took in another spoonful of cold stew, then added with a mouthful of food. “If there is anyone alive that is.”

“Well I can’t believe that everyone is gone or toast, that’s just too many people.”

“I know, I know, but maybe they evacuated everyone, maybe they took them somewhere else.” Chavez nearly sounded like he was pleading.

“Yeah . . . maybe.” Larkin responded as he looked out on a quiet city. “Maybe.”

“Captain we’re receiving radio communication on international frequency from Russian ships of war representing the Atlantic UN Naval Command.”

“Yes?” Jennings asked.

“They are requesting identification and nation of origin.”

“Inform them that we are in international waters and not obligated to reply to their request.” Jennings replied calmly.

The radioman complied with his Captains request.

“Ah Skipper, they don’t seem too happy with that reply.” He said cautiously.

“Repeat it, please Petty Officer Washington.”

A few more moments passed.

“Ah . . . Sir . . . the Russian ship is ordering us to immediately leave this area and return to our home port.” The Radioman listened a few seconds longer. “The UN has enacted a zone of exclusion around the United States and all ships are restricted from entering or leaving without UN approval.”

“Is that so? Hmmm.” Jennings looked over at his Executive Officer. “XO, please bring the ship to full battle readiness.”

Suddenly the klaxon of General Quarters alarm filled the ship from stem to stern.

“GENERAL QUARTERS – GENERAL QUARTERS, THIS IS NOT A DRILL – REPEAT – THIS IS NOT A DRILL. GENERAL QUARTERS – GENERAL QUARTERS ALL HANDS MAN YOUR BATTLE STA-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

TIONS, SET MATERIAL CONDITION ZEBRA THROUGHOUT THE SHIP. REPORT STATUS OF GENERAL QUARTERS TO THE EXECUTIVE OFFICER ON THE BRIDGE, NOW ALL HANDS TO YOUR BATTLE STATIONS, GENERAL QUARTERS “T” PLUS FIFTEEN SECONDS.”

Not unlike an anthill that had been kicked open the ship suddenly became alive with bodies moving in every direction. Men and women half dressed and donning battle gear running down every passageway and up and down the designated ladders to their battle stations. The seconds ticked away and were broadcast in the race to bring the ship up to full fighting prowess. There was no hesitation, no malingerers, no sickbay commandos trying to shirk their duties as every combat aspect of the fighting ship suddenly sprang to life.

“GENERAL QUARTERS PLUS TWO MINUTES.”

Calls to the XO on the bridge were backing up, as section after section completed preparations for combat and called in as quickly as possible.

Four minutes later the Captain received the word from his Executive Officer. “Captain Jennings, this is the XO, the ship is fully manned and ready Sir. There are no discrepancies reported. We await your command.”

Jennings turned back to his radioman. “Please inform the Russian captain that we are indeed returning to our homeport and if he wishes to return to his . . . he had best get out of our way.”

The radioman turned back to his Captain. “Skipper, the Russian is repeating his earlier warning and ordering us to stand by for boarding.”

Jennings turned to his weapons officer. “Weapons status?”

“Weapons Hot Sir!”

Jennings turned back to his radioman. “Petty Officer, repeat my last order and inform the Russian captain he has thirty seconds to comply.”

“Boss’n take us down their throat. Cheng (Chief of Engineering) bring us up to fully power and have damage control teams ready. Inform the XO that we are about to engage.”

The USS Chosin turned into the battle and the Captain kicked it into high gear. Jennings knew that this would not be an easy fight, but nothing was going to come between him and his mission, which was to reach home waters and protect the fleet.

“Sir the Russian commander is screaming in my ear that we must back down now or they will shoot us out of the water.”

“Inform the Russian that it’s not the dog in the fight . . . it’s the fight in the dog.”

“Stand by to engage battle plan Alpha.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

The captains aboard the Sovremenny destroyer and the Kara guided missile cruiser must have thought the American commander had lost his mind when he turned to engage them. They out gunned the American cruiser, could out maneuver him and catch him between them easily. But the blimp on the screen moving rapidly towards them was no mistake. The American was not only advancing straight at them but . . . suddenly the first wave of standard arm missiles racing headlong toward the two ships showed up the Russian radar screens. Then behind the first wall of rockets was a second . . . and a third. Jennings plan was quite simple; advance at flank speed towards the enemy closing the distance as quickly as possible, laying in a combination of missile waves made up of fast flying standard arms, slower SM2MR's, still slower but ultimately more deadlier Harpoon ship busting missiles, and finally to engage with the five inch fifty-four gun mount . . . if they survived that long. The Chosin would be totally offensive relying on the ships two close in weapons systems CIWS mounts to protect the ship from any return fire. It was a big gamble.

The Russians scrambled to bring their ships up to fully combat readiness. The Americans had gotten the jump on them. No one expected the weak American commanders to actually start a conflict. The Russians had already turned around or commandeered several American merchant vessels earlier in the week. But this was the first real engagement between warships.

The Russian close in ships defense systems were kick in gear just in time to drop the first volley of missiles as they came in. But they had their effect to unnerve the Russian sailors as the explosions echoed across the water towards them. Neither ship was up to full battle readiness when the second American volley closed in for the kill. The Russian commanders let loose their large surface-to-surface deck missiles and returned fire just as the second wave reached them. These American missiles too were blown from the skies before they could inflict any real damage but both ships were rained with shrapnel from the close proximity of the explosions. Suddenly the third wave was approaching made up of a third salvo of standard arms and the first salvo of the slower anti-radiation SM2MR's. Once again the soviet close in defense system worked . . . almost. Only two missiles managed to escape the defensive weapons screens and the Kara class guided missile cruiser sucked them both up. One was a standard arms that ripped into the superstructure but caused no serious harm, but the second missile that pierced the defensive screen took out one of the main weapons radar arrays and partially blinded the cruiser.

Crewmen aboard the USS Chosin worked at a feverish pace to reload the missile bays as quickly as they could. They realized their very survival hinged on their ability to maintain the pressure on the enemy ships. Meanwhile the CIWS (pronounced See-Wiz) crews waited for their part of the battle to commence. It was solely up to them to defend the ship against the incoming enemy missiles. In taking on these two ships the Skipper was gambling that by going totally offensive with every long reach weapon at his disposal he could defeat both ships, but victory depended upon the success of the Vulcan phalanx gun systems commonly referred to as the R2D2 of Star Wars fame.

The heavy Russian ship busting SAM's converged on the Chosin and the radar systems of the CIWS came to life. Everything was set on automatic. If it came within ten nautical miles of the ship it would targeted and engaged. The gun system that resembles an R2D2 droid robot with an erection suddenly sprang to life and began spitting out burst after burst of depleted uranium rounds at the incoming missiles. Explosions now echoed across the water surrounding the American ship as it closed the distance between the antagonists at over thirty-five knots. Around the ship clouds of radar confusing chaff filled the sky in an attempt to trick the inbound missiles away from the main signature of the Chosin. But one made it through and struck the ship just aft of amid

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

ship taking out the hanger and both LAMPS helos in the process rocking the whole ship as flames erupted from the ruptured aircraft fuel cells and the ship was suddenly engulfed.

However things were not going so well for the Russians on the other side of the gunfight. The Kara had lost half of its ability to direct its self-defense close in weapon systems and the Sovremenny destroyer suffering from a near miss had lost its ability to communicate with its fellow Russian warship. Then the biggest wave yet from the American suddenly materialized on the radar screens; the four Harpoon ship killers skimming across the top of the waves suddenly joined a mix of standard arms missiles and SM2MR's. The Russian commanders looked on helplessly as their systems were overwhelmed and the first group of missiles flooded in.

The Sovremenny took the first deathblow when the lead Harpoon literally blew off the aft section of the ship after several smaller missiles pierced the thin skin of the destroyer. The Sovremenny was dead in the water and out of the game. The Kara even with her close in defense systems wounded put up a strong fight but couldn't hold its own alone and finally gave in to the overwhelming onslaught. The smaller missiles riddled her sides and muted explosions rumbled about her interior, until she took the Harpoon to the lead aspect of her superstructure. Like an M-80 firecracker in a tuna can her bridge was nearly blown off the main deck by the explosion.

Both ships were out of the fight as Kara staggered forward blind and heavily damaged and the Sovremenny wallowed in its death throes. The USS Chosin wounded but with a full head of steam pressed the attack. Another wave of standard arms arched out of her launch tubes and streaked towards the crippled Russian ships as the forward gun mount prepared to fire.

The Damage Control teams of the wounded Chosin struggling to knock down the fires and seal off the damage from the rest of the ship worked heroically in their own personal battlefield of twisted metal and intense heat. Fortunately the missile hit had landed above the waterline. Its damage had been extensive, but slowly and steadily they inched their way into the worst areas and put down the fires. True teamwork and training had paid off as the damage control crews contained and then eliminated the immediate threat to the ship but the battle was far from over.

As quickly as the ships had engaged the battle was over. The Sovremenny was down hard by the stern with most of her superstructure on fire. The Kara heeled over on her portside nearly forty-five degrees and ablaze was beginning to slip nose first beneath the waves as the Chosin cruised by trailing smoke from her badly damaged stern superstructure.

Jennings turned to the weapons officer. "Nick use the portside torpedoes and put them both down."

"Sir, they're dead in the water, shouldn't we save the torpedoes?"

"Never leave an enemy in your wake son, now take care of it."

The young Lieutenant quickly replied. "Aye Aye Sir." And turned to issue the orders that would seal the fate of the two Russian warships.

"Targets?" Jennings asked his combat information team.

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“Negative air threat sir.”

“Negative Surface threat sir.”

“Negative subsurface threat sir.”

“Damage control?”

The team went down the numbers as the ship began the clean up from its action and prepared for the next. They were now a hunted ship and were deep within hostile waters. They had drawn first blood and telegraphed their intentions across the seven seas. The word would go out from here that the Americans were headed home and would not let anyone stand in their way.

Chapter 82 – The Turning Point

There are moments in time when the collective consciousness of a people suddenly becomes aware, that universal split-second when in the flash of crystal clarity a singular event of awakening burns through the fog of ignorance and illusion. Reality crashes in and focuses minds, hearts and souls to a truth that stands out suddenly and clearly for all to see. The awakened hold their breaths and wait for the next heart beat to fall.

In the American consciousness such a singular event occurred on the Lexington Green between seventy-seven Minutemen and over seven hundred Redcoats. The event became known as the “shot heard round the world” and began the first Revolutionary War, that hard fought eight-year struggle towards freedom and the birth of a nation.

On that “day of infamy” when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor they unwittingly awoke and cemented a fragmented nation into a mighty hammer that would seal their fate and change the world forever. When the second tower was struck for all to see on national television there was a collective hush that crossed the nation and began a plunge into the darkest days of a great nation and a man hunt began that would span the globe in a struggle against spectral ghosts that faded before the light; yet struck again and again from the shadows. However far too soon the nation became frustrated with the lack of a clear enemy and a clear victory and the never ending struggle for retribution.

Then on a clear crisp fall day after years of struggling against the enemy from both without and within, with borders collapsing, isolation, disease, chaos running rampant, with the very structure of government and stability of a nation falling to its knees there were three singular events that would be forever etched in the collective mindset of a people . . . the first was the assault by the federal forces against one of its own cities that resulted in the nuking of Chicago. The second event was the defiance of a lone Navy cruiser fighting across a vast defiant sea to return home. Suddenly the world held its breath and waited and watched as the juggernauts lined up.

Americans are a confusing people to outsiders. They are very much like a large family, loud, constantly in motion, constantly bickering amongst themselves, everything they do is in a big way, nothing is left out; they revel

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

in what appears to be utter chaos. No one voice speaks for all of them, no one culture identifies them, they are an enigma upon the globe of mankind . . . and there is one thing that the world truly fears. The world truly fears when this great overwhelmingly chaotic nation of individuals suddenly holds its breath; narrows its eyes and looks upon an enemy collectively with a singular intent on its mind.

As the world watched . . . and held ITS BREATH . . . the news of Chicago spread like a western mountain wild-fire across the nation, from sea to shining sea. Despite Washington's best efforts at spin (and you better believe they were spinning up a storm) the collective eyes viciously snapped open. The nation was becoming aware and suddenly millions of eyes were focused in one direction . . . Washington.

There was never any doubt among the vast majority of Americans that Washington, the seat of the American central authority, had long ago forgotten its place. There was never any doubt that those who had been elected and traveled to that "City on the hill", full of fantasy and politics had lost touch with the people. But this attack, this heinous contemptuous attack upon the very people that it had sworn to protect and serve could not and would not be forgiven.

The mind of a nation was once again rousing from its long slumber and becoming set towards a common goal, from deep in the valleys and from high on the mountains, across the vast plains, "Chicago" was the shot heard round the world . . . a second time . . . and then, ever so slowly the word of the battle of the USS Chosin leaked out. Surrounded, outnumbered, and wounded it had survived a vicious sea battle and was in the lead of a vanguard of forces determined to reach home, the world held its breath.

The Americans were no longer bickering amongst themselves. There was a portentous calm that fell across the land, the chaos that had always prevailed, was suddenly very, very still. The sleeping giant had been awakened and it began to focus its will into one thought and was becoming of one mind. The vote had been taken in that instant . . . and those that had lost the election would pay dearly now. The Americans were now . . . on the move.

The snow drifted down on the storybook city, modern yet very old. The few people out scurried along the sidewalks skirting the gathering drifts. The Christian holiday season was in full swing and eager shoppers could be seen with their arms laden with packages. On the outskirts of the city in a modest chalet they gathered, the power brokers of the new world order. Their plans were slowly evolving towards their ultimate utopian goal. A utopia that they would of course control and guide for their own benefit and the betterment of mankind. Their faces were unrecognizable; their names never appeared in any publication. They were the shadow masters, pulling the strings of the great puppet nations, the power behind the thrones.

The meeting in Bonn was called to order by the entrance of the elder statesman of the group. All the seats were filled save two. The silver haired gentleman paused briefly and glanced at the faces of the men and women seated around the elongated table before taking his place at the head of the group.

All eyes were upon him as a servant silently placed a small fine China teacup of steaming liquid to the gentleman's right and quickly stepped away into the background and left the room. There was now only single vacancy and after taking a sip of tea he looked directly at the empty space.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“I gather that Jonathan was predisposed?” More a statement than a question, he took another sip in the silent room.

The room was as quiet and still as a mausoleum. Each member stoic behind their well groomed poker faces. A tiny mote drifted down in the dark silence and hung for a second on the rising steam from the teacup.

“There is a problem developing in the North America.” Ian began.

The teacup was gracefully placed down on its saucer. “How so?” The elder Chairman responded with a voice of cultured grace and power.

Ian nervously took a quick sip of water and cleared his throat. “Sir, there have been two . . . incidents . . .” He let the words trail off before he continued. “. . . since our last meeting.”

The older gentleman’s hands were now clasped in calm contemplation as he listened.

Ian continued. “It seems that a nuclear device has been detonated near the city of Chicago.” He paused to take a slow breath before he continued. “You will recall Sir, that particular region had become rather autonomous from the central authority of late and military action had been implemented to bring the situation back under control.”

“The source of this detonation?”

“Ah Sir, it was ordered by Jonathan after the failure of the military ground action.”

The elder man’s eyebrow rose slightly.

“Failure?” He questioned softly.

“Yes Sir, it seems that the central authority grossly underestimated the capabilities of the civilian antagonist.”

The gentleman’s head nodded ever so slightly. “The current status of the antagonists?”

“Ahh, well Sir, that issue is still in question. I believe Alexander has people on the ground in that region and is better prepared to share his insight there Sir.” Ian deferred to the Canadian representative seated in the shadows behind him.

Alexander stood up and stepped into the light. He glanced quickly at the papers in his hand and then at Ian before speaking. “There appears to have been a conflict between two American Air Force pilots assigned to neutralize the Chicago . . . err . . . ah . . . autonomy.”

“A conflict?”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Well . . . yes Sir, a conflict. One of the pilots refused to carry out his orders upon American citizens. A dogfight ensued and somewhere in the struggle one of the aircraft managed to launch a device . . . but it . . . well, Sir . . . it fell short of the mark.”

“And the city?”

“Intact, but many parts are now contaminated due to the fallout.”

“Have there been any other rogue incidences among the American Military?” The elder man asked.

“Scattered events here and there, Sir. You may recall that Marine battalion that went rogue early on during the disarmament phase.”

Sir nodded his head in acknowledgement. “Yes, we expected some discomfort among the civilian population, especially the more militant patriotic groups. That was a bit of a disappointment with the Marines.”

“Yes Sir, very unexpected.”

“I understand that there may be another unexpected turn of events regarding the American fleet.” The Chairman took another sip from his tea.

“That would bring us to our second issue Sir.” Demitri interjected. Despite his best efforts his Russian accent still heavily colored his speech. “An American Ticonderoga class guided missile cruiser was intercepted by two Russian warships as it was trying to return to American waters despite orders of both the American government and the United Nations.”

Demitri cleared his throat and continued. “The exact events of the incident is not known, however, as we have lost all contact with our two ships. Satellite imagery has been unable to locate them since the incident took place. The American cruiser however does appear to be badly damaged yet still heading towards the eastern coast of that nation.”

“And the rest of the American fleet?”

“Ahh, their position is . . . not exactly known at this time.” Ian hesitated.

“Why not?”

“We have been having some slight problems . . . with our satellites.”

“How slight?”

“We believe that it may be computer related. Early yesterday morning there was a temporary loss of scattered uplinks in the system. It was initially believed to be a temporary situation but the effects have cascaded and we are now unable to uplink to over ninety percent of our system.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“A failure in our systems?!” The elder gentleman raised his voice slightly.

“We’re not certain at this point Sir, there are all the indications that we may be dealing with a virus, but we are having difficulties locating the specific anomaly that may be causing the problems within the system.”

“Is there any other good news for me this morning gentleman?”

Estaban leaned back in his high back leather chair and looked at the ceiling. “I think that we may need to reconsider the situation in North America.” He looked slowly around the table before leaning forward.

His well-groomed hawkish profile combined with his perfect olive complexion gave him a look of old world and old money aristocracy. His eyes appeared sharp and deadly and ever watchful for potential threats. He continued. “The southern front has all but collapsed.”

Estaban pushed away from the table and stood up. He began to slowly walk around the gathering. “There is a new state of Jefferson that has appeared in northern California. In the south we are fighting our own people . . . OUR OWN PEOPLE! We were told that the state had been disarmed . . . THEY WERE NOT DISARMED! We were told they would be too few and too sick to fight and would collapse under our assault . . . THEY DID NOT COLLAPSE! Instead THEY FOUGHT BACK! We have taken major losses in every unit we have sent into the Indian reservations of Arizona and New Mexico. Texas has once again declared itself a republic and completely closed off its borders. Of the spies located in that territory we’ve have heard nothing in over a week.”

He placed his hands on the backs of chairs as he continued. “There is word of fierce resistance in the upper New England states. In the northern states of Idaho and Montana resistance is mounting. Through out the Rockies, down in the Deep South pockets of rebellion are sprouting up everywhere. Those damned patriot militias are crawling out from under the rocks and stones and they are armed to the teeth!”

He raised his hands in frustration. “We have killed half of these Americans with disease, poison gas, bullets and THEY DO NOT DIE! WE HAVE TAKEN AWAY THEIR POWER, THEIR FOOD AND STILL THEY DO NOT DIE!” He ended dramatically.

The Chairman stood and motioned Estaban to take his seat. He then began to walk the room slowly.

“It does appear that we underestimated their resilience. However, they ARE severely weakened and I do not believe they can hold out for much longer under the weight of our combined efforts. I would warn you against an outright military resolution to this issue now . . . as I have in the past. Such an effort would severely polarize the Americans and we would not be able to force an occupation upon them. They must relent to wear the shackles that we mean to place upon them and to do so we must take great care in our presentation. This recent business has been very messy, very messy indeed!”

The Russian again spoke. “That is all well and good, but each of us here are now facing serious concerns in our own backyards. That plant virus that so effectively wiped out the American food production is now spreading to our own fields and is not responding to the antidotes as promised.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

The Chairman stopped in his tracks. He looked intently to one of the seated members of the cabal. “Mutoto, is this true?”

Mutoto’s ebony skin was the perfect background for the gold watch and chain that he wore and his rich pigment intensified the whites of his eyes as he looked back. In a thick West African accent with hints of both German and English pigeon speech he answered. “It is true Sir. There has been a modest degree of mutation with the specie that has decreased the effectiveness of our counter treatment.”

“How modest?”

“Very modest.” Mutoto replied. “A significant . . . ah . . . setback to be sure.”

“Are our reserve stocks of food affected?”

Ian spoke up. “No Sir, they are intact and secure. However, this will impact our ability to sustain the numbers as originally planned.”

“To what degree Ian?”

“We may have to lower our expectations by fifteen to twenty percent.”

The Chairman looked up at the wood grained beams overhead. “That would mean an additional half billion would have to be sacrificed.” The words rolled off his tongue as if they had virtually no meaning at all, merely numbers in an accountants books, rather than the souls of one half billion human beings.

“Split the bulk of the difference between India and China and take ten percent from Africa and South America. That should better balance the numbers I think.” He turned back to the African. “Mutoto, can you get ahead of this virus or will we have to further balance the ledger?”

Mutoto understood exactly what was being said. “Yes Sir, my laboratories are working around the clock and are very close to resolving this issue as we speak. Though . . .” His voice trailed off.

“Yes?”

