

MR. MESSIAH

A full length play

By

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AUTHOR'S NOTES

“Mr. Messiah” is a cinematic, multi-environmental piece. I have recommended specific elements and staging suggestions, but the play can be presented as elaborately or as simply as one desires. In either case scenic elements would be better suggested than realistically rendered.

CAST

The play’s many characters are described within. I recommend a formulation that identifies principle and ensemble actors. The ensemble actors would play a variety of characters.

For example:

13 ACTORS: 6 principles (Christian Carpenter, Hope Sullivan, Dick Newting, Tom Lessor, Ted Feely, Tori Carpenter), and 7 members of the ensemble (five men, two women).

10 ACTORS: 5 principles (Christian Carpenter, Hope Sullivan, Dick Newting, Tom Lessor, Ted Feely), and 5 members of the ensemble (three men, two women).

7 ACTORS: 2 Principles (Christian Carpenter, Hope Sullivan) and five members of the ensemble.

TIME AND PLACE

Washington, DC plus various national and international locales.

“MR. MESSIAH”

ACT ONE

A large VIDEO SCREEN, reminiscent of the “Wizard of Oz” looms above the stage, which is painted to look like white marble and is built to accommodate various levels and playing spaces.

In the center of the stage is an Early American, antique, QUEEN BED WITH HEADBOARD. Other set pieces can come and go as needed.

AT RISE a quote fills the SCREEN:

"If there be a God and he is just, his day will come. He will never abandon the whole race of man to be eaten up by the leviathans and mammoths of a day." Thomas Jefferson

The quote dissolves into a VIDEO with a kinetic background of news images slashing in from beyond the frame.

This is accompanied by a swelling musical SOUNDTRACK and the deep, resonant voice of an ANNOUNCER.

ANNOUNCER (O.S.)

This is a special report of the Sullivan Hour.

Boom.! The fiery graphic of an EXPLOSION engulfs the screen.

ANNOUNCER (O.S.)

“America in Crisis: One Year Later.”

After a few moments, the glowing image of the Liberty Bell slowly emerges from within its depths and eventually evaporates the smoke and fire.

ANNOUNCER (O.S.)

With your host, award-winning, television news correspondent Hope Sullivan.

The MUSIC fades.

REVEAL HOPE SULLIVAN (30s) below the screen. She wears a bright, red blazer over a bright blue dress.

HOPE

(grave)

Good evening. This day marks the first anniversary of a political event unmatched in our country's history. Tonight, in a live, two-hour, special presentation, we will explore, in depth, what unfolded, how it threatened the most powerful office in the land, and how America emerged intact, in control and in full command of its future.

(beat)

As in all important stories, ours begins dramatically with the sudden death of President Clifford Stihl.

REVEAL an ADULT MALE FIGURE. He is seated on a commode with his back turned to us and his pants around his ankles. He GRUNTS with effort.

HOPE

On an otherwise bright January morning, the nation awoke to startling news. Its Chief of State, eighteen months into his first term, had been the victim of a massive heart attack.

The Adult Male Figure's last grunt is suddenly replaced by a startled GASP followed by desperate CRIES.

The Adult Male Figure collapses.

The SCREEN reads:

"One year earlier."

Hope removes her red blazer and CROSSES to a LONG NEWS DESK. On the front of the desk is a logo featuring three capital "Ns."

Seated in a row behind the desk are FOUR PUNDITS. This is the set of the television news, discussion program "BACKTALK."

HOPE

Welcome back to Triple N's "Backtalk." We are nine hours removed from the stunning news of President's Stihl's death and are discussing the resulting transition.

She addresses MICHAEL PILSON (50s).

HOPE

Michael, will it go smoothly?

PILSON

(the absolutist)

Hardly. The Vice President has been invisible since his wife died ten months ago. There has been no indication that he is either prepared or even interested in being president.

DIANE WATTLES (40s), jumps in.

WATTLES

(old school)

Well, perhaps he hasn't made as many public statements as you, Michael....

Smiles from the other Pundits.

WATTLES

...But it's a bit early to assume anything about his intent as chief executive.

JAY PREEN, (40s), disagrees.

PREEN

(the wise-acre)

...Other than the fact that he'll be MIA. White House sources have been expressing discontent over his lack of engagement for months now.

ANDREA LIBERATI (30s), counters.

LIBERATI

(the progressive)

But, isn't that more the result of President Stihl's displeasure with a running mate who was not on board with White House strategy?

PILSON

Who are we kidding? Christian Carpenter is a nice man, with a nice smile and the ability to negotiate his way around a sentence. But as the one-term junior senator from Rhode Island, he was, and still remains, distinctly unqualified for the role of world leader.

HOPE

I agree with Michael. I think we're looking at a place-holder here. The question has to be asked; is this a president capable of restoring faith in an office that no longer commands the respect and trust of the people?

REVEAL CHRISTIAN CARPENTER (50s), at center stage, unpacking clothes from a large suitcase on the queen size bed. This is the PRESIDENT'S BEDROOM.

Carpenter stares out front as if he were watching television. A once formidable and vibrant presence, he appears sullen and defeated.

HOPE

The truth is if it hadn't been for the sharp instincts of his campaign-manager-wife, he'd still be butt-polishing the last seat on the judiciary committee.

A grim Carpenter TURNS OFF the TV with his REMOTE and CROSSES to a set resembling the OVAL OFFICE. Joining him is his deeply serious Chief of Staff, TOM LESSOR (30s), the loyal, African-American White House Chief of Staff, JAMES GOODY (40s), and Senate Majority Leader DICK NEWTING (60s), a man, whose eyes still gleam with the savvy of a successful, six-term politician.

NEWTING

(finishing up a report)

...Joe is expecting it to pry it from appropriations by July. May have to skim off the frosting to bring in the votes, but I can re-decorate in the Senate. On deficit reduction there are eight....

LESSOR

Nine.

NEWTING

Nine bills of all shapes and sizes. This is a cat roundup. We're going to need some direction.

He awaits an answer. Nothing. Jumping back in....

NEWTING

Are we still looking on backing the wealth tax?

No response from Carpenter.

GOODY

President Stihl was willing to let it die.

Carpenter rubs the weariness out of his eyes.

NEWTING

Is there a better time to do this?

CARPENTER

I would appreciate if you refrained from speaking to me as if I've been comatose for ten months.

NEWTING

Hard to know otherwise, Mr. President.

Carpenter takes a moment to absorb the remark.

CARPENTER

The campaign promise on the revenue equity was to eliminate the billionaire feed trough and pocket two-cents of every plutocrat's dollar. We're already on the wrong side of that fight and the biggest battle hasn't even been waged. Where is the...?

A BELL sounds, indicating a SHORT LEAP FORWARD IN TIME. Lessor, Goody and Newting SHIFT to different postures. Carpenter starts pacing.

CARPENTER

...The effort to re-open our borders has failed to re-invigorate communities of color. Why haven't we....?

The BELL sounds. The three listeners SHIFT again. Carpenter, stops behind his desk and scrolls through his laptop.

CARPENTER

...Latest predictors indicate unemployment will hit an even ten percent at year's end. Manufacturers have reduced labor costs to keep pace with the faltering economy, jettisoning millions of single-skill workers into the job marketplace. We should be re-training them? What happened to the...?

The BELL and another SHIFT. Carpenter stares out a window.

CARPENTER

...The day inflation hit a high water mark, I watched a news report on a congressional golf tournament, featuring the lobbyists of the some of the most powerful corporations in America, including Wright News International, which is now the largest, single-funding source of tax exempt, conservative, political action committees. Is this how we've....?

The BELL. SHIFT. Carpenter paces once again.

CARPENTER

...Every budget proposal I've read is bloated with corporate-friendly amendments that exploit consumers and choke off competition, while the gap between the wealthiest one percent and the middle class has continued to expand beyond the historical record? Have any of you read the latest...?

The BELL. SHIFT. Carpenter picks up a sheet of paper from his desk and scans it.

CARPENTER

...We regained power in the wake of the most dishonest, unlawful, undemocratic, and violent chapter in this country's history. And, yet, despite our mandate, we've accomplished nothing. There's not one bill in either chamber that has value beyond financing the second homes of the special interests and movement conservatives that influenced them. This is because my predecessor, may he rest in peace, could not get off the pot! The result is a legislature in which apples stand for oranges and one inch represents a mile. The other bills are so diluted I wouldn't recommend the paper for use in the congressional lavatories. We are stuck, gentlemen, stymied by gerrymandering, grounded by obstructionists and shamed by our own lack of will. Do you not feel the pressure on your ankles?

Carpenter sits.

That took the air out of the room. A moment passes as everyone readjusts.

NEWTING

With all due respect, Mr. President, we inherited this goat fuck.

CARPENTER

And, we've had eighteen months to fix it.

NEWTING

Yet polling indicates we're not likely to give up our Senate majority.

CARPENTER

This is your goal, to lose less seats?

NEWTING

(a challenge)

And what would be yours?

CARPENTER

(giving up)

I don't know, Dick. Let me sleep on it.

Carpenter rises and CROSSES THE STAGE as Newting does his best to control his contempt.

The time transitions into EVENING. Carpenter joins elegant Congressman TED FEELY (40s) on the PATIO outside the Oval Office, hands him a glass of brandy and hoists one of his own.

CARPENTER

A toast. To Tori Carpenter.

Feely raises his glass.

CARPENTER

God bless her brilliant, dynamic, vegetarian, new age soul.

FEELY

And fuck drugs.

CARPENTER

(agreeing loudly)

Fuck drugs!

With conviction Carpenter taps Feely's glass with his own and downs its contents.

CARPENTER

I haven't washed her pillow yet, can still smell her.

Feely, his glass raised to his lips, stops himself from drinking his own, looks on with concern.

FEELY

Teach me how to find that comforting.

CARPENTER

It's therapeutic, an attempt to sustain physical contact.

FEELY

Along with a bacterial infection?

CARPENTER

Anything that will help me feel something.

FEELY

I'll drink to that.

And he does.

CARPENTER

(his ears attuned)

Hear anything?

FEELY

No.

CARPENTER

Exactly. First thing I noticed about the White House is how isolated it is. So easy to ignore what's happening beyond those gates.

FEELY

Then don't. You have six months before campaigning begins. Give yourself a head start. Hit the streets, talk to the people.

CARPENTER

About what, how every administration abandons them? They're furious...left and right. If I've learned anything, there are two things you do not want in the hands of angry citizens....ballots and guns.

FEELY

You need a plan. Dick Newting wants your head on a pole.

CARPENTER

Nothing new there.

FEELY

He's trying isolate you from the party.

Carpenter shrugs.

FEELY

Which is why I think you should make him your V.P.

Carpenter turns away in disgust.

FEELY

Let me float it. His ego won't allow him to say no. And you get to remove him from where he can do the most damage. His seniority will be useful on the circuit.

CARPENTER

See, that's where you're confused. You think I want this job.

FEELY

If you don't it will be the second greatest disappointment of our eighteen year friendship.

CARPENTER

What's the first?

FEELY

The day you told me you were straight.

Carpenter manages a begrudging smile and CROSSES to the President's bedroom, where he continues to unpack on the bed. Shortly he removes a standard-size PILLOW AND CASE. Gently, almost ritualistically, he lays the pillow on one side of the bed.

He stares at for a time, then scoots onto the bed, slips under the covers, pulls it close and clutches it to his chest.

The LIGHTS fade to BLACK..

SNORING is heard.

The LIGHTS fade BACK UP, revealing a sleeping Carpenter honking away.

A MUFFLED FEMALE VOICE is heard.

TORI'S VOICE

Chris, roll over.

Carpenter stirs, mumbles.

TORI'S VOICE

Sleep on your side. You're snoring.

A moment as he takes this in.

Suddenly, he BOLTS UPRIGHT, scans the room....

TORI'S VOICE

(no longer muffled)

Honey, it's me.

Sensing that it's coming from a place close to him he slowly REVEALS TORI'S PILLOW and scrutinizes it carefully.

The pillow's FOLDS APPROXIMATE HUMAN FACIAL FEATURES.

*

TORI'S VOICE

Hi.

Momentarily shocked, he takes a beat, then touches the pillow gently.

TORI'S VOICE

You okay?

CARPENTER

You're not really here.

She begins SINGING The Lovin' Spoonful's,
"Do You Believe in Magic."

TORI'S VOICE

"Do you believe in magic in a young girl's heart,
How the music can free her, whenever it starts...."

Tears flood Carpenter's eyes.

TORI'S VOICE

"And it's magic, if the music is...."

CARPENTER

Don't.

TORI'S VOICE

Why? You like it when I sing.

CARPENTER

Please. I'm too tired.

TORI'S VOICE

I do it because I love you.

CARPENTER

If you loved me you wouldn't have left.

TORI'S VOICE

I didn't leave. I got lost.

CARPENTER

I can't have the distraction.

TORI'S VOICE

You're taking this all too seriously. It's just another job with a bigger house.

CARPENTER

You've always said that, but.....

TORI'S VOICE

Tell me about your swearing in.

CARPENTER

What? No.

TORI'S VOICE

Was it exciting?

CARPENTER

Tense. I almost blew a hole in my shorts.

TORI'S VOICE

Oh, dear.

CARPENTER

Got through it, though. Squeezed out half a dozen on my way to the rose garden.

TORI'S VOICE

What've you been eating?

CARPENTER

Barbecue. Stihl loved the stuff. It was at every event. I got hooked.

(coming around)

I know. I know. Animal products....bad; brutalizing, unhealthy, environmentally unsound.

TORI'S VOICE

Not to mention difficult to digest.

CARPENTER

(reflective beat)

I suppose I'm no less capable of addiction than you.

(regretful)

I should have forced you into rehab.

TORI'S VOICE

I wouldn't have gone. The pills had taken over.

CARPENTER

Why weren't you able to sleep?

TORI'S VOICE

Couldn't shut down.

CARPENTER

You were overworked.

(guilty)

Why didn't I see that?

TORI'S VOICE

I wouldn't let you.

CARPENTER

No, I was too self-involved to notice.

TORI'S VOICE

You had to be. It was the only way to keep yourself on track.

CARPENTER

And for what?

TORI'S VOICE

What I'd always dreamed for you.

CARPENTER

Let's run away somewhere.

TORI'S VOICE

Unacceptable, Mr. President.

CARPENTER

I don't belong here, Tori. I'm too sensitive for this game. I stumbled my way up the ladder. Best I can do is resign before I fall a great distance. *

TORI'S VOICE

Falling is just a shorter version of flying.

CARPENTER

The public has unrealistic expectations of what a President can accomplish. We're set up to fail. They love us when we don't deserve it. They reject us when we do. And they shoot at us regardless. And despite who's in office, we all end up in the same unfinished place. This idea of political salvation, it's a fantasy. And that's because politicians aren't up to it. We're not even as worthy as the average citizen. We're... lesser beings.

TORI'S VOICE

Not true.

CARPENTER

We embrace self-entitlement and ideological arrogance at the expense of decency.

TORI'S VOICE

But that's not you. You have a sense of greater purpose.

CARPENTER

I'm nothing special. Men like me, we can move things along, perhaps set an example or two, but no leader can eliminate the disappointment of unmet expectations. Not only am I not a savior, but I don't even have the skill set to fake it.

TORI'S VOICE

Take a walk with me.

Lifting the pillow as if it were a delicate infant,
Carpenter slides off the bed and stares up at
Rembrandt Peale's framed PORTRAIT OF
THOMAS JEFFERSON, which now appears on
the SCREEN.

TORI'S VOICE

Do you know how he became President?

CARPENTER

Remind me.

TORI'S VOICE

The House had to break a tie in the electoral college between Jefferson and Burr.
Jefferson won on the thirty sixth ballot because Hamilton disliked Burr more.

CARPENTER

And?

TORI'S VOICE

He stumbled in, dummy.

Carpenter acknowledges her point with a smile.

CARPENTER

God, I've missed you.

TORI'S VOICE

I told you I'd never be far.

CARPENTER

You've always had faith in the metaphysical.

TORI'S VOICE

And look how it's worked out.

CARPENTER

Don't ever leave me again.

TORI'S VOICE

That's up to you, love.

He gazes down at the pillow, considers the notion, smiles at the clarity of this moment.

TORI'S VOICE

It's a shame we don't get an inaugural ball.

Carpenter suddenly hoists the pillow to eye level. Tori SQUEALS with pleasure.

Then, holding it as if it were his dance partner, he begins WALTZING across the floor.

After some moments of this....

TORI'S VOICE

(Re: Jefferson)

Is he watching?

CARPENTER

Who cares?

Carpenter WALTZES OFFSTAGE with the pillow.

Ted Feely ENTERS the stage. Carpenter, now wearing a suit jacket, REENTERS and joins him.

FEELY

(To Carpenter)

Newting's camp is on board with the V.P. nom. No strings.

Carpenter nods.

FEELY

Good luck in the pit today.

CARPENTER

Thanks.

FEELY

And don't forget to dress left.

Tom Lessor and James Goody ENTER and APPROACH.

LESSOR

How are you feeling Mr. President?

CARPENTER

Oddly buoyant.

LESSOR

A few reminders. Goal one is to reverse negative speculation. We want to emphasize stability and competence, stay consistent with previous policies, but leave room for improvement. No reason to give them fresh bullets at this point.

CARPENTER

(to Goody)

Jim, Tom will be taking over as White House Chief of Staff.

GOODY

I understand, Sir.

CARPENTER

Will you be my press secretary?

GOODY

(a beat, pleasantly surprised)

I'm honored to serve at your pleasure, Mr. President.

CARPENTER

It would please me to get as much help as possible from all of you.

Carpenter adjusts his crotch to the left, CROSSES BETWEEN two American flags (at rest), approaches a podium and scans the audience.

CARPENTER

Because of the urgency surrounding recent events, I will refrain from making an opening statement and move directly into questioning.

Reporter STUART DAHL (30s), rises from the AUDIENCE.

DAHL

Stuart Dahl, A.P. The general opinion is that you and President Stihl were at odds. Do you plan to support his policies?

Instead of launching into an immediate answer, Carpenter reflects upon it.

The moments pass.

DAHL

(uneasy)

Mr. President?

CARPENTER

(jumping in)

I plan to support the notion of a spiritually sound democracy.

DAHL

(not getting it)

Could you elucidate?

CARPENTER

Policies which seek to expand and nourish the souls of the citizenry.

Dahl remains confused. What is he talking about? Carpenter chooses to explain.

CARPENTER

Human nature drives us to seek that which will bring us the most short-term gain...relief from hunger, physical discomfort, financial insecurity. But longer-term, social returns are a result of our recognizing the same need in others, and working together to achieve mutual satisfaction. This results in the creation of organizational entities...institutions. But whether they be political, media-driven, corporate, private, not-for-profit or otherwise, these institutions also become expressions of self-preservation, resulting in a propensity to increase power at the expense of others. This encourages moral ambiguity, spiritual hypocrisy, and inherent racism. To boot, many have grown so large that maintaining their existence is essential to the way the system operates. I believe we cannot truly be free until we learn how to properly regulate them. My plan, therefore, is, first, to make sure the law specifically supports equal rights for all subgroups and excludes institutional interests from the equation. Second, I want to promote the notion of change as a productive tool...change that moves us from the habitual to the inspired. But most of all I want to limit the ways in which private interests can influence public policy, so as to allow citizens the ability to escape the worst of institutional influences...fear-mongering, pandering, exploitation, etc.