“Intelligence has reported that resistant seeds are already available . . .”

“Yes?”

“But their recovery would require some very delicate . . . er . . . ah . . . negotiation.” Mutoto hesitated.

“Yes?”

“In America.”

“In America?” The Chairman looked towards the empty chair or the American representative.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Yes Sir . . . ah . . . there are indications that resistant strains of seeds are being distributed through an underground network centralized around or near the city of Denver, Colorado.”

“How has this happened so quickly?” He looked intently at the African. “Since we control all the hybrid and GM seed production how did this lot escape our hands.”

“They were never in our hands Sir. These are not hybrid or GM seeds; they are what are called open pollinated and antique varieties. We had no control over them, as such their genetic structure is very random and unpredictable.”

“So how is it these seeds are resistant and yet our own seeds are not?” The tenor of his voice was rising slightly.

Mutoto continued in his rich deep accented voice. “Sir, in every disease situation, be it plant or animal, there are always a number, a very small number of individuals that have some natural immunity to attack. It is random, unpredictable and highly variable. Our created virus was designed to attack a specific weakness in our manipulated seeds, a weakness we knew about because we put it there. But then the virus did what all viruses’ do, it mutated, but at a higher rate than normally predicted. It escaped beyond the parameters of the envelope that we were ready to contain. This was all in the initial conceptual report . . . Sir.”

“So . . . we have a nuked city,” He began to summarize the situation. “A rogue missile cruiser has broken through our blockade, a naval fleet is missing somewhere in the Atlantic ocean, a runaway plant virus threatens our own seed stocks, a failed invasion, growing cells of resistance, and falling food stocks.” He walked back to his seat and picked up the now luke warm tea. “Have I left anything out Gentleman?” He said sarcastically as he looked around the table. There was no response.

“Well then.” His words hung in the air like a hangman’s noose.

“Nagato, you must direct the United Nations to mount a “rescue mission” to our stricken comrades in the major America cities; food, medicine, all manner of peaceful offerings. This is not a show of force, but a display of compassion. Keep the military components out of sight . . . but ready.”

“Mutoto send enough of your specialists with Nagato’s “rescue mission” to find the source of those seeds and retrieve them. Use whatever “negotiation methods” you need, but acquire those seeds and destroy the American capability to replicate them.”

“Estaban, you will withdrawal all your forces and . . . in a display of good will . . . execute several of your Generals for this heinous attack upon your North American neighbor. Withdrawal and regroup, but well south of the border, they may still be of some use to us.”

“Demitri, you will find that rogue American ship and put it on the bottom. I don’t care how you do it, or what forces you use, just make it so. That ship must never reach American soil.”

“Ian, get to the bottom of this communication problem, quickly . . . and find that American fleet. We must not allow their military to reach home soil!”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

He turned abruptly, “I will deal with Jonathan myself.” He snapped and disappeared through the door that he had entered just minutes before.

The members sitting at the table looked cautiously around the group. Failure was not an option in this game, the stakes they were playing for were much too high.

Damian looked at the radiation meter and whistled. “YO DOG! This thing is jumping. Are you sure we’re not cooking our nuts off here?”

The old man chuckled. “Boy you gots lots of learning a head of you.” He reached over and clicked the dial and watched the needle drop suddenly down.

“You had it on the wrong setting. First you must calibrate your meter . . . now watch again.”

He went through the lesson one more time to the group. Most of the radiation from the burst was dropping well south of the fortress. Thank God for the Lake effect as the winds swept the deadly fallout away and south of them. Still they had to check their immediate area and make sure that the deadly cloud hadn’t left little tokens of death scattered across their turf.

The great bulk of the inner fortress protected the inhabitants with walls of dirt and rubble several feet thick. For now they had survived the invasion, but the government had now played their biggest ace and none of them doubted for a second that they would not use another bomb if it suited their needs.

Later that night Damian sat with his Grandfather deep in the protective basement of the citadel as they discussed their next move.

“We gots to get out of here Damian.”

“But to where? Where iz we gonna go? Itz not like dey is folks out der waiting wit open arms for us niggers to flood out of diz city. We gots no where to go . . . no where.” His voice trailed off.

“Boy dere iz always a way. Isn’t dat what I learned you though all of diz shit. Boy, yuz just got to put that good mind dat God done gives you and pray real hard. He will show you da way, boy . . . the Good Lord will show you de way.

Captain Jennings surveyed the damage to his ship the USS Chosin. The aft superstructure was a mess from the missile hit. One helo had been in the hanger and virtually vaporized. The second was in the ready position on the flight deck and was blown nearly over the stern by the explosion. By a miracle it landed on the aft VLS (Vertical Launch System) but was stopped by the MK 45 five inch fifty four gun mount before it could damage the Harpoon missile launcher, an essential part of the Ticonderoga’s offensive capability. He had lost one com-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

plete aircrew, most of the second crew, almost all of the air maintenance personnel and a complete topside damage control team from that one missile strike. Tactically both of the stern SPG-52 illuminators were OOC (out of commission). The aft super structure was quite literally Swiss cheese or just plain toast.

Jennings walked among the exhausted DC teams that had fought and beat back the fire. He personally thanked each and every one of the men and women as they continued about their business, dirty, soot covered and singed. They had saved the ship and he was proud of each and every one of them. He spotted his Chief Corpsman over by the body bags that lined the aft port edge of the flight deck.

“Doc . . . how bad is it?” Jennings asked, not really wanting to know.

“It could have been worse Skipper, it could have been a lot worse.”

The Captain placed his hand on the Corpsman’s shoulder. “Doc, how bad.”

“Sir, we’ve got twenty-three not answering muster. We’ve filled eighteen bags so far and are looking for the rest in that mess.” He nodded his head in the direction of what was left of the hanger bay. “I’ve got another dozen or so down on the mess deck wounded or pretty badly burned, but they’ll be back to duty after a fashion . . . oh ah . . . that is most of them will, got a couple of fractures that won’t be too fast on the deck for a while.”

“I don’t envy your job Doc.” Jennings gave a sigh. “You’ve got to pick up the pieces of this mess.”

“I don’t envy your job Skipper . . . you’ve got to write the letters, not me.”

He nodded in a sad acknowledgement. “That I do Doc . . . that I do.”

Jennings walked to the back to look at the damage caused by the “on deck” helo. Already torches of the Hull Tech’s and Damage Control men were busily cutting up the skeleton of the dead bird and tossing the partitioned sections over the side. He watched as they carefully removed the remains of one of the crew and placed it in a body bag.

‘So much for the glory of battle.’ He thought to himself.

He became aware of footsteps quickly coming up from behind and turned to see his XO walking briskly to him.

“Well, Dell have you got any GOOD WORD for me?” Jennings asked.

Lieutenant Commander Dell VanGorten reached out and grasped his commanding officers hand. Jennings was a little surprised and his expression showed it.

“Let me be the first to congratulate you Commodore!”

Captain Jennings looked at his Executive Officer in disbelief. “What the hell are you talking about Dell?”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Just in from the Battle Group.” He handed the message to Jennings. “They’ve joined the Atlantic and Mediterranean battle groups together and are sending us three ships in support . . .”

Jennings looked at the decoded message and his jaw dropped. “What the fuck?” He said in shock.

Staff Sergeant Larkin cautiously surveyed the city ahead of him through the binoculars from the top of an empty apartment building. What he saw was like Mad Max on steroids and Dante’s Inferno rolled into one. Heavily armed gang bangers herding ragged civilians down the ransacked streets of L.A. To Larkin it looked like a foraging group out to gather up the detritus of a collapsed civilization. The Civies each hunched under heavy loads were constantly prodded along by the heavily armed bandana wearing punks.

“Chavez what do you make of that?” Larkin handed him the glasses.

“Shiiiiit . . . those are Bloods and Crips working those poor bastards.”

“I thought they didn’t like each other.” Larkin commented

Chavez continued to look through the bino’s. “Dey don’t Staff Sergeant, but you know, there’s been some pretty weird shit goin down since we left town.”

“So what do you think?”

“It’s not good.” He handed back the glasses. “Those are some pretty bad bro’s, crazy mutha fuckers. If dey’s in charge . . . wheeeeeew, dat’s some bad shit man! Er . . . I mean Staff Sergeant.”

The trio followed behind the group darting from one shadow to the next. Chavez was now in “HIS” element as he led the way through the jungle of city buildings, homes, small business, parked, stalled, and broken cars. For over two hours they followed the band of bangers and their human mules as they scavenged through the dead city. Finally they located what appeared to be the banger’s main compound. They had taken over the county garages. A series of old administration buildings and garages that sat on a main boulevard and was backed up against one of the main flood control concrete lined rivers of Los Angeles.

Yahzee looked through the bino’s. “That will be a tough nut to crack Staff Sergeant. That river bed makes for a nasty killing zone in their rear and all the approaches to the buildings are exposed and covered from their roof.” He was referring to the four-story structure that towered over most of the homes and older shops and stores nearby.

Four several hours the trio reconned the site. The bangers had certainly picked a good place to hold up and build a base of operations. In the park that lay to one side of the complex they spotted the tents and chain link and barb wired enclosure that housed the civilian workers they had seen herded along by the scavenger group. A partially broken and hanging sign indicated that this area had been originally a FEMA disaster compound, which would explain the large number of civilians.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Trapped and disarmed they were easy prey to the bangers when they arrived and took the place of the municipal authorities.

“Those poor bastards.” Larkin commented.

Eli Simpson sat down in utter disbelief at the news. Commander Redway just stood there taking in the news and shaking his head.

“It can’t be true!” Mark Bennett kept saying. “It can’t be true, it can’t be true.” The NPR reporter refused to accept this word that was being passed.

“Commander, the source is verified and reliable. They have the second pilot and he verified the order came directly from the acting president.”

“Matthew,” Redway began. “You must absolute be sure of this information.”

The burley Militia Sergeant pulled his shoulders back. “Sir, I got this straight from my sister-in-laws husband. I personally vouch for this man. Yankee or not, he is a good and honest God fearing man and a stout patriot. He gave me his word before God that he had personally talked to this pilot and I believe him . . . Sir!”

Redway put his hand on the large Sergeant’s shoulder. “And I believe you Matthew. If you say his word is Gospel then it is Gospel . . . Yankee or not.”

The Militia Commander looked into his fellow militiaman’s eyes. “I don’t doubt you for a second Sergeant, but you have to realize just how important this information is. Thank you Matthew for bringing this to me as fast as you did. Now go and make ready, pass the word to get our troops ready, we’ll be moving out soon.”

Bennett paced the floor still bantering quietly to himself in disbelief.

Redway walked across the dirt floor of the command tent and sat down next to the elderly Georgia Senator. “Well Senator . . . I’d say that the line in the sand has finally been crossed.” He shook his head.

Eli looked over at the young commander. “Son, I’d say it’s been more than crossed. It’s been obliterated.”

Yahzee moved like a ghost across the open ground. Darting in and out of the shadows like a wraith he quickly arrived at the corner of the compound. Hidden in the shadows of the wall and a short hedge he cut a hole just large enough for him to shimmy through and gain entrance to the FEMA compound. Only two of the four watchtowers that stood in the corners of the compound were manned by the bangers. Bored with their guard post assignment one leaned out over the rail and smoked a cigarette not paying attention to much of anything.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

As Yahzee move silently under the shadow of the tower he caught a whiff of pot drifting down in the still air and wrinkled his nose in disgust, it was almost too easy, but he could not afford to lower his guard for a second. He moved carefully towards the tents filled with sleeping civilians. When he neared the selected tent on the edge of the camp he lowered his night vision goggles and carefully moved past the flap into the tent.

Despite the enhanced night vision he peered through, the inside of the old military canvas tent was incredibly dark and it was very difficult to distinguish much of anything. Yahzee stealthily maneuvered through the mass of sleeping bodies until he spotted the man he'd come for. The next few seconds would be the most dangerous as he had to awaken the man and get him away without anyone raising the alarm.

Yahzee carefully lay down on the ground next to the sleeping target and placed his hand over the man's mouth to stifle any cry of alarm as he whispered into his ear.

"Do not move . . . US Marines are here to get you out . . . do not move."

The man woke with a start and started to fight Yahzee until he suddenly froze.

"We're Marines . . . we're here to get you out." Yahzee repeated quickly several times.

Yahzee could feel the man relax and he slowly released the grip around his mouth.

"Are you for real?" The man whispered back.

The Marine tapped the man hard on the chest twice and then began to pull him up. "As real as it gets . . . follow me." Yahzee ordered.

They pair retraced the Navaho's steps and were quickly to the wire and through the fence. Several hundred yards away in the back yard of a small house they met up with the rest of the team. The group moved into the house through a broken down back door and finally stopped in the central hallway. With the doors to all the rooms shut Larkin finally turned on his flashlight.

A very tired, dirty and disheveled man stood silently before the Marines. From what remained of his uniform they had guessed that he was law enforcement of some sort. Now they could see that he was a security guard only.

"Staff Sergeant Larkin, United States Marine Corps." He offered a hand to the guard.

"Christopher Higgins . . . ah . . . er . . . Brinks Security." He accepted the offered hand and returned a firm but even grip to the Marine.

"This here is Lance Corporal Yahzee, and Lance Corporal Chavez." The three men shook hands and then Larkin squatted down on the carpeted floor.

"Well mister Higgins . . ."

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Chris is fine . . . ah Staff Sergeant.”

“Fine, Chris it is.” Larkin leaned back against the wall. “Can you tell me just what the hell is going on around here?”

For the next thirty minutes the security guard poured out a Readers Digest condensed version of the last several months. L.A. had been devastated by the first and second Plague. Panic, lack of food and then a total break down of the civil authority destroyed the once proud city. By the time FEMA and the Homeland Security Forces had finally moved in and taken charge the surviving people welcomed their presence with open arms. Their welcome was short lived as they soon found themselves herded into a number of scatter FEMA camps and restricted from leaving or returning to their homes. In the blink of an eye the people of L.A. found themselves as prisoners “for their own protection” behind chain link and barbed wire fences.

Then the gang wars started. Into the vacuum of authority they quickly expanded their turfs and became exceedingly bolder until this camp was ultimately overrun and taken over by a coalition of gutter bred gang bangers. They, the civilians, found their situation had gone from bad to much worse. Over half of the camp had already been killed, tortured or worked to death since the hostile take over. Any attempt at escape resulted in a killing spree and escapees were hunted down and literally torn apart by the bangers.

Most of the prisoners were on the verge of starvation. Disease had rapidly spreading through the camp and most had given up any hope of rescue and considered their situation hopeless. In the last week alone there had been more than a dozen suicides. Then Chris asked the million-dollar question.

“So how many Marines are here to get us out?” He asked.

The Lance Corporals both looked to Larkin, who looked down and then quietly answered him. “There are only six of us.”

The security guard let out a gasp! “That’s all! There are over a hundred of those bastards!”

“Yeah . . . that hardly seems fair Staff Sergeant.” Chavez answered. “Do you think we should let them get some more to even the odds a bit.” He raised his hand in a high five and Yahzee smacked it.

“Enough of that shit Chavez.” Larkin scolded. “We’ve got work to do.”

The morning watch climbed up the watchtower to begin his turn keeping an eye on the slaves down below. Hand over hand he made his way up the wooden ladder and pushed open the trap door. It was heavy and he at first thought that the ‘fucker’ inside was ‘fucking with him’.

“Roach, I’m gonna kick yur ass, mutha fucker if you don’t get off dis fucking door!” He then pushed with his feet and shoulders finally raising up the trapdoor. He heard something click and then roll across the floor of the tower as he pushed through.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“You dumb mutha fucker, if Warez catches you sleeping on the job again he’s gonna nail your balls to the wall!” He yelled at the supine form on the floor. He was half way through the trapdoor when he put his hand on something round and metallic and looked down.

“What the hell is that.” Were the last words he spoke as the hand grenade exploded.

The early morning explosion woke the stronghold’s sleeping gang members. They quickly gathered up their arms and raced hodge-podge to FEMA camp to investigate the explosive alarm clock that had awakened them from their drug and alcohol induced stupor. One of the guard towers was smoldering; what was left of it that is and there was no answer from the other one. It didn’t take long for them to recognize that something was wrong. Then someone realized that the entire camp was empty! All their slaves were gone! Not one remained. They started to quickly search through the tents until several more explosions echoed in the early morning gray. The Marines had left small presents behind to slow up any pursuit that might begin once the bangers discovered the absence of their tormented toys. The effect while effective did not curtail the bangers fanning out to hunt down the escapee’s.

Several miles away a rag tag group of survivors finally ended their flight at the waterfront. Stevens had seen the motley group through his bino’s as they approached and readied the defense of their boat, as Ian got ready to get underway.

Fortunately Yahzee arrived well ahead of the pack and calmed the boats jumpy crew. It had taken two days to herd the under nourished, and sickly group safely back to the marina. Several had died, too sick or exhausted to continue their hearts finally just gave up on them. Chavez had eased the journey a little bit when he hotwired a small abandoned bus and shuttled groups of thirty civvies out of the immediate area until it ran out of gas and they were forced to continue their exodus on foot. At any minute Larkin expected to be ambushed but all his fears were not answered and for that he was extremely thankful.

It was mid day before all of the one hundred and sixty-three survivors could finally rest in an empty warehouse on the waterfront. Staff Sergeant Larking looked out over the sad gathering of humanity that he had lead like the pied piper out of the jaws of death. Just what he was going to do with them he had no idea. The Marines and Kat the Army Medical Specialist were busy taking care of the group as best that they could. Ian had built a small fire, produced a large pot and was busy putting together his version of “Stone Soup” from the remnants of “Izzards” galley. Kat seemed to be everywhere at once, bouncing from victim to victim and it was several hours later before she reported her findings to Larkin.

“You’ve got a real mess here Trevor.” She began.

Larkin shook his head in acknowledgement. “Kat you’re not telling me something I don’t already know. Hell we lost nearly twenty just getting them here.” He fumed.

“Do you want the good news or the bad first?”

“There’s good news?” He asked in a quiet shocked voice.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“You got them here alive . . . that’s good news! Most of them will make, providing we can get them some food, safe water to drink and clean them up.”

“And the bad news?”

“There are over dozen that I don’t think will make it through the night. Between malnutrition, disease, infections and just plain exhaustion . . .” She paused. “There is only so much I can do, with what I have to work with.” She turned slowing and looked out over the group. “And there are several children that . . . I just don’t know where to begin.”

Larkin put his hand on her shoulder and spoke in a near whisper as he leaned his head towards hers. “Just do what you can Kat, just do what you can.”

The Marine Staff Sergeant walked out onto the loading dock and looked up and down the wharf. “I sure wish I knew what all this stuff was. Maybe there’s something we could use here?” He said to no one in particular wishfully.

Just then Chavez came up to him. “Hey Staff Sergeant! You know I was just talking to that security guy.”

“What security guy?”

“You know, the one Yahzee brought out first.”

Larkin nodded.

“You’ll never guess what he guards!” Chavez said excitedly. “SHIPMENTS! GOVERNMENT SHIPMENTS!”

Larkin looked at him questioningly. “What kind of shipments?”

Chavez was like a little kid full of excitement as he danced around trying to tell his great news. “He guards the impound lot for overseas shipments and the government warehouses. They are next to each other. He says they’ve got all kinds of shit we could use over there, food, clothes, and, and, and, and, even guns and stuff!!!”

Larkin’s eyes lit up. He quickly confirmed what Chavez had told him. Chris Higgins had been a security officer with Brinks for over ten years. As a section chief he was responsible for the security of several high security warehouses along the waterfront, of which several were part of the impound lot systems where shipments were held waiting to clear customs.

Less than an hour later a muffled explosion removed the armored lock to one of the main warehouses.

“There ain’t no door that can’t be opened with the proper application of a small amount of plastic explosives.” Quipped Sergeant Stevens as he pushed back the large sliding door. Chris led the group up the stairway into one of his supervising offices. He quickly looked across a wall of clipboards until he found the one he was looking for.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Ok.” He said turning around. “See the colored block of this one?” He pointed at the now vacant spot on the wall surrounded by an inch wide blue line. “The containers sitting in the equivalent area out there in the yard are full of military issue MRE’s, uniforms, equipment and such. They were awaiting shipment overseas.”

The group quickly ran down the stairs and out into the lot stacked four high with sea containers. Chris cut the lock and broke the seals and with help pulled open the container’s heavy metal doors. There stacked to the ceiling where case after case of military meals. Larkin’s prayers had been answered.

However it was the next discovery that was the icing on the cake. Larkin had already sent Stevens and Chavez back to shuttle the escapee’s over to these warehouses. Ian was also motoring the “Izzard’s Revenge” around to the nearby docks. “Better to bring Mohammed to the mountain . . .” Larkin rationalized. But now Chris was walking the Marine through the restricted lots and to a corner piled high with old beaten up wooden crates. Higgins carried a crowbar and upon arrival to this corner of the warehouse he began to pry up one of the lids. The old nails strained and finally gave way in an ear splitting screech. Chris popped off the lid and then pulled back the protective oiled paper. Larkin’s eye’s nearly popped out of their sockets. There covered in a dark sticky film of Cosmoline lay a crate of firearms that had not seen the light of day in over five decades. The K98 Mauser’s had lain in Russian warehouses since the last Great War, quietly waiting the day they would be called back into action. That day had finally come.

Chris showed the Marine through the rest of the holding area. There were stacks of crates full of imported Mausers, Enfields, Mosin Nagant and even more surprises. More importantly in another nearby warehouse the security guard showed Larkin stacks of ammunition, cases upon cases of ammunition.