CARPENTER (CONT'D)

This way individuals can better regulate their own narcissistic habits and avoid unproductive consequences like falling victim to the apathy/anger syndrome and the epidemic of obesity to name but a few. The more they succeed, the more responsible they will become, and the more responsible they are, the more capable they will be of positively influencing the institutions to which they belong, creating an unbroken circle of positive reinforcement.

Satisfied with his response, Carpenter stops.

DAHL

(stunned, then shaking it off)

But, isn't the federal government our single, largest institution?

CARPENTER

Above all, regulation begins in Washington. Recent history has certainly made it clear that no one with access to the seat of power should have undue influence.

DAHL

(thrown)

How do you plan to accomplish this?

CARPENTER

With help. Thank you.

OTHER MEMBERS OF THE PRESS shout questions from the audience as Carpenter, appearing relaxed and confident, CROSSES BACK between the two flags. As he passes a STUNNED Lessor and Goody....

CARPENTER

Jim, Tom, lunch meeting in thirty.

Ted Feely APPROACHES.

FEELY

No one's going to get it.

CARPENTER

Did you?

FEELY

Of course. It was a digest of every serious conversation the three of us ever had.

CARPENTER

And now I've taken it out of the salon.

FEELY

Is this your way of ending things?

CARPENTER

On the contrary. I'm looking to start something.

FEELY

I'm not recognizing this person. Who was I was speaking to yesterday?

CARPENTER

My lesser self.

FEELY

I don't need to worry about you, do I?

CARPENTER

Go ahead, it'll give you something to do.

FEELY

How far do you plan to take these ideas?

CARPENTER

As far as my friends will let me.

FEELY

Okay, I deserved that. What do you need from me?

They EXIT the stage.

REVEAL Hope Sullivan on the "BACKTALK"
SET, standing before the four Pundits. Michael
Pilson is going at it with hammer and tongs.

PILSON

It was staggeringly tone deaf. This wasn't a press-conference; but an obtuse,
socio/political polemic of stupefying proportions.

Diane Wattles jumps in.

WATTLES

Not one specific proposal.

PILSON

And what in blazes is a “spiritually sound democracy?” Will we next see him in robe and vestments?

Andrea Liberati offers a calmer analysis.

LIBERATI

Well, one can argue that this was not the correct platform for an analysis of societal ills. But it did feel heartfelt and....

PREEN

(incredulous)

Oh, please! We’re now using a sincerity meter to judge our political leaders?

WATTLES

Actually, I would like to have experienced what Andrea is talking about, because, for me, it was as dry as kibble.

HOPE

No one’s talking about the presumptuousness of this act.

REVEAL Carpenter in the President’s bedroom seated on his, bed, staring out as if he were watching TV. Tori’s Pillow is propped neatly beside him.

HOPE

I mean, to accuse the American people of personal and political irresponsibility is not only the pinnacle of self-righteousness but wildly self-destructive.

TORI’S VOICE

(to Carpenter)

Let’s check on the Newt.

Carpenter picks up the REMOTE and points it out, ostensibly SWITCHING THE CHANNEL on the television.

REVEAL Dick Newting being questioned by a FEMALE INTERVIEWER on a NEWS SET.

FEMALE INTERVIWER

They seemed more lofty than stated party aims. Do you agree with the President?

NEWTING

I share his support of the public interest.

Tori's voice now PRECEDES and SLIGHTLY OVERLAPS the interviewer's follow-ups so that we hear Tori's more accurate observations.

TORI'S VOICE

If that's true, why do you repeatedly torpedo progressive initiatives?

FEMALE INTERVIEWER

But members of your own party have expressed dismay at his statements, and feel they've been blindsided.

NEWTING

Individuals, as in every case, may disagree but, make no mistake, the party is united behind this President.

TORI'S VOICE

But don't you privately debase him and once told him to remove his head from his ass?

FEMALE INTERVIEWER

The rumor is you're being considered for the V.P. slot.

NEWTING

I have no knowledge of such interest, but, in any case, my chief obligation is to the constituents of my district.

TORI'S VOICE

That would contradict the public record, which reveals an exploratory committee for a run at the presidency.

FEMALE INTERVIEWER

Would you accept the position if offered?

NEWTING

I am willing to do what is asked of me to serve President Carpenter and the party he currently leads.

Carpenter CLICKS OFF THE TV and the Newting scene, sighs, then looks over at Tori's Pillow for her thoughts.

TORI'S VOICE

You're standing naked on the ten meter platform with your toes curled over the edge.
What do you do?

Carpenter smiles back. He knows.

REVEAL Ted Feely at a PODIUM, addressing
the audience.

FEELY

As the representative from Michigan's twelfth district, I proudly accept the President's
nomination for Vice President of the United States.

FEELY (CONT'D)

Welcome to the Pleasure Dome!

(another beat)

Kidding.

REVEAL the President's bedroom. Carpenter
TURNS OUT THE LIGHT reaches for Tori's
Pillow and gently tucks it under an arm. He
appears relaxed, content even.

TORI'S VOICE

How do you feel?

CARPENTER

Better.

She SINGS the refrain from Bo Diddley's "Who
Do You Love?"....

TORI'S VOICE

"Who do you love? Who do you love?"

He smiles, turns to the pillow.

TORI'S VOICE

"Who do you...."

He cuts her off by smothering the pillow with
passionate kisses.

The head and shoulders of Wright News International Founder and President, HUGH WRIGHT (70s), appear on the SCREEN. An experienced and unflappable corporate titan and propagandist of the highest order, Wright appears imposing, Oz-like.

REVEAL A CAPITOL BUILDING OFFICE. Conservative, bipolar, House Majority Leader JOHN STALLINGS (60s), and the pragmatic, Senate Minority leader SHARON ARLINGTON (50s), watch as a title appears below Wright's image:

"Wright News International, Framing Strategy."

WRIGHT

(from the screen)

As always, our frames are moral ones. But my news staff thinks attacking Feely on purely moral grounds is too obvious and will encourage a liberal press backlash. That narrative is better delivered from the pulpit, which is both less visible and more resonant. The word is already out to our religious allies. Instead our first line of attack will be angled.

A new title appears:

"Equality and Fairness."

WRIGHT

The President is a widower and childless, the congressman, homosexual. Our commentators will suggest that, should Feely be confirmed, heterosexual families would no longer be represented by the two most powerful leaders in the country. The interests of the majority would, in essence, be ignored and forgotten. This will be followed by a second framing idea....

A third title:

"Freedom."

WRIGHT

...In which our commentators will insist that by stressing both corporate and self-regulation, the President is saying that we are, as a nation, self-interested and do not deserve the freedoms afforded by our Constitution. We lead with it tonight on “Wright Thinking.”

STALLINGS

(gleeful)

Sensational, Hugh.

ARLINGTON

Any sense, Hugh, as to why Carpenter is playing into our hands?

WRIGHT

Frustration? Despondency? Naïveté? Not sure it matters as long as it's politically irrational.

ARLINGTON

We've scheduled a closed-door in two hours with party members of both houses.

STALLINGS

It'll be the centerpiece of every sound bite from Seattle to Sarasota. The second approach should go down like oysters with Independents and Libertarians.

ARLINGTON

We'll need twenty hours of air-time in the next two weeks.

WRIGHT

How about twenty-five

Arlington and Stallings smile back with pleasure.

REVEAL the President's bedroom. Carpenter, facing out, buttons his shirt as if he were staring at his image in a mirror.

TORI'S VOICE

It's to be expected. Short term losses, long term gain.

CARPENTER

I get why my own party is melting down, but the polls! Twenty four is equal to Nixon's lowest numbers.

TORI'S VOICE

Then you only have to beat Harry Truman.

CARPENTER

Is that what you expect me to tell Dick Newting?

TORI'S VOICE

No, tell him if he sinks Feely's nomination, your next choice will be from across the aisle.

Before Carpenter can respond....

TORI'S VOICE

Those words exactly. Stay with the plan. Consistency beats backtracking.

He nods, turns to Tori's Pillow, and displays two ties....one blue, one yellow.

TORI'S VOICE

Yellow.

He slips the yellow tie over his head and tightens it. *Note:* The yellow tie becomes Carpenter's signature piece of clothing from this point on.

He then CROSSES to the OVAL OFFICE, where he meets an agitated Dick Newting.

NEWTING

You stupid, ignorant, son-of-a-bitch! You ever threaten me again, I'll yank your tongue out your ass and nail it to the floor. You are President by default. That gives you less, not more license to screw with the process. I don't know what you're taking, but if you don't start displaying mature political instincts, I will shut you up in this building 'till you rot!

CARPENTER

(remaining calm)

Why do we no longer refer to the far-right as reactionaries?

NEWTING

What?

CARPENTER

Doesn't it seem more appropriate now than ever? The word freedom, for example.

NEWTING

Changing the subject won't....

CARPENTER

(standing strong)

Yes, it will. It better.

Newting pauses, then settles back.

CARPENTER

The Founding Fathers defined freedom as relief from tyranny. But movement conservatives react to its most self-indulgent implications...the freedom to avoid taxation with representation. The freedom to bear firearms in peacetime, to abuse the environment, to conduct business without ethical restraints....

NEWTING

Get to the point.

CARPENTER

Why not give them something to react to...while we're pursuing our own interests?

NEWTING

(processing)

You want to hide the ball.

CARPENTER

(pleased)

Ah, a fellow infielder.

NEWTING

That's not why you nominated Feely.

CARPENTER

But it is why it makes political sense.

NEWTING

Been tried before.

CARPENTER

Not like this.

Long beat as Newting considers the idea.
Shortly, he shrugs with the possibility. Then....

NEWTING

Hard to know whether you're being crafty or crazy.

CARPENTER

What if it's both?

Beat. Without revealing his reaction, Newting turns and EXITS.

Carpenter watches him leave, then loses the smile. Removing a handkerchief, he dabs at his perspiring brow.

REVEAL the "BACKTALK" set. Hope Sullivan addresses the row of Pundits.

HOPE

Media giant Hugh Wright announced today that he is contributing upwards of one hundred million dollars to Society Now, a conservative, "social welfare" organization, permissible under 501C4 of the tax code. Thoughts?

PREEN

(with a clever grin)

How much are they worth to you?

HOPE

This amuses you, Jay?

PREEN

Campaigns have been defined by money since Boston Harbor was flavored with tea. Now is the moment you choose to be outraged?

HOPE

After what this country has been through, yes. Especially if it threatens to further corrupt political discourse.

PILSON

Wait a minute, I thought that was our goal.

LAUGHTER from the panel.

REVEAL the President's bedroom. Carpenter, with Tori's Pillow tucked in close, watches from the bed.

He presses the MUTE button on the REMOTE.
Hope and the Pundits remain active but
SILENT.

CARPENTER

Can I go after Wright?

TORI'S VOICE

Not without the support of the low information voter.

CARPENTER

Them again? Why?

TORI'S VOICE

You're morally obligated to represent all Americans, including the cognitively
challenged.

CARPENTER

But I'm politically obligated to remain in power.

TORI'S VOICE

Then, you need more allies.

REVEAL a RESTAURANT/BAR. TRIPLE N
President of News Programming JON
GOLDENSON (40s), a man whose hair and
standards are thinning at the same rate, sits at a
BOOTH nursing a Diet Coke. Hope CROSSES
OVER, gestures to a WAITER.

HOPE

Lemon Drop, please.

The Waiter, nods and EXITS as Hope slides in
opposite Goldenson.

GOLDENSON

I'm not moving you to a different format.

HOPE

(let down)

Fuck!

GOLDENSON

Your numbers are through the roof.

HOPE

You're breaking your promise to me?

GOLDENSON

Postponing it. Consider yourself the victim of success.

HOPE

What success? I'm bored and single.

GOLDENSON

I'll give you a vibrator for your birthday.

HOPE

Shut up.

GOLDENSON

Just don't ask me for a one-person, commentary show in an environment where everyone else is adding bodies.

Hope's PHONE BUZZES. Removing it from her purse, she checks the text screen.

GOLDENSON

If anything, I'd consider offering you more of the same...maybe this time with all women....

Suddenly attentive, Hope presses the on-screen bar and intently reads the message.

GOLDENSON

(only half-joking)

Mix it up a bit. One could even wear a burkah.

HOPE

Quiet. Listen to this text....

She reads the message aloud.

HOPE

"One accurate measurement is worth a thousand expert opinions." Admiral Grace Hopper.

GOLDENSON

Quote of the day?

HOPE

(stunned)

It's from the President.

As Goldenson reacts, REVEAL part of a REDWOOD SWING SET, replete with climbing wall, two swings, a slide and an overhead ladder. Carpenter, wearing a jogging outfit, is seated on one of the swings.

As Hope CROSSES to him she is joined by Tom Lessor.

HOPE

Why again am I not allowed to bring my cameraman?

LESSOR

Consider this an unofficial visit.

HOPE

Okay, now I'm worried.

Lessor reveals a small plastic case and flips open the top.

HOPE

What's that?

LESSOR

Breath mint.

She holds out her hand. He taps one into her palm and leaves.

With trepidation, Hope APPROACHES the swing set.

As she crosses into Carpenter's periphery, he points above him to the ladder of bars connecting the slide to the climbing wall.

CARPENTER

Think you can make it from one end to the other?

HOPE

Not in a suit.

CARPENTER

I do it three times a day, always from the wall to the slide.

HOPE

Keeps you in shape?

CARPENTER

And I like the metaphor.

She manages a slight smile. He points to a swing beside him.

CARPENTER

Have a seat.

After a moment of hesitation, she sits on the swing as best she can in a tight skirt.

HOPE

Is this an attempt at embracing your enemy?

CARPENTER

Actually, it is.

HOPE

Good luck.

CARPENTER

You don't like what I'm doing?

HOPE

I don't understand what you're doing. I don't like what you did?

CARPENTER

And what was that?

HOPE

You indulged yourself in grief while Stihl was sleeping on the job.

CARPENTER

(grim)

He knew how I felt.

HOPE

I supported the ticket because I thought you would balance him out.

Encouraged by this revelation, he stands and crosses behind her swing.

CARPENTER

Then we're equally disappointing.

HOPE

(offended)

Excuse me?

He gives her swing a PUSH. Surprised, she YELPS, stiffens, and grips the chains more tightly.

CARPENTER

I used to listen to your radio commentary.

HOPE

Oh, you were the one.

CARPENTER

But then you chose to indulge in opinion mongering.

He continues to push her on the swing.

HOPE

That suggests you're watching.

CARPENTER

Unfortunately, so is the public.

HOPE

As well they should. Their leaders are failing them.

CARPENTER

Or are they failing themselves by putting too much faith in their leaders? Consider the challenge of reasoning with a hyper-stimulated populous....

HOPE

No thanks.

CARPENTER

...Polarized by the constant drumbeat of partisan opinion, no room for reflection. Governing is less possible when passions override logic, when beliefs are replaced with feelings and truth is deemed irrelevant.

HOPE

You're ignoring the affect of political rhetoric. We do what we can to sort it out, but the responsibility lies with those who present party affiliation as a religious act. If the public is unreflective it's because the messaging won't allow it.

CARPENTER

But, we both know the public would back off short term reactions if the pundits did the same.

HOPE

Short term reactions are what characterize the political thinking of the majority of Americans. We're only acknowledging that. It's why voters change sides every two years. They have no capacity for perspective. If they lose their job, their spouse or their hair they jump to the other guy. It's always been that way.

CARPENTER

Not in the beginning. The colonists had spiritual will.

HOPE

Define the term for me.

CARPENTER

The belief that limitations are self-imposed, that transcendence is not only possible but a naturally occurring, long-term phenomenon.

HOPE

And you believe you can reverse over two hundred years of accumulated doubt?

CARPENTER

I can try.

HOPE

How? Not that I expect you to tell me.

CARPENTER

(telling her)

I'm going to take the private money out of politics.

HOPE

(thinking it's a joke)

Right.

He STOPS PUSHING, crosses to where she can see him as the swing continues it's arc.

CARPENTER

I want all federally mandated elections to be supported by public funds.

HOPE

(chuckling)

Oh, okay.

CARPENTER

(undeterred)

As a result, national policy will be motivated solely by conviction. Otherwise, the system will further subjugate the dreams of the people to the will of the influential until there are no real dreams...just manufactured ones.

He fixes a serious gaze on her as she swings back and forth in front of him.

CARPENTER

That's my plan. My only plan.

Shortly, her smile dissolves into confusion. She drags her feet on the ground to stop her forward movement.

HOPE

(confused)

I don't know why I'm here.

CARPENTER

Because I need help. I keep telling people this.

HOPE

(appalled)

Are you asking me to give you good press?

CARPENTER

I'm asking you trust my sincerity. Be as critical as you want.

HOPE

I am one of five.

CARPENTER

But you're the one who gets my attention.

This sets her back a bit. What is he saying?

CARPENTER

And you were the only television news person to accept the clear evidence of an accidental overdose and not speculate that my wife had committed suicide.

(making his point)

Your cynicism has limits.

HOPE

Not much of an endorsement.

CARPENTER

Enough for me.

For the first time since she arrived, Hope has no response.

Carpenter CROSSES DOWNSTAGE and picks up a microphone. A BLUE COLLAR MALE (30s), wearing a tractor cap, rises from the AUDIENCE. We're at a TOWN MEETING.

CARPENTER

(into the mike)

...Ted Feely is not just a gay congressman, but a member of a legally unequal minority in the state he represents. Michigan's laws do not protect employees of state and local governments from discrimination on the basis of gender identity and/or expression. I'm not just asking you to support his nomination. I want you to stand behind the constitutional principle of equal rights for all.

BLUE COLLAR

On what authority? You can't even speak for everyone in this gym.

CARPENTER

Well, you're not female. By your definition, you can't speak for your wife.

Positive MURMURS from the AUDIENCE.
Blue Collar points accusingly at Carpenter.

BLUE COLLAR

My wife knows that gay-friendly amendments won't put food on our family table.

CARPENTER

I'll ask you not to point your finger at me, Sir. Instead, I suggest you place it on the pulse of your wife and children. Under the laws of this land, they have less freedom than you.

BLUE COLLAR

This is why liberals never win elections in this county. We know it's all a cover for the socialist agenda.

CARPENTER

What if I proposed that Ted Feely and I are not liberal, but, in fact, are the true conservatives here? We're for "conserving" the environment, the small businessman, global peace, and the faith of the American citizen. Perhaps those who call themselves conservatives are actually the liberals, taking a liberal, permissive attitude towards deregulation, corporate welfare, autocratic regimes and voter suppression.

BLUE COLLAR

We don't care. Most of us here don't even have jobs.