“How did you keep this all secret from those gangsta’s? Larkin asked.

“It wasn’t easy Staff Sergeant. Especially when we were slowing starving to death. I just kept believing that somehow I would get away from them, escape and get a few folks out with me.” He shook his head.

“But I didn’t dare tell them about this stuff. Even when the children were starving . . . that was the hardest part, the kids. But can you imagine what they would have done with all this stuff!” He exclaim as he spread his arms. “They would have owned us forever!”

Three weeks later Dogman strutted his stuff down the boulevard. ‘Yeah he waz bad’ He thought. He liked being a solder for the Crips, especially since they now totally owned the hood! No more cops. No more social workers trying to drag him back to school or some stupid program to get him out of the ‘hood’.

‘FUCK THAT!’ He strutted along. ‘WE IZ DA HOOD!’

He never noticed the shadow that suddenly reached out from the side ally and pulled him in. The last thing he remembered seeing was a dark skinned funny looking “dude” bringing something black down into this face and then he flashed into unconsciousness.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Yahzee drove the butt of his rifle into the face of the gang-banger dispatching him quickly. Chavez let the limp body smack into the hard black top before grabbing his feet and dragging him deeper into the alley where they deposited him in a nearby dumpster.

That took care of the last of the outer perimeter roving guards, if you wanted to call them that. The way was now cleared for payback!

The recovery of the civilians was rapid, what with plenty of food, water and shelter. But the Marines lost no time in beginning preparations for their inevitable confrontation with the gangster's. They reconned the entire waterfront area and used the time they had to make sure that any intrusion into "Their Turf" would be costly to the invaders, very costly indeed. In addition the group immediately broke out the early Christmas presents that Chris had showered on them. Of the one hundred and fifty-five survivors that were still with them only about sixty-three were what Larkin felt were able-bodies. He began to arm and train them. He half expected some amount of protest about his intentions, but he received none.

The Marine Staff Sergeant found it somewhat amusing that probably before the entire world had gone to hell in a handcart the majority of these people before him would have refused to have even handled a firearm. I guessed that they had seen the error of their ways. His students were more than attentive and interested in his and his fellow Marine's classes. There was a fire he could see burning deep inside their eyes. They wanted revenge; vicious apocalyptic revenge. Well that was all right by him. He had sat and listened for hours at the descriptions of their internment. The torture, humiliation, and abuse they had suffered for months at the hands of their oppressors.

But Larkin knew that they must be able to control and contain their blood lust if they are to be effect and exacting in their retribution. He wanted to put an end to the gangsta reign. They were vermin, a disease and he and his newly acquired troops would become the penicillin to treat. Their time was nearly up.

The transformation from victim to soldier took place in the weeks before the winter solstice. The twenty-second would be the shortest day of the year or the longest night depending upon how you looked at it. For some it would be the last night Larkin thought as they moved into position. The darkness came early and had a sinister feel to it. The air was still and seemed to hang around their heads in anticipation.

Sgt Stevens lead the assault with his 249 spewing forth five point five six daggers of high-speed death in a concentrated cone of fire to the center front. On the right side of the flying wedge was the stern faced SSgt Larkin, a supreme example of THE perfect superior killing machine. He seemed to have morphed to become one with his M-4 as the camouflaged stalking terminator sent out controlled accurate bursts of hellfire. On the left flank of the wedge was the team's Native American, LCpl Tony Yahzee, whose cammo job resembled ancient war paint of lightening bolts streaking across his face. The trio rolled on like a juggernaut of death and destruction. Anything that presented it self in the target area was immediately sent to the happy hunting grounds in supremely controlled double taps. Like Sherman's march to the sea the trio burned a swath of damnation through the street punks while the remainder of the team danced from roof top to roof top sending the wrath of the Corps down upon the unsuspecting slime confronting them.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Oh those foolish mortal souls.” Ian thought as he witnessed the carnage wrought by his Marines and the vengeful civilians. His pity was directed not at the Marines, but at their victims. It was difficult to think of the gutter swine choking out their last gasps of breath as adversaries. Adversaries at least had a chance of putting up a fight. There was no equity on this battlefield, the game was entirely rigged and one sided as Larkin had predicted.

The fight resembled a game of “Smack a Mole” as each thug popped up in an attempt to return fire at the on rushing killing machines, twin hornets of death leapt across the void separating the antagonists and splayed through their drug infested diseased brain housing group or cracked through defenseless ribs to rip apart soft cardiac flesh seizing the putrid life that should have been aborted before conception. These were not humans that the Marines mowed down but plague-ridden vermin and the exterminators had arrived.

From his vantage point Ian watched the battle unfolding below him with an almost detached fascination. The thick humid air lent an eerie surrealism to the event as the sounds of devastation echoed down the empty dark streets and off the surrounding buildings. One after another the gang-bangers would expose themselves and then almost instantly crumple up like a used snotty paper napkin to be discarded into the trash. The Marines just continued their march up the street without so much as a casual notice of the life that they had just snuffed out. The first word that came into Ian’s mind as he watched the rolling tide of death was efficient . . . “BLOODY DAMN EFFICIENT!” Ian was reminded of an image he envisioned as a young lad back in primary school when his World History teacher described the streets of Babylon flowing six inches thick with blood after the Huns finally breached the city’s gates and went into a killing frenzy that lasted for over twenty days inside the great walls of the fabled Babylon.

There on the edge of death like dark specters dancing in the strobic muzzles flashes emanating from the bloody hardtop at street level Ian could just make out LCpl Chavez and Cpl Zimmerman as the pair raced ahead on the connecting roof tops. They lashed out from the high flanks sending rounds and hand grenades into the dark crevices flushing out the two-legged cockroaches into the Marine meat grinder marching up the street. The side streets were cut off as escape by the best rifleman of the ex-prisoners as they nailed anyone exiting the carnage in a deadly crossfire’s from the ancient battle rifles.

Suddenly Ian was jolted back to reality as SSgt Kat Stacy lit up a group of huddling vermin with the 20mm chain gun. The big gun boomed out across the dark city as it sent it’s high explosive message shredding down the barricaded boulevard ripping huge chunks out of metal and flesh. She may have been a Medic and a non-combatant but she sure was bloody effective with the big gun. He watched as she sighted in on another target and let fly a second burst. Combinations of HE (high explosive) and AP (armor piercing) rounds burst apart car after car in the blockade like an M-80 firecracker inside an empty tuna fish can. She then began to dance the big gun against the outer walls of the gangsta fortress. Concrete, stucco, and wood framing splintered and burst apart sending secondary projectiles searing into soft flesh.

The gangsta’s were, for the first time since their reign of terror had begun, facing a real full-scale war and the reality of their own mortality. It was they that suddenly found themselves under a blitzkrieg attack with nowhere to run as line after line of resistance was being mowed aside. It was just then as they were pressed back to the center of their lines that the firebombing began.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Zipper set up his surgical-tubed water-balloon slingshot from a nearby convenience store rooftop and began launching the deadly alchemist concoctions high into the air above the demon's lair. One of the FEMA escapee's had been a chemistry student working on his Master's Degree when he was captured by the gangsters and forced into servitude. The gasoline based gelatinous mixture worked on a thermo-dynamic chemical interaction when the jars broke and combined the two acids. The mason jars spun in above the outer barricades and descended with a vengeance spewing out their molten contents on the unsuspecting vermin hidden within. Jar after jar disappeared into the predawn sky only to reappear as an expanding ball of liquid death against gangsta flesh a hundred yards away. Zimmerman was walking the jars of death in like a skilled mortarmen, cutting off any hope of relief or retreat for the shooters on the front lines. They were trapped between the approaching death in front of them and the flaming walls growing up quickly behind them. Silhouetted against a glowing nightmare, as they were, the ragged band of street punks raced back and forth trying in vain trying to find a crack to crawl into or a hole to sneak out of. But they had built their fortress too well and now found themselves trapped by its walls.

Stacy lined up the big gun and laid down a concentrated barrage of quick bursts into the space just under the first floor windows of the building. All return fire from that section of the building immediately ceased and she went looking for other targets of opportunity. Off in the distance a pair of pickup trucks full of bangers squealed around the corner and headed to intercept the Marine flying wedge on the main boulevard. But on their approach they suddenly became fully exposed as they ran across a near empty parking lot. Stacy waited until the trucks were fully committed on their run towards the advancing left rear flank of the trio of Marines before she fired up the big gun.

A steady staccato of twenty-millimeters "WOOMP-WOOMP-WOOMP-WOOMP-WOOP" echoed across the battle scene as Ian watched the huge holes suddenly rip open down the side of the lead truck just before it was engulfed in a horrific explosion that threw truck and human parts in every direction. The second truck locked up all four and came to a sliding stop that tossed half of its contents of bangers out across the top of the hood and over the right side of the pickup bed onto the unforgiving blacktop. Stacy sent two more rounds down range before she ran out of ammunition.

"SHIT!" She shouted. "IAN GET ME MORE AMMO!"

The two worked as a well-oiled team and in seconds the second drum was locked in and the Medic was back into the battle pounding the second truck into so much tin foil!

Warez stood panic struck as he watched both his stronghold and his Aztlan army dissolve before the on rushing gringo attack. He witnessed Hernandez, his most senior lieutenant, cut in two by an armor piercing 20mm round that blasted through the old brick walls that offered his soldiers no protection what so ever from the belching hellfire. Their only hope remained in a hasty retreat over the back walls and into the large concrete lined riverbed behind the building. They would slink back into the shadows from which they came and strike another day. He would return to make the gringos pay! Oh how they would pay.

Like the cockroaches they were, the survivors scurried out the back of the administration building and were soon spilling over the security walls into the dry riverbed. Warez ran into the darkness and felt protected by the dark cloak that surrounded him. His shoes slapped the dry concrete as he headed straight across the empty space to freedom. Suddenly the entire opposite riverbank lit up and the fleeing gangsta's were blinded by the multi-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

tude of lights. He and the twenty or so of the remaining gangsta's were caught flatfooted. Blinded by the light in front of them, silhouetted by the raging fires behind, there was nowhere for them to run.

A deep growl began to grow within him. He was a king and he would be king of his turf. He gripped his M-16 tighter and began to rush the blinding lights firing into them as he ran. He managed to make nearly a dozen feet before he was viciously halted when over a dozen high powered rounds punched through him and went on to inflict further damage to those behind him. Victor Warez lay sprawled out with a contorted expression frozen on his lifeless face. The man who would be king would lay in the riverbed until what remained of his corpse was finally washed down the river and out into the waiting ocean with the spring rains. But he would not be alone. No gangsta made it out of that river channel that night alive. La Raza was dead. MECHA was dead. The invasion of Aztlan was finished; at least in this part of the west it was dead.

When the sun was finally up and shining its light over the southland, the only people walking in the streets were the free residents of Los Angeles. They had learned a bitter lesson. One learned by our forefathers over two hundred and fifty years ago. Freedom isn't free.

Epilog

Angel looked into the sleeping face of his little girl. Such an angel his Cynthia had given him. He tip toed out of her room and quietly walked down the hallway into the living room.

"Is she finally asleep?" His wife asked.

"Yes." He whispered. "She looks like such an angel when she sleeps."

"Like her daddy." Cynthia giggled. "I'm sure that is why your mother gave you that name."

Angel blushed as he sat down next to his wife and the two gazed into the fire.

"I doubt that. She always said I was more of a little devil than an angel."

Cynthia leaned her head upon his shoulder and snuggled closer. "I wish I could have known your mother." She sighed.

"Me too." His voice was distant. "And her little grand-daughter. She would have been very proud of her."

"Are we going to make it Angel? Are things ever going to get back to normal?"

He hugged her and gave his wife a kiss on the top of her head. "Only God knows the answer to that question my love. But I hope so. I truly hope so, maybe it will be even better."

He took in a large breath and slowly released it. "We have had to learn some very bitter lessons over the last couple of years. As my mother would have said, 'Very expensive lessons, but through it all God has been look-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

ing out for us. While its true we have lost much, and many have suffered greatly. We must remember the gifts that we have received. He has given us seeds that are immune to the “Brown”, he as given us each other when all hope was lost. He has given us friends that care for us. He has given us a healthy and whole little girl. He has given us hope. All these things and still he has given us more.”

“More?”

“Remember what day tomorrow is?”

“Oh . . . you mean Christmas?” She asked.

“Yes Christmas. For all the evil in the world, for all the wrong that has been committed, for all our faults that we possess, he has given us the greatest gift of all, his only son and through him, we have been given hope. I never really understood that until now when I look into our little girl’s eyes. I would sacrifice myself before I could sacrifice my child. But God did it to give us hope, to save us from ourselves. I hope we are worth it.”

Chapter 83 – A Devil's Bargain

Mark tramped through the snowdrifts pulling a sled that wallowed behind him over the uneven drifts. He stopped for a moment to catch his breath and removed the knit stocking cap from his head. He wiped his brow with the back of his hand and replaced the cap. His breath came out in great white clouds and he glanced around the forest. The air was very still, and the snow hanging from the branches and on the ground absorbed sound, leaving Mark in a quiet circle. He looked back at the sled that had the results of their meager trap line.

“Not a bad day,” He thought. The lines he had placed in the open water of the stream had yielded three decent-sized fish. The traps had also been earning their keep, having caught a couple of rabbits. They had been eating a lot of meat, rice and beans during the winter. It wasn’t a great diet, and it probably wasn’t helping Lazarus heal as fast as he should, but it kept their bellies full. He once again thanked his luck for contacting Dale’s group that fateful day. The vitamin tablets that were included in the ration packs Dale had left were no doubt keeping them from scurvy and all kinds of other vitamin deficiencies to which their meager diet would have left them exposed.

Lazarus was healing well, and Dale - though claiming to be no expert - said it looked as if he would regain most of the use of the leg and that it was healing pretty well. In general, Lazarus was much better. He was up and around the tiny cabin, doing what he could to help out. He walked with the aid of a crutch that Mark had carved for him. He had taken several trips outside, mostly to the outhouse, and seemed to get stronger every day. He had done a thorough cleaning of the cabin, and had organized their supplies. He had also had insisted in his quiet way that Mark show him how all of their firearms worked. Mark had done all that he could with the limited ammunition that he had. He had worked with Lazarus until he was proficient at field stripping, loading, unloading, clearing malfunctions, and anything else that Mark could think of. He went over the different shooting positions, and worked with him as much as his limited knowledge allowed on the pistol as well. Mark had saved an empty case from their limited practice sessions and made a “snap cap” by prying out the primer and replacing it with a bit of wood hardened in the fire. Lazarus was then able to practice dry firing, which he did for

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

hours on end. Mark had learned a drill from his time in the service: He balanced a dime on the barrel of the rifle, and the object was to have Lazarus pull the trigger with the “snap cap” in the chamber without upsetting the dime from the barrel. The object was to teach him not to flinch as he pulled the trigger. Mark didn’t know if it was doing any good, since usually this drill was also accompanied by live fire practice, but it was the best he could do. He had a thought to ask Dale about trading for some additional ammunition.

Lazarus and Mark traded with Dale’s group on a somewhat regular basis. Mostly it was the rare occasions that the traps or the lines caught excess game that Mark traded for more of the ration packs. Mark suspected that Dale’s group didn’t really need the meat, but were looking for a reason to be generous without seeming to give handouts. Whatever their motivation, Mark appreciated it: It was keeping them alive.

Their days at the cabin were lean, but relatively happy. Whether it was that the world outside was mostly dead, or that the cabin was tucked away in a particularly hidden spot, they had no visitors other than Dale and his group. They always came in a group of four or five, were very kind and polite, but always alert, always posting a watch.

Mark and Lazarus spent most of the day working. They awoke at about seven, and re-stoked the fire, then set about cleaning up and getting breakfast. A pot of water was set on the stove to heat while they made their beds. After a few minutes later, they drew off some lukewarm water to wash up, while the rest of the water heated to a boil. They almost always had oatmeal for breakfast, sweetened with a little sugar or honey. After breakfast Lazarus always volunteered to clean up the dishes while Mark made the trek down to the creek to fill the water jugs. Usually then Mark would attend to the trap line, while Lazarus would repair small items such as having sewn up Mark’s backpack and making crude fishhooks. They had worked together on trying to add insulation to the cabin in the form of dry leaves they found under some overhanging rocks. They also went for as much of a “walk” as Lazarus could tolerate. Then Mark would move Lazarus’ foot gently in all directions, flexing and extending trying to loosen it up. Lazarus would sweat and grit his teeth, but would be soundless through the ordeal.

The afternoons were spent on a myriad of activities, ranging from cleaning the maple sap buckets found in the shed to repairing the tumbledown chairs found in the cabin. After the evening meal that usually included some form of beans and/or rice, that was usually supplemented by game meat. Mark had taken a skinny doe while working the trap line several weeks ago that they had long since finished. In the evenings, they would sometimes sit outside and look up at the clear night sky. The stars shone with a nighttime brilliance that bid them be silent and stare up at the heavens.

Mark shook his head and hitched the straps of the sled into position on his shoulders and resumed his trudging. It was not terribly far now to the cabin. He couldn’t wait to get inside and take off his jacket, myriad layers of clothing, and to dry out. Most of all, he wanted to flop down on the bunk and rest. He figured he should be getting stronger after all these weeks of snow and towing the sled, but he still got pretty tired. Mark figured it was his poor diet that didn’t let him gain muscle mass the way he normally would. Maybe springtime would bring more food.

Soon the little cabin came into sight, a wisp of smoke curling from the chimney. He could see Lazarus chopping some branches in front, using the axe with uncanny deftness to turn the branches quickly into lengths usable in the stove. He rested his knee on the stump of a log as he chopped. They had found a large tree that was dead,

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

but still standing some distance from the cabin. They had taken turns with the axe to fell it, and Mark had pulled it back to the cabin with the four-wheeler. They had spent a great deal of time hacking it to stove-sized bits. He now knew what the old timers meant by “Chopping your own firewood warms you twice!” As he drew closer to the cabin, Mark noticed that Lazarus was not using his crutch now as he bent and dragged a stray large branch closer. Without the crutch his limp was much more pronounced but no matter how Mark pressed the issue, Lazarus wouldn’t use it when he wasn’t in the mood. Mark had finally stopped pestering him about it, and they both seemed the happier for it.

Lazarus turned at Mark’s approach and gave him a half smile.

“What’s for supper?” He asked.

“Same as every damn night this week: Rice and fish. I think I’m turning Chinese!” Mark replied, pulling up to him and dropping the tow rope on the sled.

“It is better than tree bark,” observed Lazarus as he leaned on the axe to catch his breath.

“Not by much!” joked Mark. “Hey, we’d better get cleaned up. Especially you; Kate’s coming over tonight”

Lazarus blushed at this. He had developed quite a crush on young Kate, who didn’t seem too distressed that the quiet young man seemed to glance at her slightly more than was - strictly speaking - necessary. Mark guessed her to be nineteen years old or so. A little older than Lazarus, but not too much. During the few visits that Dale’s group had made to the little cabin, Mark had noticed the smile that came to Lazarus’ face when Kate was part of the team. He watched her somewhat bashfully as she pulled security around the cabin. Mark wasn’t sure if Lazarus’ feelings were reciprocated, but she certainly did not seem to avoid him.

The rabbits were already frozen by the bitter cold, as were the fish. Whether he cleaned them now or later made no difference. He took them to the shed and hung them on nails, away from the floor of the cabin while Lazarus wrestled an armload of wood into the cabin while using his crutch. As he passed by the woodpile, Mark scooped up a load of wood to bring inside as well, setting it down in front of the neatly stacked row that was already in place next to the stove. Mark got the large pot out and poured it full of water from the five gallon jug that was least full. The jugs were the plastic Coleman-type with a spigot to act as a faucet. Mark usually hefted one into place above the little sink. This gave an illusion of running water, but like a cheap gas station men’s room all you got was cold water.

In some of Mark’s wanderings that had him range far afield, he had come upon a blackened farmhouse. The tracks in the snow had indicated that the only recent visitors had been animals, but he had watched the place and listened for hours, nonetheless. Finally convincing himself that danger was minimal, he moved in closer to the house. It contained very little of use, as the fire had been quite thorough in gutting the structure, and only a shell remained. He peered through a blackened and scorched hole where a window was, and attempted to discern if anything of value remained. He could see little that was not ruined by the fire. An ironing board, twisted from the intense heat lay forlornly against the rubble on the floor along with the equally charred remains of a metal table. The floor of the kitchen had piles of snow here and there where the roof above had burn through and even partially collapsed, allowing the clean, white snow to enter. Mark circled the outside of the house to look through the other windows. Nothing really appeared to have been worth the effort to walk this far. Mark went

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

around the last corner of the house, already eyeing the path he had taken from the shelter of the woods when he tripped over something buried in the snow. He stood back up and brushed the snow from his jacket while looking down at the offending object. He kicked at it with his boot, dislodging the covering of snow that shrouded it.