CARPENTER

Are you collecting unemployment?

BLUE COLLAR

I am.

CARPENTER

That's socialism as is social security and other federally sponsored assistance programs.

Before his antagonist can answer....

CARPENTER

Hear me out. I want you to consider that your point of view has been manipulated by the former administration as a way of exploiting your anger and voting behavior. Your interests are no less important to me than anyone who feels powerless. What was your job?

BLUE COLLAR

Press operator at a paper mill.

How did you lose it?
CARPENTER

The company moved to Chicago.
BLUE COLLAR

Do you have other skills?
CARPENTER

I'm building a boat.
BLUE COLLAR

You're a craftsman.
CARPENTER

I guess.
BLUE COLLAR

Would you accept re-training?
CARPENTER

Yeah.
BLUE COLLAR

And will you take me out on your boat when it's finished?
CARPENTER

Sure.
(beat)
BLUE COLLAR

Sudden APPLAUSE from the members of the AUDIENCE.

Carpenter CROSSES to a LOCKER ROOM, Where Dick Newting awaits. As they begin to change into T-shirts and shorts.....

NEWTING
Rising numbers do not a leader make.

CARPENTER
No, but they can bring a crank senator back into the conversation.

NEWTING

I'm here because every cloakroom confab seems to concern Feely. The right wing is obsessed with the issue, especially if it reinvigorates equal rights legislation.

CARPENTER

One point for me.

Carpenter pulls a squash racquet and a can of balls out of an equipment bag.

NEWTING

But if you expect me to wrestle the Blue Dogs into voting submission, you better have a plan that flies, tap dances and, and sings God Bless America, while fucking itself in the ass.

CARPENTER

How much money has your opponent raised?

NEWTING

Alot.

CARPENTER

And your lead?

NEWTING

Four points.

CARPENTER

I hear it's never been smaller than ten.

NEWTING

It happens.

CARPENTER

It's happening to all of us.

Newting can't argue with the facts.

CARPENTER

Whatever became of the Fitzgerald campaign finance bill?

NEWTING

I pissed all over it.

CARPENTER

Is it still in committee?

NEWTING

What's left of it?

CARPENTER

Joe's agreed to revive it in the House as a federal public finance mandate.

Newting CHORTLES with amusement.

CARPENTER

But only if you pledge your support.

NEWTING

You can't turn the system around by turning it off. Greater men than you have tried.

CARPENTER

I don't claim greatness, only certitude.

NEWTING

What about PAC money?

CARPENTER

If we win we send the issue back to the courts. One precedent drives the other.

NEWTING

How do you expect to finance this without a tax increase?

CARPENTER

I don't.

NEWTING

It's suicide.

Carpenter pulls a folded document out of his bag, hands it to him and taps a ball out of the can.

CARPENTER

We did our own polling. Your lead is a point and a half.

Newting unfolds it and checks the figures. He grimaces and looks back at Carpenter who flips him the ball.

REVEAL a FEMALE NEWS ANCHOR (30s),
seated at the WRIGHT INTERNATIONAL
NEWS DESK.

FEMALE NEWS ANCHOR

Some are calling it historic, others a low water mark in the history of American politics, but in a squeaker, the Senate, today, confirmed Representative Ted Feely's nomination as the country's first openly gay Vice President.

REVEAL the President's bedroom. Carpenter repeatedly tosses Tori's Pillow in the air. She SQUEALS with delight.

REVEAL Hope on her smart phone. As she stares at its screen, the head and shoulders of Hugh Wright appear on the BIG SCREEN.

WRIGHT

Good morning, Ms. Sullivan. I appreciate your time.

HOPE

(into her phone)

My pleasure. It's not every day one gets to interview their rival.

WRIGHT

Was that your impression of this encounter?

HOPE

Of course.

WRIGHT

I called to offer you work. My CEO informs me there's a prime time, commentary slot about to open. Your direct manner suits our brand.

Hope is momentarily stunned.

WRIGHT

You're a journalist, not a ring master.

HOPE

If I'm a journalist, why would I want to work for you?

WRIGHT

Because, unlike your boss, I'm willing to give you what you want. And please don't feign ignorance. Everyone knows you're miserable over there.

HOPE

I won't be told what to say.

WRIGHT

That can be discussed.

HOPE

No, I'm afraid it can't. It's either real news or no news.

WRIGHT

Well, at least we agree on the President's unsuitability.

She chooses to withhold comment.

WRIGHT

Perhaps I've misread you.

Nothing from Hope.

WRIGHT

Although I don't think so.

HOPE

I'm sorry, but no.

WRIGHT

Alright.

HOPE

Can I at least get a quote?

WRIGHT

I can do that. There is no greater folly than misplaced idealism.

HOPE

Does that make you a pessimist?

WRIGHT

It makes me wealthy, Ms. Sullivan. Good day.

The BIG SCREEN goes BLACK.

REVEAL Ted Feely at a podium, addressing the nation.

FEELY

Good evening, fellow Americans.

REVEAL the SWING SET. Carpenter hoists himself onto the ladder and travels, hand over hand, back and forth, across the monkey bars.

FEELY

I'll spare you the self-satisfied proclamations. As a gay man, I do not consider my appointment as your Vice President historic, only necessary...as necessary as it is for women, gay women, African Americans, Native Americans, trans people, Latinos, Asians, Muslims and all under-represented citizens to serve at the highest levels of our government. Our diversity is our strength. Do we honestly want a return to the homogenous morass of limited thought? We are not the same. But we do have the same desires. What does it matter how we express ourselves as long as we agree that life in the United States of America is to be celebrated? If we're in spiritual synch, if we all support the President's idea that policy should be advanced not just for the public welfare but for its peace of mind, then are we really that different? Don't all of us want to close our eyes each night, confident that the sun will not only come up, but light the way? Shouldn't the nation's Capitol be spelled with an "o" not an "a." Wouldn't we rather our politicians run on principle with an "le" rather than an "al?" The President and I, of course, cannot guarantee success...only that we will not be self-serving in our endeavors. We will instead strive to foster change that is in the common interests of every citizen, and refrain from making decisions based on the selfish, short-term, partisan thinking that has, for too long, been the signature of Washington politics. In closing I offer you this quote of everlasting truth from the lips of my favorite American....

(beat)

"If happy little bluebirds fly beyond the rainbow, why, oh why, can't I?"

Carpenter STOPS exercising. Both he and Feely CROSS to the Oval Office, where they are joined by Newting, Lessor and Goody.

LESSOR

There are enough opposition moderates in support of a public campaign finance package to put us within range. But they won't break with party leadership unless their constituents beat down their doors.

CARPENTER

Senate?

FEELY

The votes are there.

NEWTING

Theoretically.

CARPENTER

Good work, Gentlemen.

NEWTING

Happy to take credit for it, but it's more a case of incumbents with nothing to lose but the headache of raising more money.

CARPENTER

Where's the radar on this?

LESSOR

It's hiding in committee so the right isn't taking it seriously. They're too busy marshaling their forces against the Frakes/Lewis equal rights bill.

NEWTING

Scares the shit out of them. Senate conservatives are putting together an obstructionist plan longer than Tom's dick.

Amused response from the others.

CARPENTER

Do we have a shot at Frakes/Lewis?

GOODY

Maybe down the line.

LESSOR

We need to keep it diversionary. Otherwise we could lose both.

CARPENTER

And the public?

GOODY

Polling indicates they're confused. There's no precedent.

CARPENTER

Then I need to build their support and use constituent pressure to bring in the votes.

NEWTING

You got a plan for that?

CARPENTER

Not yet.

NEWTING

(referencing their very first conversation)

Well, in that case, Mr. President, pleasant dreams.

A less-than-encouraged Carpenter CROSSES to the President's bedroom, slips under the covers, lays back against his pillow and stares at the ceiling. After a beat....

TORI'S VOICE

We need to do something symbolic.

REVEAL the Female News Anchor, seated at the Wright News International news desk.

FEMALE NEWS ANCHOR

The President's trip to China has thus far been limited to tourist attractions and head-of-state rituals. The intended discussions on economic and foreign policy have resulted in one tightly controlled press event, sending a clear message of disrespect for this President.

REVEAL Carpenter seated next to the CHINESE PREMIER and an INTERPRETER. They are watching as two Olympic caliber TABLE TENNIS CHAMPS play an exhibition game.

Finishing, they bow to Carpenter, who APPLAUDS with vigor.

Carpenter stands, shakes their hands enthusiastically, then turns to the INTERPRETER.

CARPENTER

I understand the Premiere was a champion in his day.

The Interpreter silently PASSES ON CARPENTER'S REMARK to the Premiere, who quickly WHISPERS BACK.

INTERPRETER

He says he still plays.

CARPENTER

I'll give him a game if he stands with his back turned.

The Interpreter smiles, RELAYS THE MESSAGE, listens to the AMUSED RESPONSE.

INTERPRETER

The Premiere prefers to face his opponents.

CARPENTER

So be it.

Carpenter crosses to the end of table, picks up a paddle and smiles broadly at the Premiere, who, surprised by the move, takes a moment to respond...then LAUGHS with glee.

REVEAL Hope on the "BACKTALK" set, standing before the Pundits.

HOPE

The ball actually hit him! It hit the Premiere in the chest. It was the winning shot in a twenty-one to seventeen victory for the President, and it wasn't even that close.

PILSON

Look, is this a feel-good moment for a jaded constituency? Sure. But, the President returned without movement on the issues he set out to resolve.

WATTLES

And, it could be argued, that by humiliating this man, he has, in fact, put a halt to such a possibility.

LIBERATI

I agree. There wasn't even an attempt to allow him to save face.

PREEN

He'll be fine. He has another one.

LIBERATI

But, seriously, why would the President even take this kind of risk? I understand he was a three-letter athlete at Brown, but what if he had lost? What if he had been beaten badly? Our relationship with China was already damaged by the policies of the last administration. Why create further tension?

WATTLES

This brings up what I think is most troubling about Chris Carpenter. He and his new V.P. are working so far out of the box I'm not sure any of us even know where it is anymore.

LIBERATI

I think what we're seeing here is an interim leader trying to prove, in a rather desperate way, that he is more than a nice guy with a questionable agenda.

HOPE

The President was responding to an official snubbing by the leader of a country that has repeatedly refused to address outsourcing, copyright theft, currency suppression, trade imbalance, violation of international borders and an extensive military build-up...all issues that have direct impact on the lives of American citizens. In five hours his approval rating has increased by nineteen points, bringing into the fold a large chunk of patriotic America. His constituents know where the box is because he's standing on it. Not since Teddy Roosevelt have we seen a President take on the challenges of the moment with such political savvy. And his choices, rather than acts of desperation, seem to me to be a direct reflection of his plan for a redefined America.

Silence as all six pundits stare back with astonishment.

REVEAL JOHN STALLINGS seated on the HOUSE SPEAKER'S PLATFORM.

STALLINGS

Motion accepted to invoke cloture. There will be no vote on Frakes/Lewis tonight. We'll reconvene after the holiday break.

Before Stallings can rise, Joe Lopez is already on his feet.

LOPEZ

Mister Speaker, I'd like to propose a vote on HR seven-thirty-four.

STALLINGS

(confused)

I'm sorry?

LOPEZ

The National Public Finance Resolution.

STALLINGS

The what?!

CONGRESSMAN #2

I second.

Off Stalling's growing sense of panic.

REVEAL the W.N.I. Female News Anchor.

FEMALE NEWS ANCHOR

The bill was passed by a two thirds majority after a number of conservative legislators, believing the evening's business to be concluded, had already left the chamber. The surprise bill, which virtually eliminates private funding from federal elections, received official support this morning from the President.

REVEAL the SCREEN and the head and shoulders of Hugh Wright who, along with Sharon Arlington, watches as an exasperated John Stallings PELTS a white board with a barrage of POWDERED DONUTS.

FEMALE NEWS ANCHOR

Washington, it appears, is a Senate vote away from re-inventing our national political process.

Out of gas, Stallings, plops himself down in a chair and begins consuming one of the donuts.

WRIGHT

Your options, Sharon?

ARLINGTON

Not clear yet. Something aggressive I hope.

Sharon Arlington crosses to the white board, wipes away the sugar dust and grabs a marker.

WRIGHT

Suggestions?

STALLINGS

(grumpy)

Assassination.

Arlington shrugs it off with a grin. After a beat, however, she rethinks, uncaps the marker and begins to write “ASSA...” on the board.

WRIGHT

That would put the queer in the White House.

She stops, erases it. A long silence, as an unfamiliar sense of impotence fills the room.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

AT RISE we discover RAINBOW LIGHTS,
accentuated by CAMERA FLASHES.
Sophisticated DANCE MUSIC is heard.

A festive sign reads, “White House Rainbow
Ball: Waltzing into a new America.”

President Carpenter, in a tuxedo, stares out front
as if overseeing a ballroom full of guests.

Dick Newting, also in formal wear, APPROACHES.

Where’s the wife?
CARPENTER

Wondering why I’m here.
NEWTING

It’s a good question.
CARPENTER

Let’s call it a show of faith.
NEWTING

I appreciate that.
CARPENTER

Why didn’t you limit the media? Parents in Omaha will be locking their kids in the
basement.
NEWTING

Would you know their sexual orientation if they weren’t dancing with same-sex partners?
CARPENTER
(re: the dancers)

Probably not.
NEWTING

That’s why.
CARPENTER

Ted Feely glides by with a YOUNG MAN in his arms, spots Newting, WAVES.

NEWTING

I have no idea how you grew those giant testicles of yours, but I suggest you invest in an iron jock strap before you injure yourself.

Carpenter grins at what he takes as a compliment.

NEWTING

(changing the subject)

About SR one-eighty-eight.

CARPENTER

(ahead of him)

The real reason you're here.

NEWTING

Not ready to release it from committee.

CARPENTER

Why? The poll numbers are in range. We have the votes.

NEWTING

We're one short.

CARPENTER

Who is it?

NEWTING

Me.

Carpenter takes a moment to assess the gravity of this statement.

CARPENTER

Make your argument.

NEWTING

It's not going to work. You can't design a fish and tell it not to swim. Limited public campaign financing will create a world of influence at deeper depths that will drown the lot of us.

CARPENTER

That's why we spent months building safeguards into the bill. You're panicking.

NEWTING

And you're moving too fast. Slow the fuck down.

CARPENTER

Speed is what gives us the advantage. The country is good with this pace. The people can feel the wind through their hair for the first time in decades.

NEWTING

Numbers are transitory. The only thing consistent about politics is its lack of consistency.

CARPENTER

And the need to raise more money.

NEWTING

I'm not going to get into philosophical arm wrestling with you. I want to add a structural amendment that encourages private fund raising in certain cases.

CARPENTER

A party-friendly amendment.

Newting gestures back with an "of course" response.

CARPENTER

The motivation for this legislation was to inhibit the self-serving consciousness that's fueling your impulse. I expect the bill, as currently written, to reach the floor as soon as possible.

(before Newting can reply.)

As I see it, you have two options. You can continue to underestimate me, or you can put on your dancing shoes.

Carpenter CROSSES AWAY, leaving Newting alone, bathed in rainbow light.

REVEAL Representative Stallings at a PODIUM, finishing up a speech.

STALLINGS

(enthusiastic)

...And I would like to close by reminding you that taxpayer-financed political campaigns force individuals to fund all candidates regardless of whether they support them or not. As free citizens we are not obligated to dine at the same table.

STALLINGS (CONT'D)

It is a direct violation of individual liberties and cannot be tolerated. To directly exercise these rights you are welcome to contribute at my website, Stallings-for-President dot-com. God bless you, God bless, our party, and God Bless the United States of America.

As Stallings EXITS, STATE SENATOR
STEPHANIE HOLLENBECK (40s), attractive
in a tall, square-jawed kind of way, CROSSES
to the podium.

HOLLENBECK

Thank you, Representative Stallings. That concludes our Presidential conclave for this evening. I want to thank all the candidates and the great state of Alabama!

She lets out a JOYFUL HOLLER.

HOLLENBECK

But before I leave this podium, I would like to take a moment to reflect on what I've heard from the candidates tonight. As a long time hunter, I can tell you that my favorite target is the moving one. This President is like a spooked buck running head-first into a government-controlled wilderness where homosexuals, baby-killers, big spenders and tax collectors are afforded rights denied the average God-fearing citizen. And this thinking is protected by a Constitution that is bloated with amendments, excluding one, that threaten the very freedoms we have come to cherish. Don't kid yourselves. We are headed for a political apocalypse and unless we get this man in our sights and bring him down, he will run us right off the edge of the earth and into the inferno. Step out, be heard and take aim.

She mimes cocking a shot gun.

HOLLENBECK

Stay strong, y'all.

A RECORDING of a PATRIOTIC COUNTRY
song kicks in.

REVEAL Carpenter in the President's bedroom,
tucked into bed with Tori's Pillow at his side.
He is watching the conclave on TV.

TORI'S VOICE

No more handshaking, love. And triple your security.

CARPENTER

Who is she?

TORI'S VOICE

The unrepressed voice. It always strikes the loudest chord...as we well know.

He farts.

TORI'S VOICE

(offended)

Chris!

CARPENTER

Sorry. Can I engage her?

TORI'S VOICE

No. Her need for attention will neutralize any rational action on your part. Stick to your agenda. Your extremism has broader appeal than hers.

Carpenter farts again.

CARPENTER

Oops.

He picks up a half-eaten barbecue sandwich from a plate next to the bed. But before he can take a bite....

TORI'S VOICE

(suspicious)

What are you eating?

Carpenter stares at the food before him like a child with his hand caught in the cookie jar.

REVEAL Stephanie Hollenbeck in her OFFICE, staring into a laptop computer. The head and shoulders of Hugh Wright appear on the BIG SCREEN.

WRIGHT

Good afternoon, Ms. Hollenbeck.

HOLLENBECK

Well, hey.

WRIGHT

I saw your speech last night.

HOLLENBECK

Our State Chairman took offense, thought I was out of line.

WRIGHT

I'm not surprised.

HOLLENBECK

What do you think?

WRIGHT

I think you're a lunatic.

Taken aback by his remark, she's struck dumb.

WRIGHT

Want your own show?

Surprised, she bursts into LAUGHTER. After a few moments, she realizes he's not joining in.

HOLLENBECK

I'm an elected official.

WRIGHT

Quit.

HOLLENBECK

Why?

WRIGHT

Because this is the platform you deserve.

HOLLENBECK

Not if I'm going to be told what to say.

WRIGHT

Won't be necessary in your case.

As Hollenbeck considers the possibility.....

REVEAL James Goody at the PRESS ROOM
PODIUM.

GOODY

The President has decided not to pardon an individual turkey this Thanksgiving. Instead, his thoughts go out to every bird being prepared for slaughter. He and his guests will be eating a vegetable roast in its place along with the traditional holiday fixings.

Stuart Dahl rises from the AUDIENCE.....

DAHL

Are you saying the President is pardoning all turkeys?

GOODY

Obviously he does not have the authority to prevent others from eating turkey. But he does want it to be known that he has chosen an alternative to the holiday feast.