Soon he had traced the outline of what seemed to be a set of cellar doors. Visions of shelves laden with canned carrots, beans and peas sprang to mind. His mouth began to water as he cleared the snow from where the door handles should be. He muttered a curse when he felt a battered padlock and brushed the snow from it. He cast about for something to break the lock, but it seemed that pry bars were in short supply. He examined the hasp a little more closely. It had been installed incorrectly, with the screw heads exposed. Mark reached into his pocket and withdrew his Leatherman "Super Tool." He bent to work at the screw heads, twisting slowly and firmly attempting to avoid stripping the screw heads. The metal doors were not very thick, but attempting to bash through them would not be his first choice. The metal could withstand an attack from his bare hands quite well. He could use a precious .308 round from his M1A to shatter the lock. He may still need to do that. He didn't know what the payoff would be. Through the visions of vegetables and - dare to hop e- fruits, he knew that the odds were quite against him. The brown had come, then the plague, finally the bandits, the hungry and the desperate. The root cellar was probably accessed from the inside, and then the house put to the torch after everything of value was carted off. He had encountered very few places in the time since the plague that someone had not been to already. As he worked, he would stop to listen and look around. He was loath to be out in the open like this, but the risk versus benefit made the danger worth it.

Finally, the hasp popped off and Mark was able to open the door. It was dark in the cellar, and smelled of smoke. He reached into his pocket to withdraw his tiny LED flashlight that normally was attached to his key chain, but since he no longer had use for keys, resided in his front pocket. It took several moments for his eyes to adjust to the darkness enough to slowly descend the stone steps. The cellar was roughly twelve feet square, and much of it contained burned beams and debris from above. He could make out some three-foot square boxes of what appeared to be sand. He remembered from a junior high school trip to a "colonial village" historical recreation center that sometimes vegetables were stored in such boxes to preserve them. He carefully cleared the debris from the top of the sand, and began to dig through it. His hopes faded quickly as the digging produced naught but dirty hands. The only prize had been a dry, shriveled potato found in the corner of one of the boxes.

His eyes had adjusted almost completely to the dim light streaming in from the cellar doors. The shelves that had once lined the walls had collapsed, spilling their meager contents to the floor. He was able to salvage three empty one-quart mason jars that were unbroken. He also found - inexplicably - amongst the debris of broken glass and tin cans, an intact plastic bottle of "Lemon Joy" dishwashing soap.

This find had been an unexpected Godsend. He and Lazarus used it for everything from shampoo to laundry soap, though they had needed to learn to dilute it, lest the bubbles fill the cabin. Mark had longed for a hot shower all winter. The sweat produced by chopping wood and the constant permeating smell of wood smoke began to drive him crazy. He hated that his skin was sticky. Slimy. Smelly. Lazarus had not the bouquet of a rose, either. The sponge baths that they had given themselves helped . . . but it wasn't the same as a real bath. Or a hot shower. Finally, Mark decided to do something about it. He sacrificed a five-gallon pail that he had found by using a nail to pierce the bottom ten or twelve times. He then made a wooden grating from peeled branches outside, under a convenient tree branch close to the door of the cabin.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

The procedure was place a plastic ice cream bucket lid with attached string in the bottom of the bucket. This served to prevent water from leaking from the holes until the one who was showering was ready. Two gallons of water was boiled, and then poured into the bucket. The bucket was filled the rest of the way with cool water, and then hoisted into position by the shivering user. When the bucket was in position and tied off, the string connected to the ice cream bucket lid was pulled, allowing water to spill out the dozen holes onto the bather below. The dishwashing soap lathered hair and cleaned armpits and groin on the way to the ground. With the air temperature below zero, there was no concern about lingering too long under the lukewarm dribble. The bather usually bolted into the cabin to stand beside the wood stove while toweling off with a clean t-shirt. Lazarus was usually at a disadvantage, as he was still reliant on his crutch to hobble very far. However, he was usually quite ready for a shower whenever Mark suggested it. On average they bathed in this manner every three days. Not like a real “Hollywood” shower, but better than nothing.

Mark helped boil the water, and then hoist it up before discretely vanishing to the shed to work on some project or another and leave Lazarus to his shower.

After they had both finished, Mark sat on his bunk and leaned back against the wall.

“Ahhhh!” he exclaimed, “There’s nothing like being clean. I love it!”

“We smell like lemons,” noted Lazarus wryly.

“Maybe Kate’ll think it’s our aftershave,” chuckled Mark.

“Perhaps.”

“She always manages to smell so good.” Mark was baiting him, just a little. He smiled as Lazarus began to look slightly uncomfortable.

There was a long silence before Lazarus answered, changing the subject.

“How long are we going to stay here?” he asked.

His question took Mark somewhat aback. He had asked himself this same question of himself of course, but Lazarus had never brought up anything aside from the here and now. Mark took it as a sign of some mental healing to accompany the physical.

“I dunno, Lazarus. Where do you want to go?”

Lazarus hesitated and looked at the floor, then replied.

“There are some people that I need to check on. I . . .” He faltered. “I just need to make certain they are doing well.”

“Family?” Inquired Mark gently.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“They used to be.”

Mark thought this a strange thing to say. Family was family, wasn't it? All the same, the boy had his reasons. He had a good head on his shoulders, and he trusted that Lazarus knew what he was doing. Or at least had good reasons for doing what he was doing. The boy still made him a little sad. A teenage boy should not have the aura of an old man who had seen and done too many terrible things. He could imagine what Lazarus was going through. The faces of those he had been forced to kill occasionally haunted his own dreams. He drew his mind back to the present.

“I say we should go. But,” Mark cautioned, “We should wait just a little while longer. You're getting around better and better on that leg. We're safe here, but if we range away, there's no telling what we may run up against.”

Lazarus nodded at this.

Mark continued, “I'd feel better if you were able to move a little better. If we need to fight, it'll be easier if you can run. Can you wait two weeks?”

“I don't think two weeks will make a difference to them. We'll wait until I am stronger.”

Mark stared through the small holes in the woodstove at the flames for a few moments, and then turned to Lazarus. “What happens when we get to your . . . to the people you want to see? Will you stay with them?”

Lazarus was quick to reply, “No. There is no chance of that.”

Finally, Mark could take it no more. “Lazarus, what happened? Who are you?”

He looked down at his hands, and was still for a long while. Finally he raised his head to look Mark in the eyes. As he opened his mouth to speak, a knock came at the door.

They both started, and Lazarus hastily made for the door using his crutch. He swung the door wide and soon Dale and Kate stood before them. They warmly greeted Lazarus and Kate even caught the boy up in a brief hug. He invited them in, blushing furiously with a grin.

After their initial greetings, Dale spoke to Lazarus. “Looks like that leg is getting better. Mind if I take a closer look?”

“Not at all,” said Lazarus as he sat in a chair and swung the leg on to the table.

Dale looked the leg over and peered at the still red wound. “How's the pain?” he asked.

“Almost gone. Much of the time I forget to use the crutch. If I stay on it too long, it does ache.”

“Sounds pretty normal. Be sure you baby it for a while: It's still healing up on the inside.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Mark tells me the same thing.”

“Now you have a second opinion.” Dale said with a grin

Lazarus pulled his leg from the table as Mark asked Dale “What’s going on out there?”

“Locally or globally?” He replied.

“First one, then the other.”

“Well, locally, things are starting to cool off in some ways, and heat up in others. The cold weather is keeping a lot of the marauders holed up”

Mark’s head snapped up. “Marauders?”

“Well, that’s what we sort of settled on calling them. You have been pretty sheltered up here. I don’t know if you really know where you are, but it’s really off the beaten paths quite a distance. It’s a couple miles to the nearest road, and it’s a gravel road at that. Anyway, at first there were mostly just scared people. They really didn’t want to hurt anybody while waving their guns around. They were just powerless in the situation, and they thought the gun was the fastest and quickest way to get their feeling of control back. Those folks died off pretty quick through the Plague, or getting killed by other folks in the same boat as they were.” Pretty soon things got tougher. People who were left around here organized. There are some groups like us, good folks who pulled together to help each other out. On the other hand, the Plague wasn’t kind enough to kill off just the bad people. They survived too, and the really mean ones were the ones who climbed to the top of the heap, so to speak. They have charisma, and collected some followers. It’s like the old feudal system: They follow the directions of - and even kill for - the leader who provides food, direction, and the illusion of power. “

Dale glanced around the room before continuing. “Anyway, there seems to be a few of these marauder groups in this area. Some groups seem to have eight or ten people while some have fifty or so. Lately, there haven’t been many reports of activity. Maybe they’re holed up. Maybe they have disbanded for the winter, each person finding his own food supply. Maybe they moved on to greener pastures. Maybe they found Jesus. Who knows? Our guess is that they will resume their activity when the weather warms up a little.”

As to the global situation, well, our info is a little spotty. We do know that there have been some battles inside the US. Martial law has been declared, and some people are fighting that pretty hard. Seems like some people in the government are using this as an excuse to expand their power. The “official” broadcasts from the government talk about controls on travel, what little food gets produced, fuel, communications . . . anybody caught with a gun is subject to execution.

This doesn’t sit too well with a lot of folks, including some units in the military. There have been reports of units, or parts of units refusing to follow orders to fire on civilians. This has led to firefights, desertions, and who knows what all else. There’s even talk about foreign troops on US soil. We’re lucky that we live way out here in “flyover country.” The government has their hands full with the cities. Hell, even the few National Guard that responded to the call up here got sent down to the state capital. ‘Course, most of what I just told you is second hand at best, but it seems like that for better or worse, we’re on our own here.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Mark sat quietly and digested all that Dale had said. He was in the Guard. Did he have an obligation to try to return to his unit? He hadn't even thought about it during the past few weeks. He was too busy trying to get through to the next day. He did take an oath to defend the constitution against all enemies, though. That sense of duty pricked him like a knife.

Dale had been silent a while, and stared at the snippets of flame visible in the woodstove. There seemed to be something on his mind as he watched the flames dance. Kate was quiet as usual, perched on Lazarus' bunk. She had taken her parka off to reveal a thick grey wool sweater that complemented her figure nicely. Lazarus was sitting at the table, but made furtive glances at Kate quite frequently.

Finally, Dale spoke. "I am not exactly sure how to say this. I'm not sure it's even fair to say it at all."

That got everyone's attention. They all turned to stare at Dale, waiting for him to continue. He pulled his eyes away from the fire, and looked at all of them in turn. "There's going to be a vote next week. The vote will be to see whether you will be invited to join us."

Mark looked quickly to Lazarus, whose eyes were unreadable. Mark looked carefully back to Dale.

"What does that mean," he asked, "exactly?"

"It means you will be able to move to our community; to share in our fortune and work to improve it. To help us and to be helped by us." Dale replied.

"What does that mean," Mark asked again, "exactly?"

"It means that we'll share our food, shelter, tools, skills and security in exchange for your labor and loyalty, in a nutshell. We have visited here several times. You both have demonstrated a great deal of industry and cleverness. You are polite, kind and hard working. You are the kind of people we want to have on our side. We think that you both could add to our strength. And, we fear for your safety in the spring.

Mark and Lazarus exchanged glances. Once again, Lazarus was unreadable. Mark looked at Kate who was smiling like a fool. The invitation had been extended to them that could mean the difference between getting to live another two years and an unpleasant death. On the surface, it was a dream come true, but it forced Mark to evaluate what he wanted for the future. He felt he should at least try to get home to see if his Mom was OK. The chances were pretty slim that she was still alive, but he had to know for sure. He had to try. Lazarus too had things to do as soon as his leg healed a little better. He had only been with the young man a couple months, but couldn't imagine going anywhere without him.

Mark halted his deliberations and looked back at Dale, who in turn stared back at him. Mark cleared his throat and began. "This, this is wonderful news. I can't tell you how grateful we are that this is even a possibility. Even if the vote doesn't go our way, it's an honor to be considered."

He glanced to Lazarus. "But there are some things we need to do before we can accept. I have to try to find my mom. Lazarus has . . . people he needs to check up on. I don't mean to refuse your offer. I really don't. I do

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

want to build a life for myself, and to see Lazarus safe, and if the world is really as bad off as you say, well, you are the best chance to come our way in a long time. There are just some things that we have to do.”

Rather than show anger during his reply, Dale merely grinned. “I figured you would say something like that. I told the meeting that you might not come, that you might need to settle some things. There’s going to be a vote anyway, and if you get the invitation, why it’ll be open for a while.”

Mark smiled his relief as he stretched forth his hand to Dale. “Mister, you got a deal!”

The rest of the meeting had gone quite well, with Dale and Kate relaxing some and enjoying the company of the two young men. For their part, Mark and Lazarus were delighted to talk to someone not each other. During the conversation, Mark had asked if there were any way that the group could see their way clear to providing him and Lazarus some ammunition. “Just a box of .308,” he explained, “would be very useful.”

“It’s against our group policy to trade or otherwise supply people with ammunition. Bad idea. Could be used against us,” Dale said. He reached into a pouch and withdrew a magazine for his rifle and began stripping the rounds out of it. He glanced at Mark as he put the twenty rounds in a little pile on the table. “But in your case, I’ll make an exception” he said with a small wink.

Mark laughed with delight and said, “I don’t suppose you have any 9mm on you, do you?”

“What am I? Santa Claus?” Dale joked as he put his magazine away. “Sorry, I don’t have 9mm, just good ol’ .45.”

Kate stood from her place on the bunk. “I have a little to spare.” She also pulled a magazine from a pouch and began stripping rounds from it, setting them on the table.

Even Lazarus was grinning now. Mark said. “You may not be Santa Claus, but this sure feels like Christmas!”

After celebrating by sharing some MRE hot cocoa mix that Mark had been saving for a special occasion, Dale and Kate stood to leave. Dale said, “Well, how about we come back in a couple weeks. We’ll let you know the group’s decision, and see you off on your missions, if you still insist on carrying them out.”

“It sounds great, Dale. It’s so great to have you and Kate and the others come to visit. I think it’s the only thing keeping us from going stir crazy. I’d be happy to join a group of folks as good as you.”

With happy handshakes, and hugs from Kate, the two tramped off, no doubt collecting their sentry along the way.

The euphoria that permeated the little cabin did not end with the departure of Dale and Kate. Though the two had not decided for certain to join the group, it was another option for them, and the options had been pretty slim as of late. The gift of ammunition seemed to be especially welcome. Mark now had forty-four .308 rounds for the M1A, and twenty-nine 9mm for the Glock. Though it wasn’t a vast magazine of ammunition, Mark felt better having it.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

The next two weeks were busy as they began to prepare for their trips. They had decided to go on Lazarus' errand first, and then try to see if Mark's mom were alive, though that trip was at least a hundred and thirty miles on foot. They intensified Lazarus' makeshift physical therapy, and soon he was going most of the day without resorting to the use of his crutch. Mark began to jerk what meat they had been keeping frozen, hanging it from a wire well above the woodstove to dry. They also worked on some rudimentary hand signals to communicate without noise, or God forbid, if their ears were ringing from a firefight. They worked on one firing while the other moved and any other tactics that Mark could remember and apply to a "squad" of only two people. Lazarus was very attentive to Mark during these sessions, doing his best to absorb all that Mark could teach him. They neatly stacked in the cabin what firewood they had collected, cleaned and stored items that they might find useful and need again. They cleaned again and generally did their best to get the cabin ready for a period of emptiness. The anticipation of the group's decision and the journey ahead of them weighed heavily. It was sometimes unbearable to have made the decision to go, but not be able to move on.

Finally the day arrived when Dale would return. Lazarus' leg had healed to the point where he could be on it for several hours without too much discomfort. The scar was still pink and tender, puckered and ugly, but at least it was not red and oozing any longer. They had actually made plans to go that very day. If Dale reported that they were accepted, they would return with him to the group, introducing themselves, and departing from there on their journey. If they were not voted in they would thank Dale and Kate for their help over the winter, and set out. Mark's pack stood loaded and ready to go. For Lazarus, they had built a pack frame from wood and pieces of canvas during the long nights cooped up in the cabin. It stood next to Mark's, a bundle of Lazarus' things attached to it. They had given their weapons a final cleaning as best they could, loaded the magazines and adjusted slings.

It was not without anxiety that they waited for Dale's return. It marked the end of a lean but mostly safe time. They had made friends with some very helpful people and not been shot at in months. Mark sometimes questioned his sanity at going back out into all of it again and without realizing it, slowly paced the floor. Lazarus sat quietly and observed him without moving. Mark glanced at him, and couldn't begin to fathom the thoughts in Lazarus' head. He was still curious about who he really was, and where he came from, but the opportunity to talk about it had never really seemed to occur. He heard Dale hail them from a good distance away.

"Hello Mark and Lazarus!" Dale shouted. "I'm coming in!"

Mark went to the door and looked out. Dale and Kate were drawing near, with large smiles on their faces. In spite of himself, a grin spread across his own face. He assumed the best; that the group had voted to admit them. Dale was more animated than they had ever seen him, and Kate was ebullient as well. Mark and Lazarus stepped into the cold, bright sunlight to meet them.

"Hey, fellow group members!" he laughed as he pounded Mark on the back, "What are we doing standing around? Let's get to your new home, at least for a while!"

Mark let out a whoop, and lifted Kate into the air, swinging her around in a circle, laughing all the while. Even the normally reserved Lazarus was grinning like a fool.

"I'm very happy that you can come back with us." Kate said, shyly looking at Lazarus as Mark set her down. "I can't wait to show you around the place!"

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“We won’t ever get there unless we start walking! Come on, grab your stuff. We can talk and walk,” said Dale.

“It won’t take but a minute. We’ll be right back!” Mark called as he ran to the cabin, Lazarus limping slightly but close on his heels.

Moments later they emerged, carrying their packs and rifles. A thought seemed to bring Mark up short. He stopped suddenly and turned to Dale. “We still intend to check on our people, Dale. We will go to see the group, and to thank them for the generosity but we’ll be moving on after a couple days. Hopefully we’ll be back soon.”

“I’d have expected nothing less,” said Dale as he shifted his rifle to the other hand, still bearing a grin. “And the group knows of your plans. I told them myself, and they - we - appreciate your honesty. Frankly, it only strengthened their assessment of your character.”

“Ok, I just wanted to make sure we were on the same page here.”

They started off through the woods, and after a few hundred meters, Dale brought his radio to his mouth and murmured a few words. After they had traveled a few hundred more meters, a figure in white mottled camouflaged clothing stepped from behind a pine tree. It was Luke, one of the team members that appeared the first time Dale and Kate had come. Luke gave them a slight smile and a friendly nod as they drew near. They remained standing in the trail for a few moments, and soon they heard someone tramping through the snow toward them. Luke, Kate and Dale seemed unconcerned, but Mark unsafed his rifle. Dale noticed his movements and heard the subtle “click”.

“Whoa, pardner! It’s just John! He and Luke help keep an eye on things while Kate and I enjoy your hospitality.”

Mark nodded and safed his rifle once more. After John had joined them, they once again set off. They walked single file in a long line, with plenty of space between them.

Mostly, the journey was in the tree line, though they did need to cross a field from time to time. Mark watched approvingly of how they traveled. While not up to the Corps standards, it was a lot better than just trudging in a straight line in a bunch. They made frequent rest stops. Dale said it was because he was getting old, but Mark was pretty sure it was for Lazarus. Lazarus for his part seemed to be keeping up pretty well, although he did seem to welcome the stops.

At long last, they came to a series of buildings. As they drew near, several men who emerged from a concealed hide greeted them.

“Hello Dale. John. Luke. Katie.” The first said, shaking his hand, and then turned to Mark, “You must be Mark and Lazarus. Welcome. I’m David. They’ll be waiting to meet you up at the big house, I think. ”

The speaker was a large man, nearly six and a half feet tall by Marks estimation. He was dressed in snow camouflage poncho, and carried a FN FAL like the other men he had seen from Dale’s group. David had orange-red

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

hair that stuck out from his stocking cap like an unruly mop. His eyes were a vivid green with smile creases around them. “I’ll see you tonight at dinner.”

They continued walking into the collection of buildings. It looked like a farm, sort of. There was a barn, a large farmhouse, and a few pole sheds. However, there were also several small, neat houses interspersed between the other buildings to make the entire community a rough circle. The houses were made of rough-cut lumber, and were bermed with several feet of earth. Many had evidence of gardens growing on the roof, alongside chimney pipes. Even the fronts of these small dwellings were partially bermed, from ground level up to the windows. There were a few solar panels on the roof of the farmhouse and barn, and two wind generators. One looked to be a commercial model; the other had the appearance of a homemade device. Both were on poles roughly seventy feet in the air next to the barn, spinning lazily in the cool breeze.

As Dale led them to the farmhouse, they met several other people, who were going about some unknown business. All smiled and greeted them warmly, seeming happy to see them. Children ran and chased each other through the snow, their cheeks pink. Their happy shouts filling the air. Mark estimated that he had seen nearly twenty-five people so far. He had seen people of all ages going about their business, leading him to believe that it was a collection of families that inhabited the little compound.

“How did all these people come to be here? You didn’t have all these families here before the plague, did you?” Asked Mark.

“No, there were only a couple of people here before it all started. As I mentioned before, we had a group that was interested in self-reliance, a collection of friends, really. Nothing formal. No real “training” or such. We had barbecues in the summer and sometimes went to the range together, but nothing like this.” Dale said as he waved his free arm vaguely “This was started by us, but it sort of seemed to take on a life of its own. There was always somebody scared and hungry showing up outside the gates, and we let a few of them stay, ones that knew something, or had something to give in return. One gal is a doctor, and her husband is a gunsmith. We were happy to have them join up. Couple of, well, lesbian gals showed up, one was a nurse practitioner; the other could grow anything you might ask for, plus was a potter and knew how to brew beer and wine. That’s their place over there. Once we got to know them, we give ‘em a little bit of a hard time, but they’re pretty good-natured. There are only a few families here that are whole. Most are missing somebody, because of the Brown or the Plague or the fighting. Everybody here has opened their doors, like it was opened for them. Katie here lost her folks. They lived next door to us before. When I came, I brought Katie along. She helped me take care of my wife at the end.”