DAHL

Why is that?

GOODY

The President's wife was a vegetarian. It's his way of honoring her.

DAHL

This time only?

GOODY

No, he will be making it an annual tradition.

REVEAL Stephanie Hollenbeck seated on a BROADCAST SET that resembles a HUNTING LODGE (gun rack, mounted animal heads, etc.). A sign features the name of her show, "SHOOTING STRAIGHT."

She reads from a newspaper.

HOLLENBECK

According to the National Association of Turkey Farmers, sales of the frozen variety are off seventeen percent from a year ago.

She stands, removes a rifle from the gun rack, sits on the corner of her desk and lays the rifle across her knee.

HOLLENBECK

I shoot, pluck and gut my Thanksgiving bird every year. Have them running wild on my property. And I want to tell you something about turkeys. They're omnivores. They eat everything ...nuts, seeds, acorns, spiders, beetles, tadpoles, lizards. I even found the half-digested carcass of a sparrow chick in one. Now, if these creatures, who are as dumb as stumps, can figure out God's natural order, why can't our President? And don't be fooled by the sentimentality of his gesture. A one-fifth loss in revenue is a significant handicap for an industry that counts on seasonal sales to maintain profit. A number of the smaller farms have even had to resort to reducing their slaughter schedule and laying off workers. We are talking about jobs here. This is not only economically irresponsible but deeply offensive to the spirit and history of this great American holiday.

She stands, her rifle thudding resolutely against the floor.

HOLLEBECK

Now here's what I want you to do. Let this President know that the Constitution does not give him the right to trash our cultural heritage. Make it clear, in the strongest terms possible, that you do not approve of him imposing his will on the American landscape. And don't do it for me. Do it for yourself and the future of your children.

REVEAL a languid James Goody at the Press Room Podium.

GOODY

...The President does not agree with Lebanon's action in this matter and will continue to monitor the situation closely.

Stuart Dahl from the AUDIENCE.

DAHL

Change of subject, Jim?

Goody nods.

DAHL

We understand there's been a sharp reaction to the President's decision to refrain from eating Thanksgiving turkey. Apparently the White House mail room has been flooded with parcels containing severed turkey heads.

GOODY

Do you have a question?

DAHL

What is the President signaling here? We've been hearing reports of a shift in White House food preparation.

GOODY

(reluctantly)

The President has adjusted his diet.

DAHL

(checking his notes)

The Prince of Wales was served an eggplant casserole as a main dish?

GOODY

It was delicious.

DAHL

Apparently there has been no meat served in the White House in over two weeks.

GOODY

President Carpenter is restricting his intake.

DAHL

For how long?

GOODY

Permanently.

DAHL

Why?

GOODY

Health reasons mostly.

DAHL

Mostly?

GOODY

He also believes that its humane and makes environmental sense.

DAHL

So, he's become a vegetarian.

GOODY

Yes.

No beef, lamb or pork. DAHL

Correct. GOODY

Will he be eating chicken? DAHL

No. GOODY

Fish? DAHL

No. Thus the term vegetarian. GOODY

No animals. DAHL

They're off his diet. All of them. GOODY

REVEAL Stephanie Hollenbeck on the
"Shooting Straight set."

HOLLENBECK
(railing)

....Email the cattle industry, pork manufacturers, chicken farmers, lamb distributors, your neighborhood butcher and fish seller. And don't do it for me. Do it for the economy, the American way and the future of your stomachs!

The SOUNDS OF MOOING CATTLE mix in
with the DIN OF THE CITY.

REVEAL Carpenter and Tom Lessor looking
out from a WHITE HOUSE BALCONY.

We need to reevaluate the message. LESSOR

Why? CARPENTER

LESSOR

Mr. President, not even Andrew Johnson had to suffer the indignity of a cattle drive.

CAPRENTER

No backtracking.

LESSOR

Sir, this is new thinking for you. It's not like you've been promoting a meatless diet your entire life. The public will accept a re-adjustment on your position.

CARPENTER

I'm fully committed. We'll just have to sell it better.

LESSOR

How? I don't even know where to begin.

CARPENTER

Try street cleaning.

Lessor sighs and CROSSES to Dick Newting, eating at the DESK in his OFFICE. Upon spotting him, Newting gestures to a chair.

NEWTING

Sit. Want to join me for lunch? Steak sandwich. I can order another.

Lessor smiles back weakly.

NEWTING

He's got you feeling guilty, huh?

LESSOR

There are no dietary restrictions for staff.

NEWTING

But you're all being good soldiers I bet, sucking up that tofu as if it were caviar.

LESSOR

I'm here to talk about SR One-Eighty-Eight.

NEWTING

It lives.

LESSOR

Are you going to set it free?

NEWTING

(yes)

Why not?

LESSOR

So, what's been holding you up?

NEWTING

You worked here for three years; you tell me.

LESSOR

(beat)

I want to be wrong about this.

Newting waits patiently.

LESSOR

It's personal. You just can't bear the thought of him pulling it off.

Newting looks off, reflects.

NEWTING

Do you like him?

LESSOR

He's challenging. But I can't call it a negative. There are times I think he's the best thing that ever happened to this country.

NEWTING

And other times?

LESSOR

He scares me.

NEWTING

(fatherly)

Let me get you that sandwich.

Lessor leans back in his chair as Newting presses a button on his INTERCOM.

The VOICE OF THE PRESIDING OFFICER of the U.S. Senate is finishing a voice vote. The responses come from the AUDIENCE.

VOICE OF PRESIDING OFFICER

Mr. Hegstetter.

HEGSTETTER

Aye.

VOICE OF THE PRESIDING OFFICER

Mr. Larindo.

LARINDO

No.

VOICE OF THE PRESIDING OFFICER

Mr. Newting.

NEWTING

Aye.

VOICE OF THE PRESIDING OFFICER

Ms. Wetzel.

WETZEL

Aye.

A CHEER goes up from the AUDIENCE.

THE VOICE OF THE PRESIDING OFFICER

We have a majority. SR One-Eight-Eighty, The National Public Finance Resolution, is passed.

REVEAL CARPENTER AND GUESTS seated around the WHITE HOUSE DINING ROOM TABLE.

Carpenter is at the head. Hope sits just off to his left. He passes her a basket of various types of bread.

CARPENTER

Try the flat bread. Homemade.

Thank you.

HOPE

He points to two bottles of wine.

And, I recommend the red.

CARPENTER

Red, it is.

HOPE

As he fills her glass with red wine....

Are you all right? You've been quiet.

CARPENTER

I appreciate the invitation but I'm not sure why I was on the list.

HOPE

I couldn't think of a good reason for leaving you off. That said, I have no intention or interest in compromising your objectivity.

CARPENTER

Oh, that.

HOPE

Continue to judge me as you will.

CARPENTER

Okay. You're doing good.

HOPE

Thanks, but for the record, this is not a bribe.

CARPENTER

There goes my summer house.

HOPE

Carpenter smiles. He enjoys her.

ANDRE, a young, black chef, wheels in a food cart and parks it near the President. Andre then lifts the lid to a sterling silver serving platter, revealing an exquisitely decorated VEGETABLE LOAF.

Various pleased REACTIONS.

CARPENTER

Looks magnificent, Andre.

As Andre begins to slice and serve the loaf,
Carpenter addresses his guests.

CARPENTER

The name of this holiday is comprised of two words. I'll address the second first. When we were young and insolvent, my wife Tori would give money to an alcoholic who was living under the stairs of our building. I thought it made little sense, given that she was sustaining his addiction. But one day I witnessed this man feeding feral cats in an alley. He had spent a portion of his handout on their welfare. I realized, in that moment, that he was not simply giving. He was passing on the gift of giving. He would likely not have been motivated to do this had he not been treated similarly. What I learned is that's it's ignorant to presume that some citizens are incapable of contributing to our collective welfare. As for the first word, it's occurred to me that giving thanks is an acknowledgment of a higher form of inspiration. You can call it what you may...God, Spirit, magic, the blessings of a creative universe. But I am in awe of its power and potential to lead this country and those who love it into an unparalleled state of growth, enlightenment and unity.

(beat)

Enjoy.

As the Guests begin eat....

HOPE

(sincere)

That was beautiful.

Carpenter smiles warmly at Hope, who, to her surprise, blushes back.

Together they stand and CROSS to ANOTHER
ROOM IN THE WHITE HOUSE.

HOPE

Wow.

CARPENTER

This is....

HOPE

The Yellow room?

CARPENTER

Yellow Oval. We're at the direct front and center of the building. Dates back to the Adams administration.

HOPE

Spend time here?

He points off.

CARPENTER

Prefer the bedroom.

HOPE

And here I am without my voice recorder.

He smiles ruefully, shakes his head.

HOPE

Something wrong?

CARPENTER

Follow me.

They CROSS TO THE PRESIDENT'S
BEDROOM and approach the four poster bed.

CARPENTER

This is where I sleep. Those are my books. Sometimes I read in bed. I have two pairs of pajamas. Occasionally, I toss caution to the wind and remove....

HOPE

(cutting him off)

Okay, sorry, consider it a misplaced joke.

CARPENTER

(beat)

Why am I am so fascinating to the media?

HOPE

You're impactive.

CARPENTER

More than the CEO of Haliburton or Citibank?

HOPE

Debatable, I suppose.

CARPENTER

Do you know their names?

She's caught. But before she can reply....

CARPENTER

...Or their bedroom habits?

HOPE

Okay, so....