They were approaching the steps of a large farmhouse that sat on a low rise, and Dale led them up onto the porch. He began to stomp off his boots and the others followed his lead. He opened the farmhouse door and stepped inside.

It was like stepping into heaven. The smell of baking bread filled the air as aproned women bustled about their tasks through an open door. The door had opened into a large kitchen where two large wooden cook stoves were tended by several women of various ages. Large pots of delicious-smelling foods bubbled happily on the stoves amidst the chaos of the kitchen. A large sink full of dishes was tended to by two ladies who chatted amiably while tending to the chores. Mark stared with his jaw open. It was like Christmas at his grandma’s house; all the aunts and mom and grandma cooking and chattering in the kitchen, the men in the living room talking of the

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

things men speak of, and the children racing pell-mell underfoot. The pang of homesickness wracked him for an instant. He looked at Lazarus, who seemed to wear an expression similar to his own.

Dale had stooped to remove his boots and again, Mark and Lazarus followed suit. It was then that one of the kitchen ladies noticed the newcomers.

“Hello and welcome! You must be the latest additions. Dale has spoken highly of you,” said a matronly woman while wiping her hands on a handy dish towel. She thrust one forth for Mark and Lazarus to shake. “I hope you’ll take us up on our offer.”

Dale looked slightly abashed. “Well Ma’am, I sure haven’t seen anything better in the past few months.”

“We’ve a little oasis of normalcy here. Well, maybe not quite normal, but pretty close. A lot better’n some folks, I guess.”

“I’d better get them in there, Susan. The council’s waiting to meet them. Most of ‘em have other work to get to after,” said Dale.

Susan nodded and went back to her chores. During their conversation, the other women had glanced their way from time to time, and most had smiled, but continued their work. Dale led them through the kitchen and into a large living room. There were several men and women there, and a large fire roaring in the fireplace. When they entered the room, everyone turned to look at them, most with smiles. All of the people gazing at Mark and Lazarus were middle-aged or older. Some were silver-haired, and all looked tired. Mark suspected they had been the topic of discussion, as the room fell silent for an awkward moment before the sounds of “Welcome!” came effusively. Everyone gathered ‘round and shook their hands, beaming with pleasure at their arrival. Mark turned in some happy confusion, not remembering a single name from all of the people that introduced themselves. He was slapped on the back, his arm was nearly numb from the shaking, and after several months of quiet with Lazarus, the commotion generated in the room was nearly deafening.

Mark felt a small sense of unease, through all of the excitement. Why were they so happy to see them? What did they want from him? They knew he and Lazarus were leaving again, so why the festivities? It couldn’t be because of anything they had: They were destitute. Even his most prized possession - his rifle - was nothing compared to what they had built here. He suspected that this is where he would learn the catch. Dale had said that they welcomed all sorts of people, but he also mentioned that the people that got asked to stay were people with something to offer.

At last quiet seemed to gain a toehold in the room, and the people in the room began to resume their seats. The seating was haphazard, not like a job interview. Some sat together on the couch, while others rested in some worn old folding chairs. Space was made for Mark and Lazarus on a wooden bench, which they shared with a forty-something gent wearing bib overalls.

“Okay, we’d better come to order” Said an older lady sitting in a high-backed chair near the fire. She looked around with a smile at those present. “First, let me thank our Dale and his team for all of his work and care in finding Mark and Lazarus, and bringing them here.” Murmurs of assent and thanks echoed around the room.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

"I'm assuming Dale told you little of us here. At the risk of boring our council, I'll let you know how we came to be. This farm belongs to a group of friends who wanted a retreat from modern life. This was a weekend place, a place to relax, hunt, fish, shoot, horseback ride, and generally take it easy, but more importantly, it was a place to retreat from danger. This place was bought in the early eighties. Lazarus may not remember it," she gestured at him "but it was the time of the cold war, of the US and the Soviet Union pointing missiles at each other. This place was a retreat. The basement of this house and part of the barn had been prepared as a fallout shelter. The farm had been made as self-sufficient as possible, with a small machine shop, greenhouse, wood-working tools, and the like. The Russians didn't last, but this place carried on, mostly as a vacation spot for the owners. Y2K was the next problem that got everyone into gear. Stocks of food and fuel were increased; solar panels and diesel generator were updated, medical supplies laid in . . . Then all this happened.

Out of the six families that owned this place, none made it here intact. Some lost one member, some more. One family didn't make it at all. When the families had arrived, they began to make this a home and a fort. The fences were already up, but the times were bad enough that they figured it was time to top the fences with barbed wire and such. They had people to keep eyes on the gates. They put a man on the silo with a hunting rifle. It worked pretty well, as far as it went. But they soon found out that they weren't as self-sufficient as they thought. Although they had medical supplies, they found out that they didn't really remember all that much from their first-aid classes. They needed to change some things around here after it became obvious that this crisis wasn't going to pass quickly. They needed help. They had lost many important members of the group. They began asking those who wanted in what skills and experiences they have had. If they found someone that had a needed skill, they were invited to join. It worked pretty well as most folks were basically good people, though not farsighted enough to plan for a disaster. This brings us to you."

At this point, the people sitting around the room began to look distinctly uncomfortable. They began to fidget in their seats and glance at one another and at Mark and Lazarus.

"I'll be blunt," the woman said. "We don't really need you. You are a good strong, young man. I'm sure you've got many useful skills, but unless you have some that you haven't told Dale, strictly speaking, we can get along without you. We don't really need you"

Mark looked ashen, and he was glad he was sitting down. Had they changed their mind? Although he did indeed plan to go and look for his mom, and help Lazarus find whatever he needed to find, he planned to return here. He had been counting on the stability of a community where he could put his guard down. Even the days in the cabin had been punctuated with periods of panic: Gunshots in the night. Thumps outside their door. Days with no meals because they were trying to stretch their food supply. They had clung to the idea of an oasis of civilization, of sanity. When Dale had invited them in, they had thrown themselves into the embrace of the idea that they were once again going to be safe, warm and clean. Now it appeared that safe, warm and clean was again to be snatched from him.

He swallowed hard and looked at Dale. Why hadn't Dale told him what was going to happen? Hadn't Dale told him he was voted in? Dale looked guilty and helpless.

The woman in front seemed to interpret the look. "Please don't blame Dale. He stuck up for you pretty hard, but he couldn't get the council to vote you in. But he didn't give up. He tried different tacks, talking up your mili-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

tary service, your medical training, even your kindness to Lazarus here. In the end, it came down to a compromise. We wanted to present it to you directly, so we pretty much ordered Dale and the others to lie to you.”

She looked around the room before she began again. “To be blunt, it comes to this: To be granted admittance to the community, you have to perform a task for us. It will be dangerous and probably difficult. If you succeed, your admission will be guaranteed with no question or restrictions. If you fail, you’ll probably be dead anyway.”

“What about Lazarus?” Mark asked, glancing at the young man who sat stoically beside him.

“Dale told us that you and Lazarus are a package deal. Are we wrong?”

“Will Lazarus be allowed to remain if I refuse?” Lazarus looked sharply at Mark, but said nothing.

“Lazarus can’t stay without doing the job. Although I’m sure he has a lot of skills and is all around useful, but we have plenty of useful people here. I wish we could let in every kind of folk who are hungry, cold and scared, but we can’t. We just can’t. This whole thing’s looking more and more like it won’t be over any time soon.” She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “We just can’t.”

“What sort of ‘task’ are we talking about?” Asked Mark.

The woman looked around the room again. The other members of the council looked fixedly at her.

“I told you before that there were some of the families who started this place that didn’t make it. We don’t really know what happened to ‘em. We received one radio call several days ago, asking for help. We aren’t sure it was them. It might have been somebody trying to draw us out. We have made some enemies in the past few months. The area that these folks told us they were in over the radio is a pretty nasty place.”

“So you want us to go and find out rather than risk your own people. As disposables.”

“It sounds mean, but yes. It ain’t fair, but that’s the way it is.”

Mark looked at Lazarus, who made no indication of what he was thinking. It was a heavy decision and he didn’t want to make it quickly, especially without talking to Lazarus. He turned to look at the woman once more.

“How long do we have to decide?”

The woman glanced at the others swiftly. “Tomorrow night?” The other nodded in assent.

“Lazarus and I will talk it over and give you our decision then.” Mark said coming to his feet.

Dale quickly rose and made to lead them out. As soon as they were out of the council room, Dale stopped and looked Mark straight in the eyes. “I’m sorry.”

Mark didn’t know what to say. It wasn’t really all right. He still felt like somebody punched him in the gut. Was it worth it? Would the risk to his and Lazarus life be justified by the chance to stay in this community? Could he just move on and forget about these clowns? Could he trust them to let him in if he did complete the task?

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

All these thoughts roiled through Mark's brain as Dale led them across the farmyard to the barn. A set of new steps ascended the few feet to a likewise new door in the side of the hay loft. They clomped up the steps, and Dale opened the door. Inside, a portion of the hay loft had been finished into a barracks-like arrangement. Mark counted seven rooms he guessed were twelve feet square, each with a bunk bed of rough cut lumber, a desk and a large bureau. Six showed signs of habitation, and Dale led them to the seventh.

"You can put your stuff in here and I'll give you a little tour" he said. Mark and Lazarus dropped their packs on the floor, and Mark looked a little closer at the bed. It looked like a real mattress with real sheets. Clean sheets. They were topped by a couple wool army blankets. He reached out a hand to feel the mattress. It was very soft.

"It's just a foam rubber mattress. But they're pretty comfortable" said Dale. "Come on, I'll show you around."

The next room was a large one dominated by a woodstove, with many chairs of differing types. Several tables were scattered throughout, with checkerboards, crossword puzzles and decks of cards strewn atop them. It looked like a common room, where people gathered after their work, but before retiring for the evening. Dale led them next to the bathroom. It had several stalls showers, and several for toilets.

"You must have had a plumber as part of your group!" mused Mark.

Dale laughed. "No, we just read a bunch of books and tried to figure it out. Anyway, those are homemade composting toilets, and can be put pretty much anywhere. Men are encouraged to take their leaks outside while they're working. Too much liquid is bad for the toilets. The shower drains run into a little drain field we buried below the frost line. There's a water tank above that's heated by the woodstove, using just natural thermosiphon. There's a cold water tank up there too. Tanks get filled by an old-fashioned windmill."

"What do you do for soap?" asked Mark.

"Well, we had a bunch stored, but now we use the glycerine that's a byproduct of our new biodiesel production set up" replied Dale. "In case this thing stretches out, we're trying to figure out how to run some vehicles around here. One of the guys remembered doing an experiment with biodiesel in college, and we had a book in our library 'From the Fryer to the Fuel Tank' by Josh Tickell. Step by step instructions. So far it's working pretty well. Come on, there's more to see."

Dale led them back outside, down the steps and went into the lower barn door. Inside was obviously a workshop of some sort. Benches lined one wall, some with vises attached, others with tools hung neatly on pegboard behind them. Several welders of different types sat against one wall. Two large Craftsman roller tool boxes stood back-to-back in the middle of the concrete floor, and a small lathe and milling machine were along another wall. An old Jeep Wagoneer sat in the corner, with the doors removed and a huge hole in the roof. Two men wearing shop aprons were conferring over a piece of machinery, but looked up as they entered. Dale waved and called them over.

"Clyde, Bernie. Come on over. This is Mark and Lazarus." The two men walked over and shook hands all around.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Pleased ta meetcha,” said Bernie “I hope you decide to take us up on our offer.”

Marks voice betrayed his feelings as he coldly said “We’re still thinking about it.”

“Bernie and Clyde are our outlaw machinists. They can pretty much make anything you need, or fix anything you broke. If you decide to take the mission, they have a couple do-dads that might help.”

Despite himself, Mark felt some curiosity. “Like what?” he asked.

Bernie and Clyde looked at each other and grinned a mischievous grin. “Look at this,” they said and opened a drawer. Inside they pulled a small device that looked something like a rocket engine: Five tubes - each about three and a half inches long - were welded together in parallel. The cluster of tubes protruded from a thin base with some sort of springed mechanism attached. Finally, two thin spikes protruded at right angles to the tubes.

“What the hell is it?” wondered Mark aloud.

“We call it a mini-claymore. Real claymore mines are easy enough to build . . . if you have the explosives. We don’t. What we do have though is plenty of twelve-gauge shotgun shells. These three-quarter diameter pieces of pipe hold a shotgun shell each. This mechanism on the back is the triggering device: It touches off all the shells simultaneously when it’s tripped. These two spikes get crammed into the ground, or in a tree or what have you. It’s re-useable, and you don’t have to mess around with explosives,” explained Clyde.

“How’s it work?” asked Mark.

“Pretty good. Not as good as a real claymore, but pretty good. If you are in the path, we figure it’s lethal to ten yards or so. We’re still figuring out the best combination of shot size and ‘barrel’ length. The good news is that we were able to rig up a few of those Radio Shack ultrasonic door alarms on ‘em, so you don’t need trip wires.”

“It’s kinda heavy,” said Mark, hefting the mine.

“Yup, it is. Nothing’s perfect,” Grinned Bernie.

“Come on, let’s go check out the guard shack, then you can take a shower if you like, then it should be about dinner time.” Said Dale, moving to the door.

“The guard shack? Why there?” asked Mark.

“I’ll tell you both on the way,” he said as they moved out into the cold. He stopped at the door and turned to Bernie and Clyde. “Whatever happens, it was nice to meet you.”

Out in the cold, Dale led them toward a larger earth-bermed building with a substantial radio tower sprouting from the roof. Halfway to the building, Dale stopped and looked about. Any other people in view were far away, and not paying them any attention.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Dale turned to Mark and Lazarus. “Look, I want you to know I think this is damned unfair. It was wrong to cut you out of the loop, to withhold information from you. I am ashamed that I had any part in it. For whatever its worth, I’m sorry.”

Mark looked at Lazarus, who made no reaction as usual. Mark turned back to Dale. “Why did you have to . . . ”

“You are forgiven,” said Lazarus, interrupting Mark.

Both Dale and Mark turned to look at him.

“What?” asked Mark. Sometimes he forgot that Lazarus could speak, he did it so rarely.

“I said he is forgiven. There has been no harm done to us. To the contrary, we may not have survived the winter without Dale’s help. Without the help of all of them. Dale’s deception has cost us nothing: It merely hurt your feelings. We have learned that, instead of free entry to a place of safety and strength, there is now a price for admission. So be it. All that remains is for us to decide if we can afford the price,” said Lazarus.

Silence reigned for nearly a minute as Mark and Dale absorbed Lazarus’ words. Mark broke it first.

“He’s right. I shouldn’t be pissed, I should be grateful. Thanks,” said Mark, extending a hand to Dale.

Dale shook Marks hand.

“I still feel like a bastard for not telling you the whole story.”

“That’s all right. You’ve done well for us, and we couldn’t ask for more.”

“Look, if you decide to take this mission, I’ll see to it you get anything you think you need that we have. I volunteered to go, so did a lot of the other guys, but the council vetoed it. There was even talk in the guard shack about going ourselves, against orders. But somebody squealed - we think it might have been one of the guard’s girlfriends - and the council said that anyone who left against orders might not be let back in. Most of us have families, and don’t want to be tossed out. Between you and me, it was feared that if any one of the group got taken prisoner, he could reveal details about our defenses, passwords, and the like.”

“I’m under orders to show you guys enough to make you want to stay, but not enough to make your capture of any value.”

“Look, we are going to need to know a lot more about this ‘mission’ if we are even going to consider it.”

“Come into the guard shack. I’ll answer what I can.”

The trio resumed their trudge through the snow and entered the low building. They doffed their coats and hats while Mark look in the room. A radio operator sat at a desk strewn with several radios with a headset on his head. He looked up and nodded courteously to them and went back to his paperback book. There was a large map displayed on the wall, covered with Plexiglas, with numerous notations and arrows drawn upon it. It

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

looked to be a topographical map of the area. Next to it was a map of the farm, with what looked to be fields of fire drawn in. A rack fastened to the wall held about ten FN-FAL rifles, and cubby holes below each rifle held what appeared to be assault vests.

As Dale led them over to the large map, Mark noticed it was made by taping together the edges of the pages of an “atlas and gazetteer.” Dale pointed to an area nearly off the map.

“This is where they said they were on the radio. It was pretty broken up, but we got that part. As you can see, it’s quite a haul. This is the edge of where we patrol. Even in this small area, we have run into some bad guys. Quite a few actually: We lost four men.”

He turned to the radio operator.

“Randy, can you get Tosha in here?”

“Are we supposed to be telling them all this?” he asked, looking sour.

Dale’s face clouded, and his voice took a hard edge.

“It’s my call. Get Tosha in here now,” he growled.

Randy shrugged, consulted a clipboard and picked up a microphone. His words were covered by Dale speaking again to Mark and Lazarus as he spun a laptop computer monitor to face them. As he spoke, he pulled up several photographs.

“Tosha took these of the area. As you can see, there’s evidence of a lot of activity. The coordinates are roughly here,” he tapped the screen, “and you can see the snow torn up here and even down to the dirt here and here.”

Dale continued to show several still photographs from different angles, at different areas.

“Are these aerial photos? How the hell did you get aerial photos?” exclaimed Mark.

“We have an ultralight. Tosha’s the pilot and flew over the area. Let me get the video ready, so when Tosha gets here she can explain what you’re seeing. She should be here any minute.” Dale pulled a CD from a folder and placed it in the laptop’s drive.

Moments later the door opened and a petite woman of about thirty stepped into the room. As she removed her coat and hat, Mark appraised her: She was not much over five feet tall, and slim. Her movements were quick and assured, and when she had finished with her coat, she fixed Mark with a frank stare for a few moments, and then turned to Dale.

“They said yes so soon?”

“Not yet. But I want you to give the briefing anyway,” he replied.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Does the council know about this?” she asked, though not in an accusing manner.

“That’s what I wanna know!” sneered Randy from his post.

“Shut up Randy!” Tosha said with venom, “It’s none of your goddamned business anyway, you filthy weasel!”

Randy’s mouth gaped several times like a landed carp, and he seemed about to say something when Dale looked at him and shook his head in warning. Randy’s mouth shut one final time, then he turned and resumed reading his book.

“Where were we?” said Dale. “Oh yes, the footage. Why don’t we have a seat?”

They all sat at the table, huddled around the laptop screen. Dale started the footage, and Tosha described what they were seeing.

“OK, farther over this way a good distance is a subdivision kind of thing off by itself. Mostly burnt up, but it looks like some houses are still intact. That’s where they said they were holed up, we think. Now this farm here seems to have a lot of activity. A lot of people outside, a lot of vehicles, and a lot of tracks. Oh! Watch! I get some ground fire in my direction!”

True to her words, Mark could make out tiny blossoms of light from the small figures milling around below. The picture became jumpy and blacked out for a moment.

“That was when I decided discretion was the better part of valor!” she grinned. “There’s another place over here where I receive similarly shabby treatment.”

After the footage was finished, she showed them on the wall map in more detail the route she had flown.

“So how high were you when they were shooting at you?” asked Mark.

“Couple, three thousand feet. That camera’s got quite a zoom on it, so it seems like I was a lot closer. “

“Did you try to raise your people on the radio while you were over them?”

“Of course . . . All I got was some foul-mouthed moron. Seems they have radio guys too,” she said with a sly smile at Dale and a glance at Randy, who stared fixedly at his book, refusing to rise to the bait.

“Anyway, there seemed to be a lot of people moving around in the area, and it seemed like I took fire from most of ‘em.”

Mark was silent for several minutes, studying the maps and pacing back to look at the footage again.

Finally, he looked up at Lazarus.

“Let’s go outside for a little while.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Lazarus nodded, and followed him outside after donning his coat and hat. They walked several paces from the guard shack, and then turned to face one another, huddled deep in their coats against the cold.

“Well, what do you think?” asked Mark, his breath coming in great plumes of white.

“I do not have any military experience. It would seem difficult.”

“I do have military experience, and it is difficult. If we plan it right, and do everything right, we still may be killed. Or worse.”

An involuntary shudder wracked Lazarus as he thought of what ‘or worse’ meant. He had seen it.

“If those people are trapped there, they need help to escape,” said Lazarus. “Dale helped us without thought of payment. We may owe him at least, a debt.”

“Plus, we might be able to ride out this storm here, if we do this one thing.”

“Are you up to it?”

“I will pull my weight.”

“Let’s do it,” said Mark, extending his hand to Lazarus.

“Let’s do it,” replied Lazarus with a sad and crooked grin.

Together they turned to walk back to Dale.

Chapter 84 – The March of the Hessians

It had been nearly two and a half centuries since foreign mercenaries had last set foot on American soil. Hessians, German mercenaries, had arrived here the first time in support of a British king during his vain attempt to regain control of his unruly colonies. Now foreign troops were arriving at the behest of the newly appointed American President. Sent across the Atlantic by their European leaders in a vain attempt to regain control of a stricken nation. The vultures of the world circled high overhead and watched with wolfish grins as a once mighty nation, the paradigm of democracy, the policeman to the world and the engine of the world economy was driven to its knees and left gasping for breath. With each new wave of plague and disaster our European brethren outwardly sent their condolences and offered their support. Inwardly they snickered profusely at the American misfortune and felt that it was about time that these arrogant young upstarts felt the bitter taste of defeat. The mistake they made was to assume that because a man is down . . . he is out. For Americans, that is when they start to fight.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

Up and down the Eastern seaboard the troop transports were off loading the United Nations Expeditionary Force. A conglomeration of mostly European troops and relief workers quickly set out to establish the first foreign beach heads ever assembled on American soil since the original European colonists arrived over three hundred and fifty years earlier. Guided by American FEMA officials the “Relief” effort began first by establishing centralized refuge camps in predetermined zones of control. It was amazing how quickly these vast camps materialized out of the dust and confusion of the continued attacks on the country when earlier American relief efforts had lagged pitifully so far behind?

To many Americans these foreign visitors were a welcome relief from the anarchy that had prevailed over the last several months. To many other Americans this invasion was a grim precursor of things to come and the final straw.

The lead UN column arrived on the outskirts of the small Pennsylvania town and began to spread out along the outer edge of the city limits. There had been a light snowfall just the day before. To Colonel Günter Von Hintermon the view in front of his troops reminded him of his parent’s village back home in the Dark Forest. He recalled from his briefings that many parts of the Eastern Seaboard had been originally settled by Germans, perhaps ancestors of his distant cousins that had left the fatherland for the riches of the new world. But now they were just refugees from a war they had lost, even if they didn’t realize it.

He felt it was somewhat ironic that his grandfather and great uncles had fought against these people back in the last big war and failed, yet a bunch of rag headed Muslims had brought this country to it’s knees. Not with bombs and soldiers but with a very small and very deadly version of the common flu. Well they were not so proud now. This was the third town they were to clear in as many days. At first he had felt pity for them, but now it was just disgust as they groveled and begged for food. Before being loaded up and sent off to the FEMA relocation camps. These were not the tough proud tall Americans his grandfather had fought. What happened to them?

Three static clicks broke the silence in the earpiece of his squad radio. Sergeant Beckerman stretched and cracked his neck before dropping his head down inline with the big sniping rifle. He focused the crosshairs on the most important looking person in the lead element. Beckerman found him. He seemed to be giving orders and looking over the town with some high-powered binoculars. The Sergeant and his team had been waiting for nearly a week preparing for this little welcoming. The gods of war were helpful in dropping that dusting of snow last night. The landscape looked pristine and pure. It had covered all the little surprises that were waiting patiently for their guests.

Beckerman watched as the first scouts from the column moved out and down towards the town. His target remained in the overwatch position. Patiently, ever so patiently the Marine kept his vigil, his finger hovering patiently to the side of the trigger. The foreign scouts would find no living souls, save themselves at the moment. Its original inhabitants had long ago abandoned the town during the first series of government sweeps. But the hills, the surround hills were another matter entirely.

Fifteen minutes later Col. Von Hintermon received the all clear from his scouts and motioned the column forward. He leaned down to speak with the American liaison with him.

“You say dere vas a problem in dis region before?” The Colonel asked.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Yes Sir, we had a small incident about fifteen months back so, where we lost some federal agents and military troops during a gun raid . . . but there’s been nothing since that time.”

“Zo dis ist a quiet sector, yah?”

“Oh most assuredly Colonel! There hasn’t been any activity in this area since then.”

“Vhut about diz rebels ve have heard about?”

“Oh those are mostly out west, cowboys mostly. It’s been quiet here for some time. We got hit pretty hard in this part of the country by the plague. There are just some scattered holdouts here and there like the pathetic refugees we’ve dealt with over the last couple of days that need to be rounded up and helped into the camps.”

The Colonel had his doubts. He had been in the military long enough to mistrust accuracy of military intelligence. They generally tell you what you want to hear or what the upper echelon wants you to know and no more, as far as real information . . . that you have to gather yourself. He had absolutely no faith at all in this American bureaucrat, a toady sort man that wouldn’t stick his neck out for anyone.

The Colonel’s Fuchs Transportpanzer began to move and the main body of the column descended into the town. Slowly the Germans flying the UN flag moved into the center of the town and began to search for survivors that would be relocated to the nearest FEMA refugee camp. Many of the buildings and homes had been burned or showed the ravages of looting and the neglect of time against the elements.

The air was still with that crisp bite of chill that almost seemed minty as your breath turned to clouds when you exhaled. The freshly fallen snow draped the landscape in a crystalline blanket of purity and quiet that glistened under the sunny sky. There where clouds moving in and tonight there would probably be another dusting of snow, but for now the landscape looked serene and peaceful . . . at least for the next few minutes anyway.

Colonel Günter Von Hintermon’s command vehicle nudged up the curb in front of a large central three-story building, its expansive lawn, now covered in snow, separated the large front steps from the parking area by thirty meters or so. The Colonel recognized a government building, an older one constructed out of red brick with the decorated cornices. The keystone above the main entrance was inscribed with the date of 1918 on it. He found it interesting that, that date corresponded with the end of the first Great War, the war to end all wars, but something wasn’t right.

Gunter looked up and flying over the supposedly abandoned building on the flag staff mounted on the roof was a bright and new looking American flag . . . but it was upside down? The field of blue with white stars was on the bottom below the red and white stripes, and there below that flag was another that he had never seen, a bright yellow flag with a large coiled serpent in the center.

The town square, now filled with the U.N. forces, were about to go about their business of searching the small town for refugees when a lone man casually walked out of the front door of the City Hall building and began to descend the wide steps. Gunter felt a sudden chill run down his spine at the sight of this lone American. The Colonel dropped over the side of his command vehicle and felt his feet crunch in the twelve inches of new

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

snow. This was no forlorn refugee. He was dressed in a field combat uniform, a winter uniform, mostly white with various splotches sprayed across it. His web gear was also mottled and his weapon was slung partially out of sight across his back, but the German officer felt that it would take only tenths of a second for it to come into play. The two men walked towards each other.

Gunter was almost to the lone American when he heard the crunch of short steps behind him. Casting a quick glance over his right shoulder recognized the American F.E.M.A. official trying to catch up.

“Damn.” The German muttered to himself.

The two warriors met in the center of that field of clean snow midway between the steps of the city hall building and the wall of U.N. vehicles parked at the curb.

Angel walked through the empty complex that had been the home that he had grown up in with his mother. His steps echoed through the house and against the garden walls. Lonely echoes. He looked around at the now empty rooms and could still hear the faint resonance of his mother’s voice in the still air, a voice that was silenced when the plague first swept through this area. He had grown up quickly with her passing and now had a wife and a young child that he was responsible for in such tough and strange times.

By some miracle of fate he stumbled across the only seeds that were fully resistant to the disastrous “Brown” that had all but wiped out American agriculture. He seemed to have a knack for knowing just which plants would prove to be resistant and perfecting that trait. But now there was another threat coming at them and as a result he and Cynthia were being forced to abandon his home . . . their home.

The mountain militias had received word only two days before that the government was looking for the fabled Denver grower. Angel didn’t know how they knew, but in the last twenty-four hours it had become painfully clear that he and his family were the target of a major effort by someone with tremendous clout to find him. Denver ate and ate well because of Angel’s generosity and luck in discovering the first resistant seeds. But luck could only last so long. There was now a bounty on his head, that he could deal with but new word was out that they also wanted his family as well. When the word is out on the streets that someone is offering five million dollars for such information, you are in serious trouble.

The militia had arrived two days ago desperately trying to convince him to abandon his home and relocate up in the mountains where they could protect him, his family and his discovery. The fact that they hadn’t tried to force him to leave or steal his current supply of seeds made Angel consider their real concern was actually for his safety. Then his local friends and neighbors suddenly sent word to warn him that there were strangers in the city offering huge sums of cash for any information that would lead to the fabled grower. These people had been through a lot in the last two years, but turning over a fellow survivor to strangers, well there was a certain loyalty that is earned towards other survivors that outsiders just don’t understand. But it was only a matter of time before someone gave in. Angel could feel the pressure and the risk of staying was too great, after all he had a family now to think of.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

He walked outside into the chill dark early morning air and pulled his collar up tighter. Cynthia was already in the five-ton military transport truck that would take them to their new home. All his plants had been carefully packed along with their furniture, books and personal effects. He turned and locked the door and dropped the key in his pocket. Pulling on his glove he turned to the militia leader.

“I think I’m ready now Major.” Angel said quietly.

Kevin Jorgenson towered over the mild mannered agriculturalist. “I’m sorry that you have to leave your home Angel, but you know it’s for the best.”

“Yeah I know, I know, but . . . ”

“It sucks?”

“Yeah.”

“If it’s any consolidation, I know that feeling all too well.” Kevin patted the young man on the shoulder with his big paw. “But you and your family will be safer and the seeds will go out.”

“Do you really think they’d keep the seeds from all the starving people?”

“I don’t think we can dare risk trusting Washington any more.” Kevin paused and looked around at the empty buildings. He felt the need to be on the road and didn’t want to rush the poor guy, but the clock was running and he felt the pressure increasing.

The big militiaman lowered his voice to a whisper. “We’ll bring you back when it’s safe if that is what you want, but Angel . . . we’ve got to get moving. It will be light soon and we’ve got to be up in the mountains before dawn.”

“Yes I know.” He lowered his head and headed towards the trucks. “I know.”

Two hours later as the convoy was well into the mountain passes and nearing their final destination, the home that Angel had been brought up in, lived in and loved in felt the brutal brunt of an invading force. Dark clad soldiers blew the front and back doors to the building off and stormed the building with guns blazing. There had been no warning, no attempt to allow the occupants to surrender peaceably. The troopers ran from empty room to empty room only to find nothing.

A lead officer dressed in black and fully combat loaded marched from the building to the waiting commander out front.

“Sir, the building is empty. Who ever was there is gone now. There looks to be a large greenhouse on the back-side of the building, but it’s been cleaned out, there’s nothing here.”

The senior officer turned to the disheveled scab of a man standing next to him who looked at him in shock.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“But I swear officer . . . that’s where Angel lives, he was there yesterday, he was there yesterday!!”

“And today? Where is he today?”

“I, I, I, don’t know! I know he was there yesterday, I saw him there yesterday, I swear to God! He was there yesterday!”

The officer backhanded the cringing Denverite knocking him to the ground.

“You can swear to him yourself when you meet him . . . KILL HIM.” He ordered the black clad lieutenant standing before him. “I will not condone liars!”

Mechanically the lieutenant swung up his MP5 and sent a burst into the vagrant as he tried to run away. He didn’t even make it two steps before he dropped face first into the brown snow stone cold dead.

“How many more leads to we have this morning Lieutenant?”

“Two more Sir.” He answered crisply as he looked at the two remaining candidates for the five million dollar reward money. They didn’t look so confident now.

“Pack it up and move ‘em out Lieutenant . . . it’s fucking cold out here!”

Gunter stopped several feet away from the American. Several seconds went by as the two men eyed each other. The German Colonel cautiously swung his right hand up into a salute.

“Colonel Gunter Von Hinterman, Deutschlander, commander of United Nations relief efforts for this sector.”

The American just stared at him for a few seconds and then returned his salute.

“Colonel Leslie Melton, First Patriot Marine Force, commander of this sector. Colonel your presence is not required nor desired. I would suggest that you immediately turn your force around and return from where you came . . . Germany.”

Just then the F.E.M.A. advisor arrived. “Just who the hell do you think you are? There is no such thing as the Patriot Marine Force! Colonel Von Hinterman you must arrest this man, he is a traitor!!” The advisor spit out as he pointed to the Marine.

The German retained his composure and ignored the F.E.M.A. advisory. In his thick German accent he replied.

“Colonel Melton, I must advice you, dat you are in violation of both your Presidential Executive Orders and U.N. Directives. Dis region is now under U.N. protection and all inhabitants must disarm and report to relocation camps unt-til diz current situation iz brought unter control. Der is plenty of food and shelter . . .”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“NUTZ!” The American replied.

“VAT?”

“You heard me . . . NUTZ!” The Marine turned and spit a dark stream of tobacco into the clean white snow. “I should think they taught you the meaning of that word in your military history classes.”

The German looked confused.

“Think . . . World War Two, Bastogne, Battle of the Bulge.” The Marine reminded him.

“He’s telling you to go to hell Colonel, now will you arrest this traitor.”

Melton looked sternly at the F.E.M.A. agent and between gritted teeth he answered him. “I’ve never broken my oath government man, can you say the same!”

“Colonel!” The FEMA agent barked.

“Sir.” Gunter began. “Surely you can see your position ist hopeless and dat you must surrender to the inevitable. Your country ist . . . how do you say . . . ist in shambles. Ve are here to help only.”

“Colonel.” Melton replied. “You are trespassing on sovereign American soil. You are uninvited and have been warned. Leave now while you can. You will receive no more warnings. This is your last opportunity to save yourself and your men.”

“WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?!?!? COLONEL VON HINTERMAN ARREST THIS IN-SANE BASTARD! THOSE ARE YOUR ORDERS! HE’S JUST ONE MAN!!”

“I do not tink zo.” The Colonel quietly replied as he looked into the Marines eyes.

The American subtly nodded at the German and gave him a sinister smile. Gunter felt a chill curse down his spine. He respected the audacity of this American. Gunter knew his orders, they were clear. He would full fill them as that was his duty. But he didn’t have to like it. Gunter saluted the Marine.

“You realize dat I must arrest you and your men.” He said calmly.

“Of course.” The Marine replied.

“I expect dat you vill of course resist.”

“Of course.” The Marine replied.

“WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS SILLY MACHO SHIT! COLONEL ARREST HIM THIS INSTANT!!”

Both soldiers looked and the ranting official.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Would you do me a small favor Colonel Melton.” Gunter asked.

“If I can Colonel Von Hinterman.”

“Would you be so kind to see zat von of your men shoots diz bastard. I have grown tired of his constant womenly whining.”

“Colonel it would be my pleasure.” Melton leaned his head to the mike attached to his shoulder harness. Beckerman please oblige the colonel.”

Two static hisses clicked on the earpiece.

“Thank you Beckerman. Colonel I have my best man on it. So if there are no more formalities.” Melton saluted and turned sharply around and marched back towards city hall.

”WHAT THE FUCK WAS THATSHOOT THE BASTARD!”

Gunter returned the salute to his adversary and then turned on his heel and began the long walk back towards his command vehicle. Without turning his head his eyes darted from side to side trying to spot any sign of the soon to be enemy.

Sergeant Beckerman changed the sight picture slightly of the Barrett 50 he commanded from the German commander to the civilian in a heavy jacket with F.E.M.A. in big bold letters printed on the back who was now standing by himself in the middle of the small field of snow. He then began to draw up the slack on the trigger.

The F.E.M.A. man was jumping up and down and ranting like a raving lunatic in the middle of the parley zone. Beckerman was ready.

Gunter made it back inside the vehicle and let out his breath in relief that he had lived long enough make it inside. He grabbed the command microphone and began to speak when a single explosion echoed against the buildings surround the town square.

“SHIZTA!” His driver yelled.

“They have vaporized the government agent!” His driver yelled at him in German. Then all hell broke loose.

The battle raged for nearly an hour and at times devolving down to hand to hand fighting. The Germans held a good account of themselves, but they never imagined the ferocity of such an attack. Gunter now knew how they had earned the name Devil Dogs from the first Great War. His soldiers were not prepared for such resistance and determination. They fought with a devil rage that brought fear to the forefront of an opponents mind.

At one point the German Colonel felt that they were nearing victory in the heat of the battle and then a squad of Patriot Marines assaulted the center of his defensive line. They doggedly advanced through the German’s overwhelming superior fire and crept within grenade range. Suddenly volley after volley of metal death rained down

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

on the center position. With the first explosion the Marines stormed the line. Like a pack of mad hellhounds they roared in unison filling the air with a demon spawned scream and breached the perimeter. The German forces fought back with every thing they had but the onslaught was too much for them and they soon abandoned their position and ran for their very lives. The line was broken and from there the Americans tore up the remaining forces.

Gunter lay seriously wounded in the snow near one of his armored cars. Now he knew why his ancestors had failed in their bid against these Americans. His vision faded in and out as he struggled to remain conscience. These Americans were insane in combat, totally insane!

Colonel Melton was surveying the battlefield when one of his sergeants informed him of the German commander's location. He walked past a group of his Corpsman busy working on troops from both sides of the battle. Several German POW's were being marched past under guard by two privates as Melton arrived at the German Commanders location. One of Melton's senior Corpsman was working on the Colonel.

"How is he Doc?" Milton asked his Corpsman.

"He'll live sir, but he's gonna have a hell of a limp for a while and a couple of nice scars to remember us by." The Corpsman responded as he finished bandaging the German officers head, having already controlled the bleeding from his leg, which was in an old style Thomas half-ring splint.

Melton bent down beside the wounded German.

"Colonel."

"Colonel." The German replied.

"Your boys put up a good fight."

"Yah, but not gute enough Colonel, dere hearts ver not into it. Ist not dare fight"

"Yeah." Melton fished around for his pack of cigarettes and offered one to the Colonel. "It's a little bit different when you're defending your home turf."

Gunter took the offered cigarette and coughed with the first lung full of smoke. "I don't smoke . . . usually."

"Yeah it's a nasty habit." Melton replied. "Probably gonna kill me in the end."

The two men smoked quietly for a few moments.

"Unt dank you for da little favor Colonel Melton."

"Favor?" Melton asked.

"Dat FEMA man . . . vat a pain in der azz." The Colonel chuckled painfully.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

“Yeah, my pleasure Colonel. You might consider thinning out your bureaucrats back in Germany as well, that would keep you out of shit like this in the future. Well at least it’s a good start.”

“Yah, yah. Dat ist a gute yah.” The Colonel chuckled again painfully.

“He’s ready to transport Sir.” The Corpsman informed Melton.

“Vere do I go now?” The German asked.

“To a field hospital so we can patch you up better and then you’ll get shipped back to your own people Colonel. Provided you never set foot on American soil again. Because if you ever do . . . we’ll hang you on the spot.”

They loaded the German commander up on a five ton truck full of wounded POW’s and watched them pull away. Melton patted the Corpsman on the shoulder.

“Good job Doc, good job.”

“Yes Sir, thanks.” He answered then suddenly responded. “SHIT!”

“What?” Melton asked as he brought up his weapon and crouched ready to respond to any possible threat. Then he followed his Corpsman’s gaze and pointing hand.

There on the street sign post on the corner where the German officer fell in battle and was under when they patched him up before they sent him off was a message that hit both Melton and his Corpsman square in the face.

They both just stood there in shock and stared at the road signs. The street corner that they had just fought over and won their first major battle against the German U.N. forces was on the corner of Lexington Way and Concord Avenue.

Melton turned to his Doc. “Well I’ll be damn!”

“Both of us Sir . . . both of us.”

Chapter 85 – Once More Into the Breach

To wield oneself -- to use oneself as a tool in one's own hand -- and so to make or break that which no one else can build or ruin -- THAT is the greatest pleasure known to man! To one who has felt the chisel in his hand and set free the angel imprisoned in the marble block, or to one who has felt sword in hand and set homeless the soul that a moment before lived in the body of his mortal enemy -- to those both come alike the taste of that rare food spread only for demons or for gods. - Gordon R. Dickson, "Soldier Ask Not"

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

I wish to have no connection with any ship that does not sail fast; for I intend to go in harm's way. -

John Paul Jones

Sir, we will give them the bayonet. Trust to the BAYONET! - General “Stonewall” Jackson

The eerie wail of an ancient chant broke the silence of the predawn hour. Like the beating of a panicked heart the pounding rhythm thundered out upon the leather skinned drum heads rising and falling with the ancient voices that pierced that early gray hour. The pounding sometimes soft and barely audible would suddenly blast the leather face with anger and intensity that vibrated to the very bone. Even to the foreigner soldiers new to this land it was clearly a warning . . . a call to arms, a call to battle, a call to drive out the invaders of the sacred lands.

The U.N. troops looked about anxiously as they moved further into the unfamiliar landscape. The wailing voices echoed out of the tree line and through the mists that began to lift off the moist grass in the first bright rays of morning sun that painted the countryside with a surrealistic brush and leant a foreboding clamminess to the air. Each soldier's hand unconsciously flexed nervously and yet held tight to their weapons. Their eyes cast about apprehensively into the grey mists chasing imaginary shadows. Every nerve was on edge as the foreboding sound continued.

This was supposed to be a clean up operation on a decimated people. The Americans were all but subdued they had been told. The arrogant young nation that had risen up in rebellion against its mother country over two hundred years ago and had grown to boldly lead the world was now supposed to be on its knees. The soldiers were quickly finding out that such propaganda was just that . . . propaganda. True, the population of this once great nation had been radically reduced as they had suffered the greatest of all the nations struck with the deadly plagues. True, the government had fallen into shambles and puppets now sat on the throne of American leadership, but these people were far from being down and out.

Eyes watched from the shadows . . . angry eyes. The wailing chant, sung in a language that had almost been eradicated from the ancient landscape bit straight to the bone. A common cause had been found that now bound the two distinct races of men on this continent together. They had become brothers under the banner of survival and freedom. Each now understood the other and the animosity that had existed for centuries faded into the dawning light like the morning mists as they now stood shoulder to shoulder against a common invader. If those poor European bastards had the slightest inkling of what lay in the shadows before them they would have dropped their weapons and raced back to the landing ships that had carried them across the cold Atlantic waters to the New World. They would not get that opportunity. Not today.

The wailing rose as did the pounding of the drum and then in the background something began to join the ominous warning call. A wraith like scream building in emotion and intensity began to fill the air surrounding the advancing U.N. troops. Like a wall of sound it hit them and assaulted their senses.

“What on God's green earth could create such a sound?” They wondered in their internal native languages. “What hideous creature could pour forth such a wicked and evil fiendish sound?”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Then they could hear the sound of movement . . . a lot of movement, coming through the forest, through the trees and the bushes that surrounded them. The officers of the foreign troops looked about anxiously unsure what commands to give but knowing that they must immediately do something as the yet unseen evil rushed on towards them. The drums pounded harder and harder with the wailing and banshee screams melding into one solid wall of sound. The officers tried to scream their orders over the unrelenting din and finally resorted to pushing and shoving their men into a rough defensive perimeter. Fearful eyes stared out at an unseen enemy, one that had obliterated units similar to their own. That is why they had been sent here in the first place. Their numbers doubled, armor and heavy guns at the ready, but no enemy had they yet found . . . until now . . . and it was the enemy that had found them.

Several young troopers lost their nerve and abandoning their weapons in a vain attempt to flee the onrushing hell spawn. The foreign staff NCOs and officers knocked them down as they attempted to run and desperately struggled to maintain order and military discipline. Their lines were holding . . . barely, and then the noise suddenly stopped. The silence that replaced it was deafening and overwhelming. Frantic men looked desperately about. They knew the American's were out there . . . but where. When would they come? What had happened to the other units that had preceded them? And worst of all they wondered if they live to see the next dawn?

A lone cry pierced the thundering stillness.

“FIX!” A single word echoed in the morning fog answered by a metallic locking of something metal on metal.

BAYONETS! A roar of meaty clicks permeated the gray dawn as hundreds of pig stickers were locked down followed by a single guttural challenge.

The U.N. soldiers strained to pierce the lifting fog with their senses. Their heartbeats pounded in their ears and were the only and overwhelming sound until the last two commands they would ever hear blasted them from nearly every direction.

“FIRE!”

A thousand angry hornets ripped out of the grey and tore through their ranks without mercy.

"CHAAAAAAAAAAAAARGE!”

Suddenly in front of the troopers the sound took form as a mass of ragged apparitions sprang from the fog and leapt upon the bug eyed soldiers. Their bayonets and tomahawks flashed through the air splitting French skulls nearly in two and piercing soft flesh as the onslaught began.

Forty-five minutes later Eli Simpson, the former senior senator from Georgia and Frank Redway, Commander of the First Georgia Militia surveyed the carnage. They walked among the dead and dying foreign troopers, none had been spared. Several battle hardened Georgians could be seen off in the distance hacking at the dead with their machetes and tossing the severed heads onto piles that were beginning to litter the field of battle.

“Do you really think that is necessary?” Eli asked in this deep Southern drawl.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Redway turned and looked in the direction the Senator was indicating. “Well it ain’t according to the Geneva Convention. But it is according to Southern payback Senator.”

“I don’t know Commander, just don’t seem right some how.”

“Senator this is not a war between gentlemen Sir. This here is a war of survival. The last war down here we fought as gentleman and look what that got us. No Sir, this time it is for keeps. They are trespassing on our sovereign territory and have suffered the consequences. Their heads will be posted as a warning to others . . . do not tread on the South!”

The two old warriors continued their walk among the carnage. Ely looked to the northeast and then motioned in that direction. “Commander I believe it is time that we move in that direction Sir.”

“How far Senator?”

“All the way to Washington D.C. itself Commander. I do believe we have some unfinished businesses to take care of there.”

“In force?” The Georgia militia commander asked in half disbelief.

“That Sir is . . . precisely what I mean. IN FORCE!”

Captain Jennings walked about his ship checking on the repairs that were taking place on virtually every deck. The welding sparks seemed to rain down and flash from every passageway. The USS Chosin was an anthill of activity as the crew from the repair ship tied along side swarmed aboard lugging tools, hoses and repair parts. He had never witnessed such an operation in the mid-ocean before, but it was what had to be done and he was thankful for the support.

The main battle fleet was still assembling out in the Atlantic far to the east of his present location. He and the “Tin Cans” recently assigned to him, would lead the battle fleet home to their American ports. But first his ship needed desperately to be patched up and made combat ready once again and the middle of the Atlantic was the only place at the moment to carry out those repairs.

For forty-eight hours the repair ship’s crew and his own worked around the clock non-stop. As the second sunrise greeted the tired men and women of the Chosin she was once again combat ready. Jennings toured his ship with his executive officer and the captain of the repair ship.

“Ed you have one shit hot crew working for you!” Jennings exclaimed.

“Thank you Commodore, I’m pretty proud of them myself.” Captain Ed Turner replied.

“Please, it’s Jacob. Commodore just doesn’t feel right.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“If you insist Jacob, but the Admiral was damn impressed with your last action. HELL TWO SOVIET SHIPS OF THE LINE! STRAIGHT TO THE BOTTOM!”

“And it cost me too many good crewmen, as well as my LAMPS helo’s and two air crews. No Ed I wouldn’t call that a victory . . . more like a survival.”

“Well either way . . . er Jacob, it was damn good shooting on your part. My sailors are more than proud to be here patching up your ship and helping you get back into the fight.”

Jennings paused and turned to the tender’s captain. “Speaking of the fight. Ed, I hate to ask this of another skipper, but I’m a little short handed right now and it looks like we’re headed into a meat grinder. I know it’s not right, but if you could spare any of your crew I would . . .”

“Commodore, I’ve already got a list ready.” He dug around in his pocket and produced a folded piece of notebook paper.

“I’ve been wading through request chits since the word got out and we headed over to work on you. I had to beat them off with a stick.” He unfolded the paper. “Here’s a list of the men and women that have volunteered. They are some of my best personnel . . . not all of my best. I hope you’ll pardon me for keep back a few of my main people, but everyone here is a solid sailor and will do both of us proud!”

Jennings took the paper and looked back up at his colleague.

“Thanks Ed. I know how hard this must be.” The two ships captains shook hands and the Commodore handed the list to his XO.

“Dell, draw the minimum from this list to fill in the vital positions on board. Get us up and running as soon as possible. As soon as they are on board with their gear stowed we’re getting underway.”

“Roger Skipper. I’ll personally take care of this.” And with that the Chosin’s executive officer disappeared down a side passageway.

“Ed I hope your people realize, fully realize, that we are headed straight into harms way.”

“Comm . . . er . . . ah . . . Jacob, trust me they fully realize that this may be a one way ticket for them. But it is also a chance to get into the fight and deliver a little payback. They’re good people Sir, but you gotta admit that my tender is a far cry from a real fighting ship.”

Jennings shook his head. “Ed without your repair ship I’d be the skipper of just so much scrap metal trying to float home. We each fight in our own way. You make sure your sailors know they are just as much in this fight as we are.”

“Will do Commadore!” Ed Turner gave Jennings a sharp salute and then shook his hand. “Give ‘em hell Jake!”

Three hours later the American cruiser was cutting through the Atlantic headed for home.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

With satellite communications spotty at best the vanguard for the returning American fleet was virtually blind and restricted to what intelligence they could gather on their own. Lamps helo's provided the over the horizon eyes but weather and sea state could restrict their usage at a moments notice. If the ships were limited to just their line of sight their warning of an approaching enemy would drop to within fifteen miles of them. Nearly pointblank range in a modern naval engagement . . . or a suicide engagement.

Commodore Jennings was standing with this Executive Officer in CIC (Combat Information Center) when the satellite communication speaker was suddenly filled by a heavily French accented voice that broke though the background static.

"This is Admiral Perquot, the commander of the United Nations Atlantic Fleet. Captain of American war vessel, you are ordered to stand down and standby to be boarded"

Jennings as well as the rest of the crew on duty at that late hour where shocked by the sudden announcement.

"Captain of American war vessel are you receiving me over?"

Jennings looked to his senior radioman. "Where in the hell is that coming from?"

RM1 Nelson looked flabbergasted at his commanding officer. "It's coming over the secured SATCOM link sir?"

"I thought those comm's were down?" The XO questioned.

"They were Sir! They've been flat out for the last ninety-six hours. I don't know how to explain this . . . but their back up again!"

Lt. Commander Dell Van Gorten, the Chosin's Executive Officer turned to his skipper. "That's a secured link! Whoever that is has not only been given access to our freg's and but our security codes as well. There's no other way for them to be on those communication satellites!"

Jenning's looked at his XO. "But only the President or the Pentagon could . . ." His voice trailed off.

"We've been sold out skipper!" Van Gorten hissed.

"Captain of American war vessel are you hearing me? This is Admiral Perquot, Commander of the United Nations Atlantic Fleet. I repeat. You are ordered to stand down and standby to be boarded"

The air inside the CIC suddenly became extremely thick as the two senior officers whispered intensely between themselves.

"So how in the hell could a Frog get into our secure comms?" Jennings asked angrily.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“There is no way Jake that they could have broken in . . . there’s just too many walls and encryption defenses. Someone had to give them access . . . at that could only come from the highest level . . . that has to be it!” Van Gorten replied.

“Captain American warship do you read me?” The heavy French accent called again.

Jennings turned to his XO. “Dell I’ll take this call on the bridge. RM1 answer the hail but do not identify the Chosin, I repeat do not identify this ship! Tell them that the captain of your ship has been called to the bridge and will answer this call momentarily . . . play stupid with him Nelson.”

“Aye Aye Skipper . . . Operation Stupid is as Stupid does Sir!” Nelson turned to his task.

“XO sound General Quarters I’m headed to the bridge!” Jennings called as he disappeared out the hatch.

“Aye – aye Captain!” The XO responded.

Outside of the CIC the ship was suddenly awakened from its slumber as the XO made the announcement over the ship’s 1MC (ship’s intercom system) that would awaken a slumbering giant.

“This is the Executive Officer . . . Officer of the Deck! Sound General Quarters (battle stations) this is NOT, I REPEAT NOT A DRILL!”

The ship’s klaxon immediately blasted four times and was quickly followed by more instructions over the 1MC.

“General Quarters! General Quarters! All hands man your battle stations! General Quarters! General Quarters! All hands man your battle stations! THIS IS NOT A DRILL – REPEAT - THIS IS NOT A DRILL!”

The ship was suddenly alive with frantic movement as sailors scrambled at breakneck speed in the crowded passageways to reach their preassigned battle stations. Many were half dressed and carrying their uniforms flapping behind them as they performed an amazing ballet of dodging in and out of hatches and up and down ladders.

The ship’s klaxon sounded four more times.

“General Quarters! General Quarters! All hands man your battle stations. Set condition zebra throughout the ship! All stations report condition to Damage Control Central. DCA (Damage Control Assistant) report readiness to the bridge!” (Condition Zebra = button up the ship, seal all hatches, drains, ventilation etc.)

Commodore Jennings suddenly burst onto the bridge as the men on watch were donning battle dress as quickly as possible and other crew members rushed in to take up their positions.

Bridge phone talker: “OOD, DCA reports condition zebra set throughout the ship Sir!”

OOD Officer Of the Day: “Roger!”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

The young duty officer turned towards his commanding officer who had just pulled on his flack vest and donned his helmet. “Condition Zebra set throughout the ship sir!”

Jennings looked about bridge at the young faces that surrounded him. “Thank you Lieutenant. Bridge team this is the Captain, I have command of the bridge.”

OOD: “The skipper has the con, Sir my course is One Niner Zero at 18 knots. Condition zebra is set throughout the ship. Weapons are free, cocked and locked! All systems ready. All commanding officers standing orders are in effect, I stand relieved Sir!”

“Very well.” Jennings said as he sat back and swiveled his command chair around and reached for the satellite phone on his console.

“This is the Captain to whom am I speaking?”

This is Admiral Perquot, Commander of the United Nations Atlantic Fleet. You are ordered to immediately stop your ship and prepare to be boarded. Do you understand?”

“And if I refuse?”

There was a long silence on the other end.

“Captain you are ordered to stand down and stand by to be boarded. Do you copy?”

“NO.” Came Jennings reply.

Another long silence followed.

“Captain of American warship do you understand that this is the Commander of the United Nations Fleet speaking and that I’m ordering you to stand down?”

“Yes.”

“Then you will comply with this order?”

“No.”

“No what?”

“No I will not comply, NO I will not stand down and NO I don’t give a shit who you are” Jennings replied calmly into the phone, but the anger of this betrayal was beginning to show in his voice.

“Skipper!” One of several phone talkers on the bridge called out. Jennings covered the mouthpiece of his phone. Jennings had trained his crew well and knew that this conversation would only be interrupted by a member of his bridge team if they had vital information necessary for him to know immediately.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Davidson?” Jennings recognized the young Airman.

“Sir, Lamps reports no immediate over the horizon threats, clear to thirty miles!”

“Roger, clear to thirty miles, thank you!”

Jennings turned back to the phone and the French admiral. “Excuse me Admiral, I was ordering some coffee. Would you please repeat what ever it was you were just saying?”

Smiles broke out across the faces of all the sailors on the bridge. The French admiral began to talk heatedly again. Jennings leaned over and activated the switch that would put the conversation on not only the speaker phone but the ships intercom system as well. The French admiral’s strained and terse voice filled the American warship.

“Captain, if you do not comply we will be forced to engage you with deadly force.” The French naval officer replied smugly. “I do not believe you understand the gravity of your situation.”

Captain Jennings looked around at his men on the bridge. All eyes were upon him. He brought the phone back up again and replied with confidence.

“Have you ever heard the American term ‘NUTZ’ Admiral?”

“Nutz?” Replied the French commander. “I do not quite understand what you mean Captain?”

“Hmmm . . . do you understand the term FUCK OFF Admiral?” Jennings replied with added sarcasm.

There was dead silence from the other side of the conversation for several seconds.

“Such insults will not improve your situation Captain. I have the full authority of the United Nations and of your new President.”

“That’s nice.” Replied Jennings. “So tell me Admiral just what the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Your President has ordered you comply with my orders. All American vessels including American warships are now under my command.”

Jennings took in a deep breath and then blew it out. “Admiral . . . Americans do not serve under FOREIGN military commanders and especially not a French one! I don’t know who this new president is . . . probably some goat roper from Provance for all I know. Since my last lawful orders were to return home, that is what I fully intend to do.”

“Captain you will comply with my orders or else!” The French Admiral practically screamed into the phone.

“Or else what?” Jennings roared back.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

“Or else we will be compelled to use deadly force in order to . . . to . . . stop you Captain.”

Jennings stood there pondering his answer. Several seconds seemed to stretch into minutes before he raised the phone up again.

“Why not! No enemy armada has ever survived an engagement with the combined force of the United States Navy . . . Admiral. The entire Atlantic and Mediterranean fleets are behind me . . . you are in front of me. If you value your lives . . . be somewhere else!”

“Ah, ah, Captain American ship . . . I, I do not think you understand the situation here. The Secretary General of the United Nations is ordering you to stand down as well as your own president of the United States? YOU MUST COMPLY!”

“No Admiral it is you that do not understand. I do not answer to the Secretary General. As to the usurper sitting upon the throne of the American government I owe him nothing. My president is dead, my congress has been destroyed, my faith and allegiance is to my God, My Country, the Constitution of the United States and the American People. You Sir are in my way!”

Captain Jennings turned to his bridge crew standing by listening to the conversation both in front of them and as it echoed throughout the ship.

“Admiral United Nations Atlantic Fleet please listen to the following and understand my meaning Weapons!”

“Aye Aye Sir?”

“Status?”

“Standing by Sir, all weapons are cocked and locked!” The young weapons officer replied smartly.

“I want missiles on the rails. Bring all weapons systems to bear.”

Mere seconds passed.

“Sir missiles up . . . cocked and locked, targeting has been initiated. Standing by on your orders, Sir!”

“CHENG this is the Captain!”

(CHENG = Chief of Engineering)

“Yes Sir!”

“Pull safety’s on the mains.”

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *A Gray Man*

(most naval vessels are capable of going faster than they actually do at "flank" speed, but because of problems the excess speed could cause i.e. tearing off sonar domes etc. . . safety's are installed to limit the maximum speed of the ship. During certain situations the skipper can have the safety's pulled to give the ship more speed.)

CHENG: "Sir, I confirm, pull safety's on all main engines."

Jennings: "Affirmative"

Several minutes passed and then the CHENG was back.

CHENG: "Bridge Engineering.."

Bridge (phone talker): Go Ahead Engineering."

CHENG: All safety's pulled on the mains."

Bridge (phone talker): "Roger. Skipper, Engineering reports all safety's pulled on the mains"

Jennings: "Aye Aye."

"Engines full head flank speed!"

"Aye Aye Skipper! All ahead flank speed!"

Jennings turned back to the phone. "Did you copy all of that Admiral?"

"You must be mad. Surely you realize that you are sending your crew to their doom!"

"Oh I don't think so Admiral. Excuse me there's one more thing I forgot."

"XO this is the Captain."

"Yes Sir!"

"Have a broom standing by on the signal bridge to hoist aloft, for we are about to sweep the seas clear of all foreign vermin!"

"It's in the signal room standing by SIR!"

The Captain smiled and could almost see the XO down in CIC giving him a wink. "A good XO anticipates his Captains needs Sir."

"That you do Dell, that you do!"

He turned back to the phone once more. "Did you copy all that Admiral?"

“OUI, OUI!” The French Admiral stuttered. “But Captain you must stand down, you can’t really mean to engage a superior force that, that, that would be sheer suicide! Your men, your ship, think of them Captain. You will be sunk! All will be lost for nothing! YOU MUST COMPLY! YOU MUST!”

“Admiral I see nothing superior in front of me, only Euro-trash foreigners in my home waters. And remember this Admiral, it’s not the size of the dog in the fight . . . it’s the size of the fight in the dog. And believe me Admiral you’ve just bitten off more than you can chew and I fully intend to make sure you choke on it!” There was a brief pause.

“Number one . . .” Jennings smiled as he thought of his XO, whom he knew was a major Star Trek fan. “ENGAGE!”

The Ticonderoga class cruiser leapt forward and headed into battle.

Chapter 86 – Red Sky in Morning

The dark cold Atlantic waters tugged and pulled at the young seaman as he struggled to reach the surface and its life giving air. But the forces that sucked him down were too great as his ship continued its long drive to the bottom of those dark waters. Waters that had claimed so many souls in the short course of human existence and through one too many wars. Its muddy bottom was pot marked with the rusting hulks of once proud vessels and the bones of spry young sailors who would never see another liberty port again save the one with pearls on the gate. Seaman Apprentice Theodore Wilson MacKutchin however was not destined to go down with his ship. As if reprieved by Neptuneus Rex himself the destroyer gave up one last gasp of breath that escaped as deck plates and bulkheads crushed under the unrelenting pressure of the deep sending a rescuing bubble racing up beneath the drowning sailor cutting the ships suctioning tendrils and buoying the young man back up to the waiting world above.

The cold air burned as he tried to suck in as much as possible to drive back the hypoxia that struggled to choke the life out of him. He could barely keep his head above water as he struggled to stay afloat in the dark cold waters. Suddenly debris released from the watery depths began to bob to the surface and the young boy swam to one of the ships life rafts as if life itself depended upon it . . . because it did. The actual distance was small but it seemed to take forever before Ted finally gripped the safety lines and using the last of his strength pulled himself aboard. He fell utterly exhausted and soaked to the core as he crawled over the side and into the twenty man life raft where he laid panting and shivering totally spent to the core. He was utterly alone and the weight of that reality had not yet quite sunk in, for now he was more concerned with trying to stem the overwhelming shivering that racked his body. He must get warm.

Fumbling around in the dark he located the survival bag attached to the side of the life raft and in a panic pulled and tore at it until finally he managed to break it open. He remembered from this initial training just a few months before that there were space blankets inside this pack. He prayed he had enough body heat left to reflect something back off the aluminized Mylar sheeting to keep himself alive. He broke one of the chemical lights from the pack and it filled the interior of the domed raft with an eerie yellow glow. He was alone . . . in

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

the middle of the Atlantic . . . in the middle of a battle . . . and he was only nineteen years old. He cried for the first time since he was eleven. The tears rushed forward and overwhelmed him and for the first time in his young adult life he prayed, he prayed for all it was worth.

The USS Chosin steamed on for several hours in full battle readiness before the word came back from her LAMPs helo's that there were no enemy vessels within the ships immediate combat area. For the moment . . . their horizon was clear.

Captain Jennings sulked in his bridge chair running all the various scenarios through this head. The bridge crew knew their skipper was pissed and continued their watch in silence. Suddenly Jennings stirred, grabbed the mike and switched on the 1 MC to address the ship.

"This is the Captain speaking. Stand down from General Quarters, set modified Condition Zebra throughout the ship."

Several seconds passed as he gathered his thoughts and activated the mike once again. "This is the Captain. Officers and crew of the USS Chosin somewhere out there in the waters ahead of us is cruising a foreign armada that intends to keep us from our homes. I want to remind you that we are the vanguard of the American fleet that is attempting to return home. As such it is our duty to find the enemy, fix his position and harass him long enough for the main fleet to destroy him. We must be ready at a seconds notice to come to full battle readiness. We are the Minute Men of the United States Navy."

He continued with a voice that was deep and stern. It resonated through out the ship. The crew called this his fighting voice. One you hoped would never be directed at you. \

"Until further notice there will be no routine maintenance conducted. All systems must be able to be made fully operational with a seconds notice. Officer's and Chief's use your best judgments in this area. From this moment on we are sailing in hostile waters. Be on guard, be ready, be sharp and know beyond a shadow of doubt that you are the best of the best. There is no finer crew and no finer fighting ship in the fleet. We are the Chosin. Captain . . . out."

"OOD, the Bridge is yours. Have the department heads, division officers and chiefs meet me in the wardroom. Be vigilant Lieutenant Brackman and notify me immediately of any change . . . of anything that is in the slightest way suspicious."

"AYE AYE Sir! I have the con. Attention on Deck, the Captain is leaving the bridge."

Fifteen minutes later the Wardroom, the officers dining area was full of the senior members of the ships crew.

"Attention on deck!" Thundered through the space as Commodore Jennings entered.

"At ease gentlemen." Jennings moved to the end of the cramped room. The senior members of the ships crew both officers and chiefs quickly found their seats. Jennings remained standing.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

The Captain took a long breath, he appeared stern and agitated. "It appears our adversary has been yanking our chain gentleman. Our LAMPS report no enemy within combat range. However, somehow somehow our highly classified and protected communication frequencies have been compromised. From this point on all communications must be suspect."

"Here's the situation gents. I f*cked up by answering that f*cking frog admiral's hail. I should have just let him flap his yap and ignored him. Now they know we're out here.. somewhere. But I don't believe that they have a real fix on our location which is to our advantage."

"Skipper how'd they get on our net?" Someone from the right asked.

"That's a good question." Jennings looked to his left. "Senior Chief Davidson it is your job to find out how this happened and to protect us from it happening again."

"ROGER SKIPPER!" A voice from the left answered.

The room was silent for a several seconds before another question was asked. "Sir what's the plan now?"

Jennings walked slowly the length of the room and turned.

"The plan has not changed. We are going home! But now we have an unknown adversary in front of us. The battle group is depending upon us to seek out this adversary and do what damage we can while learning all we can. To that end gentleman I need your help, especially you Chiefs and officers. You know this ship better than anyone on board. I want the Chosin as battle ready as humanly possible. Focus your attention on that. If it does not improve the damage control and fighting capability of this vessel drop it. If you have any ideas that would improve our chances in a knock down drag out fight I want to know about it. Chiefs get with your crews I don't have the time to deal with discipline issues . . . see to it that I don't."

"Skipper if I may . . ." The Command Master Chief stood up. Jennings gave him the nod.

"Sir, since our first engagement our sailors have taken on a totally new attitude. The reality of our situation has been hammered home. In my twenty-five years of naval service I have never Sir . . . NEVER . . . seen a crew come together like this one. You will have no discipline problems Sir, of that I am certain."

Jennings nodded in agreement with his senior enlisted sailor to the roar of hoots and hollers of the room.

Jennings turned back to the group. "Officers . . ." Jennings voice took on a stern and powerful tone. "Your Black Shoes are the finest any fleet has ever seen. John Paul Jones himself could not have asked for a better crew, be worthy of their respect and lead them from the front. You have trained all your lives for this singular moment and there is no doubt that we are going into harms way. This ship is all we have and we must utilize it to its maximum potential. You must set the example that is your legacy. You must stand on that deck with John Paul Jones himself and defy the enemy to the very last breath. We are damning all the torpedoes and driving head on into the battle. We WILL NOT BE TURNED!"

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Two hours later the commanding officers of this little battle group sat in Jennings stateroom. Lieutenant Commander Dex Allen of the guided missile frigate Stonewall had just arrived aboard the USS Chosin joining Commander Ryan Sadler, Captain of the guided missile destroyer Gettysburg.

It was a solemn moment as these three men sat down to their first and quite possibly their last meeting. For several hours they discussed in great detail their current situation and made plans to deal with the situation ahead of them. Jennings had his XO and Command Master Chief with him throughout the meeting, later as the three senior sailors of the Chosin stood on deck and watched the LAMPS helo lift off to take the two captains to their respective ships Jennings turned.

"Well gentlemen I believe we've got a plan."

Jennings sat quietly in his command chair on the bridge as the ship sprang to life around him. In less than four minutes with the General Quarters klaxon echoing throughout the 567 foot long and 9,600 ton ship she was fully manned and ready for combat. It was oh three thirty-five in the morning. Up ahead somewhere in the dark over the horizon lay the enemy. Jennings looked at his watch a second time and then turned slowly to his deck officer.

"Mr. Aimsley . . . launch all Harpoons!"

He was taking a calculated risk firing his big ship busting missiles at unseen targets just over the horizon, but if they could find their marks the first blood and the initiative would be his.

Four big sea skimming missiles cleared the ship quickly and dropped down to the deck blitzing off on their pre-planned route that with any luck would end in the severe damage or destruction of at least some of the UN vessels ahead of them.

'Boy are the Frogs going to be in for a surprise when those four arrive.' Bos'n's mate third class Simons thought to himself as he manned the sound powered phone linking him to the rest of the deck crew spread throughout the ship waiting for the word.

"Missiles away!" Came through the sound powered phone system.

"Missiles away Aye Aye!" Came the reply.

Commander Sadler looked out the damaged bridge windows at the hulk of his ship the Gettysburg. She was listing to starboard but still under power. Half of his systems were down, at least thirty of his crew dead or missing and the battle was only twenty minutes old. His men were desperately struggling to keep her afloat and in the fight. As best as he could figure the Chosin had driven right into the middle of it spitting fire and brimstone, but only God knows how long she could hold out. Man the pounding they must be taking. Old Jennings was a cunning son of a b*tch that was for sure. It was sheer genius and madness as well, and it almost worked. The Get-

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

tysburg and Stonewall had strung up ships navigation lights that in the dark would disguise them as harmless merchant ships. Using civilian radio frequencies they pretended to be non-combatants scrambling to avoid the coming confrontation. Like wolves in sheep's clothing they slipped past the foreign pickets of the UN battle group and crept into the very underbelly of the enemy fleet.

It was the hairiest two hours Sadler had ever spent on the bridge as they crept along at twelve knots. One mistake, one slip and all hell would break loose and it would break loose right on top of them.

He wondered about the condition of the Stonewall. Was she still afloat? There had been a lot of activity on that side of the enemy fleet. No doubt that Lieutenant Commander Dex Allen had been giving them hell over there. But that small frigate could only do so much. Ryan shook his head at the condition of his beloved Gettysburg. He only hoped the CHENG and his boys could seal up that ruptured hull. That had been a close one. Thank God for his quick damage control crews. They had sealed off the area quickly and shored up the buckled bulkheads.

Suddenly Jerry Bishop his XO burst onto the bridge.

"GOD DAMN IT SKIPPER! WE'RE BACK IN THE WAR!!"

The entire bridge crew nearly jumped out of their skin at his outburst as he shot through the hatch and stormed over to his captain in his command chair. The XO looked like hell, his uniform was filthy, wet and one leg was covered with someone's blood.

"Jer how the hell did you do it?" Sadler asked astonished.

"Not me Ryan, those damn snipes, SONS-OF-BITCHES! That craggily old Senior Chief, the one you nearly had to bust in the last port for fighting. Imagine at his age . . . well Skipper he's got a half a dozen men down there welding up patches over that split and we'll have the pumps starting any minute now. Sparks has rigged comm lines up all over the place and we're talking to each other again. Deck has those missiles nearly ready and I'll be damned if Boats hasn't got the gunners busting @ss to get that main mount up and running again! Give me another thirty minutes and we'll be back in the fight. We've just about got those fires back aft out.. ..DAMN IT SKIPPER SHE'S A FIGHTING BITCH AGAIN!!"

Commander Sadler jumped out of his seat and gripped his XO by the shoulders.

"TIME TO SEE IF THOSE FROGGIES CAN JUMP!! GREAT JOB JERRY!"

The Stonewall was racing away at flank speed for the horizon. Her stern was awash with smoke from the last missile strike she had taken. Like a wolf she had snuck into the flock and when the Chosin's harpoons had streaked over the horizon and slammed into the largest three ships of the UN armada, the Stonewall struck. Racing through the enemy fleet like a runaway rebel cavalry officer she closed quickly into the middle of the pack and unleashed hell's half acre on the foreign ships. They had not expected such a bold and suicidal attack and were caught literally with their pants down around their ankles and their backsides hanging out into the wind. At one point her five inch fifty-four shredded through the thin upper deck armor of a French destroyer setting her

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

decks ablaze. But Commander Allen, as bold as he was, was not stupid. He had already unlocked the mains and once he had created enough damage and confusion as possible he kicked the powerful gas turbine powered ship into overdrive and raced back out of the pack of burning ships. That's when the first of several retaliatory missiles hit and literally rocked the boat.

The hits had been high up on the superstructure and while he lost all comm's with his own battle group as well as most of his fighting radar systems his ship was still under full power and continued to spit defiance back at the foreign ships. The Stonewall left a rooster tail of water behind as the ship laid out a thick stream of smoke from her stack to further confuse and annoy the enemy as he tried to slip back out of the battle in one piece.

The plan was working as the Chosin jumped forward into the battle. Three of the four harpoon missiles had left their mark in brilliant flashes on the other side of the horizon as they had caught the French Admiral and his fleet totally flat footed. The lead harpoon slammed into the French carrier ripping open her port side and knocking out its catapults thus rendering the flag ship of the UN fleet nothing more than a neutered large floating target. The blast had knocked the smug French admiral out of his comfortable stateroom bed and onto the floor. A small trail of blood dripped into his left eye as he had bounced off the dark walnut bedside table on his way to the floor.

He staggered to his feet and noticed the floor seemed to be leaning to one side. He tried to steady himself in the dark room and fell back into the bed. The sound of the warning klaxon screamed out in the darkness and the emergency lights suddenly flashed on as the ship lost power.

"What the HELL!?!?"

The night sky was alive with flashes and sea was full of flame. Gunter Von Strasse leapt into the cold dark waters and tried in vain to swim away from the burning ship. He had been on the night signal deck watch above the bridge when the calm stillness of the early morning air viciously erupted and the back half of his warship suddenly disappeared under the flash and smoke of a direct hit. The concussion had slammed him against the bulkhead so hard that it nearly knocked him out. In seconds the ship started to heel hard towards the stern and was slipping deeper under the dark waters with every second. The young German signalman looked at the area around his ship that was quickly filling with flames from the leaking fuel oil. Then the night exploded again and he could see the outline of the French air craft carrier silhouetted in the flames rising from her damaged bow. Suddenly the horizon on both sides of the battle group was alive with flashes as the first sound waves from the stricken French carrier boomed across the water reaching him. The Americans?!

'Oh my God' the young German thought to himself. "THE AMERICANS ARE ATTACKING!"

Gunter was only forty meters away when the ships aft magazine exploded. The shock wave hit him like an on rushing train and lit up the entire perimeter of the battle group.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

Like a pack of wolves the three American ships began the battle by darting in and out of the UN fleet cutting out the weak and scattered ships, launching torpedoes, missiles and when they could get within range raking the enemy ships with their rapid fire deck guns. But their effort was not without cost. The Gettysburg was dead in the water with smoke virtually hiding the flames that danced about her decks from view. The Chosin had jumped into the middle of the dog fight and was once again taking on several ships simultaneously as she was trying to take some of the pressure off the wounded Gettysburg. Like a heavy weight prize fighter she handed out better than she got but the weight of the battle was starting to lean hard upon her.

The Stonewall had put out her fires and was now circling back into the pack once again. LCDR Allen was now fighting his ship from the bridge when the CIC called up.

"Yes this is the Captain."

"Skipper we've got comm's up momentarily. Gettysburg is DIW (dead in the water) and the Chosin is taking hell from the rest of the battle group. Sir we're going to be on our own here soon unless the main fleet gets here quick!"

"Roger that CIC."

Allen hung up the bridge phone and sat in his command chair for a moment. He was running the odds though his head and no matter how he did it, he came up short. One of his shipmates was dead in the water, the other was fighting for his very life. The main fleet might or might not get here in time, but if he hesitated now then for sure there would be two American ships headed towards the bottom of Davy Jones locker. He slammed his fist into the arm of the chair.

"NOT ON MY WATCH!" He barked.

Turning to the bridge crew he began issuing orders.

"Sound General Quarters!"

"Sir we're already at General Quarters?"

"I know that, but sound them again! Tell the signal deck to hoist the special battle ensign and put a broom at the top of the mast. Order Guns to get that front mount reloaded, manned and ready, torpedoes standing by and get that damn CIWS reloaded. And send me the deck officer on the double."

Seaman Apprentice Theodore Wilson MacKutchin was standing by on the signal deck when the strange orders came up.

"What's the old man want with a broom on the mast for Petty Officer Murphy?"

Signalman Second Class Clarence Murphy was duck taping one of the deck brooms to the line above the flag clips.

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

"Dis not a good sign Mack. Da broom like these means we is gonna sweep the seas of da enemy!"

"Sweep the seas?"

"Yah, is an old navy ting! Dis is serious man, really serious!"

Signalman First Class David Aggie ran up to the flag locker and pulled out a large flag that MacKutchin had never seen before.

"Give me a hand Mack." Aggie called to him.

"Which flag is this one?" MacKutchin asked having never seen this particular flag before. It was a big one to be sure, larger than the ships holiday flag and took the pair of them to get it ready.

"IT'S THE STARS AND BARS MACKY!! The old man wants the world to know that the Ol' Stonewall is coming I guess.

The pair hoisted the large Confederate flag and watched the old banner unfurl and begin to wave defiantly.

Suddenly the ship turned on all its holiday lights.

"CRAP!" Aggie yelled.

"WAT DA HELL!!" Murphy followed.

The Captains voice came over the ships 1MC intercom system.

"Officers and crew of the USS Stonewall Jackson this is the Captain speaking. You have fought this ship brilliantly. We've kicked the crap out of the forces availed against us, but our job is not yet done. Our shipmates are in serious trouble. The Gettysburg is Dead In the Water. The Chosin is being hammered to hell trying to protect her. Men we CANNOT AND WILL NOT stand by and watch our shipmates go down in this fight. I have hoisted the Confederate battle standard and we are getting back into this fight. Gunners aim true! Damage control men standby! May the grace of God be upon us."

There was a slight pause.

"Engineering FULL FLANK SPEED! KICK IT IN THE BUCKET CHENG!"

The ship suddenly lurched forward.

The German heavy cruiser was making a hard turn when suddenly the horizon lit up off its port beam and a ship was rapidly coming into view with all its lights on with a strange huge flag flying over her. The captain of the

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by *Desert Doc* and *AGrayMan*

German ship did not recognize the flag . . . a bright blue cross from corner to corner with white stars in it on a red background. But he did recognize its meaning when the forward gun mount of the strange ship opened up and began pounding his larger and heavier vessel.

What happened next was perhaps the greatest single heroic act that Jennings had ever witnessed in his life. He could see the Stonewall just as she came over the horizon holiday lights bright and guns blazing as she charged straight into the middle of the battle with the biggest Confederate Navy Jack he had every seen streaming out behind her signal mast. It was a damn naval cavalry charge he was witnessing and a Rebel one at that. Jennings grabbed the big eyes binocular on the bridge wing and watched the feisty little frigate full of spit and vinegar take on a larger and heavier gunned UN cruiser and pound on it as it closed the range at flank speed. That damn insane Allen, what the hell was he thinking? There was no way he'd get out of this now. Jennings watched the fighting frigate disappear over the horizon as he pushed ever deeper into the middle of the enemy battle group, leaving a smoldering UN cruiser in its wake.

Slowly the Gettysburg gathered speed. She was still listing to the starboard, but at least she was making headway. Commander Ryan noticed the first gray lines of dawn approaching and was surprised that they had made it to the morning.

"Where to Skipper?" The helmsman asked.

Sadler looked about the damaged bridge and tired men that manned it. It had been a long night and there seemed to be a lull in the battle. His ship was in no condition to fight any longer and he wasn't sure how long those repairs would hold. He had lost contact with the Chosin and the Stonewall and didn't even know if they were still floating.

"Take us East helmsman . . . take us East and back to the fleet at best speed."

The Raptor squadrons raced low across the wave tops loaded for bear. Behind them the sun was rushing to illuminate the carnage of the night with its first beams of day light. The lead aircraft popped up every few minutes to sample for active radar signatures ahead of them as the American pilots pushed the throttles forward hoping to save the brave men and ships of the vanguard, whose efforts had been monitored by the main fleet throughout the night's battle. Somewhere ahead of them were sailors and ships in a desperate struggle to survive and these airmen were determined to get into the battle and bring those insane and brave souls home. They only hoped they weren't too late.

The Stonewall kicked up a roster tail as she skirted across the dark waters. The CIWS barrels were near red hot as the gunners tried vainly to reload the overworked close in defense system. Her missiles had all been

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

launched, her chaff launchers were empty and her guns nearly out of shells when the final wave of missiles homed in on her. MacKutchin watched the smoking darts as they arched in towards his ship. There was nowhere to go . . . they were coming in from both sides now. Aggie and Murphy watched with him as the first missiles rammed into the starboard side of their little ship.

He's not sure how he ended up in the water, but the dark cold Atlantic waters tugged and pulled at the young seaman as he struggled to reach the surface and its life giving air. But the forces that sucked him down were too great as his ship continued its long drive to the bottom of those dark waters. Waters that had claimed so many souls in the short course of human existence and through one too many wars. Its muddy bottom was not marked with the rusting hulks of once proud vessels and the bones of spry young sailors who would never see another liberty port again save the one with pearls on the gate. Seaman Apprentice Theodore Wilson MacKutchin however was not destined to go down with his ship. As if reprieved by Neptunus Rex himself the destroyer gave up one last gasp of breath that escaped as deck plates and bulkheads crushed under the unrelenting pressure of the deep sending a rescuing bubble racing up beneath the drowning sailor cutting the ships suctioning tendrils and buoying the young man back up to the waiting world above.

The cold air burned as he tried to suck in as much as possible to drive back the hypoxia that struggled to choke the life out of him. He could barely keep his head above water as he struggled to stay afloat in the dark cold waters. Suddenly debris released from the watery depths began to bob to the surface and the young boy swam to one of the ships life rafts as if life itself depended upon it . . . because it did. The actual distance was small but it seemed to take forever before Ted finally gripped the safety lines and using the last of his strength pulled himself aboard. He fell utterly exhausted and soaked to the core as he crawled over the side and into the twenty man life raft where he laid panting and shivering totally spent to the core. He was utterly alone and the weight of that reality had not yet quite sunk in, for now he was more concerned with trying to stem the overwhelming shivering that racked his body. He must get warm.

Fumbling around in the dark he located the survival bag attached to the side of the life raft and in a panic pulled and tore at it until finally he managed to break it open. He remembered from this initial training just a few months before that there were space blankets inside this pack. He prayed he had enough body heat left to reflect something back off the aluminized Mylar sheeting to keep himself alive. He broke one of the chemical lights from the pack and it filled the interior of the domed raft with an eerie yellow glow. He was alone . . . in the middle of the Atlantic . . . in the middle of a battle . . . and he was only nineteen years old. He cried for the first time since he was eleven. The tears rushed forward and overwhelmed him and for the first time in his young adult life he prayed, he prayed for all it was worth.

The entire Raptor alpha flight saw the gigantic flash just over the horizon.

"Alpha flight lock and load we have vector. Remember that there are three of ours out there somewhere in this mess. Go for IFF (Identify Friend or Foe) before you hammer them. Let's get some altitude . . . ALPHA ONE UP!"

The Decline and Fall of Pax Americana, by Desert Doc and AGrayMan

"SKIPPER OUT OF THE EAST . . . PLANES!"

Jennings was nearly blinded when he suddenly swung the bino's into the morning sun. But he saw the dark tell tales of a sh*t pot full of aircraft coming out of the sun as they were climbing to attack altitude.

"GET COMMS ON THOSE PLANES AND SQUAWK OUR IFF!!! NOW!!!" He barked.

Several nervous minutes passed as he watched the aerial armada approaching his wounded ship. The Chosin was barely making any headway and he wasn't sure just how much longer he could keep her afloat in her present condition. He had had the wounded brought up on deck and they were currently sheltered in the remnants of the hanger.

Jennings knew that he was finally safe when the first Rapter to fly low overhead wagged his wing tips, climbed and then launched a pair of harpoon missiles over the horizon in the direction of the French Fleet. He wondered if either Allen or Sadler had made it through the night. He didn't see how.

Two days later a very cold, very frightened and very much alive young seaman was picked up from a life raft by another American frigate from the Atlantic Battle Group. Seaman Apprentice Theodore Wilson MacKutchin was the sole survivor of the USS Stonewall Jackson. The USS Chosin was scuttled after all her surviving crew were safely taken off. Her wounds were deemed too great to make the journey home. The Gettysburg managed to limp home under her own power escorted by two frigates. A testament to a hard fighting crew and one crusty senior chief.

The UN's Atlantic fleet was no more, battered, bruised or sunk, the survivors of that wicked night battle readily surrendered to the advancing American fleet. Their back had been broken in the confrontation when three brave ships captains and their crews had defied all odds and taken them on. They had learned during that long dark night the old American adage: "It's not the dog in the fight . . . but the fight in the dog."

Jonathan stared at the message traffic that had been laid on his desk. He picked it up and swiveled his chair to look out the window of the oval office. It was now just a matter of time. The American fleet would return. There was no doubting that now. His UN backing was shattered into a million pieces. There was word coming out of the south of a gathering army of rebels that were headed straight for Washington. He was so close . . . so close.

He wadded up the papers and threw them at the window.

"It's not over until I say it's over!" He muttered to himself as he picked up the phone.

Chapter 8...