CARPENTER

(cutting her off)

I get that we're in love with our narcissists and sociopaths. We glorify them in biographies and movies. We even elect them President. It's a way to escape the boundaries that prevent us from living out our fantasies. And, it's exhilarating to believe, that on some level, we shouldn't have to pay a price for our most hateful and dangerous tendencies. But, why me? I just want to get shit done.

HOPE

(beat)

Can I respond?

He gestures for her to continue. She takes a beat to scrutinize him.

HOPE

Point made. You're more interested in your duties than wearing the mantle of power.

CARPENTER

I didn't run for office to get attention.

HOPE

That's what's different. Your policies are designed to open up the process rather than seize it for your own means. You're unique, a true populist.

CARPENTER

Populists appeal to the people. I relate.

HOPE

Maybe that's why it's working.

He shrugs.

HOPE

You don't see that?

CARPENTER

I see that I'm learning to play the game well. I suspect I'd feel more satisfied if it were all...less infantile.

HOPE

My God, that's it! You're a grown-up.

(chuckling)

Cool!

CARPENTER

Pleased you find it entertaining.

HOPE

Actually....

(perhaps more honest than she intended)

It's damned thrilling.

Hope finds herself drawn to him in ways she's having trouble controlling. He's feeling it as well.

Suddenly, he crosses to the stack of books at his bedside, removes one, crosses back and hands it to her.

CARPENTER

A gift.

HOPE

(reading the title)

"The Essential Rumi."

CARPENTER

Poet of the heart.

HOPE

(touched)

Thank you.

(inspecting it)

Looks old.

We now hear TORI'S VOICE. HOPE DOES NOT HEAR HER.

TORI'S VOICE

It is. He gave it to me when we were first dating.

A beat as Carpenter realizes that there are now three in the room.

CARPENTER

It was my wife's.

HOPE

(surprised)

Oh. You don't consider it a keepsake?

CARPENTER

I believe she'd want you to have it.

TORI'S VOICE

Who says?

CARPENTER

I mean she might protest at first, but we were generally on the same page with the people we trusted.

TORI'S VOICE

Except in this case.

HOPE

I'm not sure I'm comfortable with this.

TORI'S PILLOW

Exactly. You could have sent her a new one.

CARPENTER

Would you like me to send you a new one?

HOPE

I guess I don't understand why you want me to have it.

TORI'S VOICE

I second that.

CARPENTER

(trying to remain focused)

It's the next frontier for me, engaging Americans on a deeper level. I thought you could help.

HOPE

How?

CARPENTER

By getting out the word.

HOPE

(suddenly uncomfortable)

I'm sorry, I'm confused here. I didn't realize we were discussing my usefulness.

CARPENTER

You're offended?

HOPE

Do you see me as your personal, presidential, press pet?

TORI'S VOICE

(to Hope)

Do you always get alliterative when you're upset?

HOPE

I think it's time for me to go.

TORI'S VOICE

Yes, please!

CARPENTER

(irritated, to Tori's Pillow)

Stop!

HOPE

(confused)

I'm sorry?

CARPENTER

(trying to defuse)

No. Look, I apologize if I....

HOPE
(uncomfortable)

Thank you for the invitation.

She attempts to hand him back the book.

CARPENTER
Please, keep it. Disregard what I said. Consider it a gesture of appreciation.

TORI'S PILLOW
For what?

HOPE
For what?

CARPENTER
Your presence in my life.

TORI'S VOICE
(stunned)
Good Lord.

More confused than ever, Hope heads off.

CARPENTER
There's a Secret Service Agent beyond the double doors. He'll show you the way.

Hope, trying to clear her head, EXITS the stage.

Carpenter reflects uneasily on what happened,
then turns to face Tori's Pillow.

TORI'S VOICE
You've never yelled at me before.

CARPENTER
You were pissing me off.

TORI'S VOICE
What does she mean to you?

Hope RE-ENTERS the stage. She's having
second thoughts. Perhaps she was too hasty.

CARPENTER
She's an ally. We agreed that her support would be useful to....

TORI'S VOICE
You're lying.

CARPENTER

Don't be foolish.

Hope HEADS towards the President.

TORI'S VOICE

Don't be defensive. It gives you away.

CARPENTER

I don't understand. You've never been jealous before.

TORI'S VOICE

I've never had reason.

CARPENTER

I apologize. It was an unintended slight. I think you're overreacting, but if you want I'll cut her off.

Silence from Tori's pillow.

CARPENTER

Say something.

(silence)

I didn't realize this was going to be such a big deal for you.

Carpenter crosses to the bed, picks up the pillow, clutches it to his shoulder and pats it gently.

CARPENTER

I can feel you trembling.

He begins to pace as if he were calming a frightened child.

Hope APPROACHES FROM BEHIND. She's about to speak, when....

CARPENTER

(to Tori's Pillow, softening)

I am so sorry. You don't deserve this. You're right. It made no sense to bring her up here. It'll never happen again. I promise.

Stunned and horrified, Hope backs away and CROSSES to the booth in the Restaurant /Bar from earlier. Sliding in opposite her requisite Lemon Drop martini, she finishes it off.

Shortly a WAITER approaches, removes the empty one and places another on the table. She puts her hand up in a stopping gesture.

HOPE
How many is that?

WAITER
Five.

HOPE
No, thank you.

WAITER
It's from the gentleman.

REVEAL ALEX, an attractive man in his 30s, leaning on a BAR. He waves.

Hope ignores his gesture and hands the Waiter back the drink, along with a credit card. The Waiter EXITS.

As Hope starts to pull herself together, Alex APPROACHES.

ALEX
Don't blow me off. It's a holiday and I've been alone all day.

HOPE
Don't you have family?

ALEX
I had to work.

HOPE
What do you do?

ALEX
What they tell me.

HOPE
Go home. Hug your mother.

ALEX
I watch your show.

HOPE
(more firmly)
Please.

Alex shrugs, RETURNS to the bar.

The Waiter APPROACHES with the credit card folder. Hope signs the bill and slips the card in her purse. She then stands, wobbles, sits back down. She's more INEBRIATED than she thought.

After a moment, she casts her gaze over to the bar.

HOPE
Yoo hoo.

Alex RETURNS and helps an unsteady Hope CROSS to HER APARTMENT, which is furnished with a couch, side table and chair.

HOPE
What are you going to do about your car?

ALEX
I'll take a cab back.

HOPE
Thanks....

ALEX
...Alex, and it's my pleasure.

HOPE
I've seen you there before.

ALEX
I've seen you seeing me.

Alex moves in for the score.

HOPE

Don't get any ideas, Alex. It's not on.

ALEX

Maybe I can find the switch.

He presses closer. She resists at first, then softens, finally gives in.

Suddenly she YELPS and pulls back with alarm.

ALEX

Sorry. My phone's on vibrate.

He reaches into his pocket, pulls it out, adjusts his settings. She begins to CHUCKLE. He joins in.

ALEX

Any other restrictions I need to know about?

HOPE

Yes, no talking.

ALEX

That seems unfair, especially from someone as good at it as you.

HOPE

I'm one of many in this town.

ALEX

I don't know. I'd put you right up there with the President.

That wakes her up. She pulls away.

HOPE

Need coffee.

Realizing she's not going to make it, she collapses into a chair.

HOPE

Dizzy.

ALEX

Sorry if I said something untoward. I thought you'd appreciate that.

HOPE

Why?

ALEX

Because of who he is.

HOPE

How can you be so cute and naive' at the same time.

ALEX

I'm one of many in this town.

She acknowledges his comeback with a weary smile.

ALEX

Don't you respect him?

HOPE

Of course I do. That's the problem.

ALEX

I don't understand.

HOPE

It's okay. Neither do I.

ALEX

You're losing me.

HOPE

Would you make us an omelet?

ALEX

No, seriously. What are you talking about?

Feeling nauseous, she places her head between her knees, groans.

HOPE

Why are they all so disappointing?

That surprises you? ALEX

In this case it does. HOPE

They're flawed, like the rest us. ALEX

It's more serious than that. HOPE

What do you mean? ALEX

The man has a mental illness, okay? He talks to inanimate objects. HOPE
(exasperated)

How do you know this? ALEX
(beat)

I witnessed it. HOPE

Suddenly sick, she rises and races OFFSTAGE.
The SOUNDS OF RETCHING are heard off.

Shortly Hope returns, looking spent and miserable.

Go. You don't need to deal with this. HOPE

Let me help. ALEX

Too embarrassing. HOPE

He rises.

ALEX
(understanding)

I'll leave my number.

He reveals a pen and scribbles a phone number on a pad of paper on the side table. She nods back weakly. He EXITS.

Hope sits back down in attempt to control her symptoms. It doesn't work. Overcome with nausea, she dashes OFFSTAGE. MORE RETCHING. After some moments, she drags her self BACK ONSTAGE, searches for her cell phone, retrieves it, pulls up a number, and connects.

REVEAL Jon Goldenson, checking his phone screen and answering.

GOLDENSON

Hopester.

HOPE

I have the bug. Call Foster.

GOLDENSON

Come in, we'll staff a doctor to help you through it.

HOPE

I'm sorry, but I'm not up to it. I should be fine by tomorrow.

GOLDENSON

I need you, my love. You're plugged in like no one else.

HOPE

What does that mean?

GOLDENSON

The President apparently talks to himself.

HOPE

(stunned)

I'm sorry?

GOLDENSON

Just came in over the wire. It jives with previous reports of the White House cleaning staff hearing repeated muttering from his bedroom. Want to defend your boy? This is your chance.

HOPE

Let me call you back.

She hangs up, nabs the pad of paper from the side table, dials Alex's number and waits.

REVEAL the Female News Anchor at her DESK, answering the phone.

FEMALE NEWS ANCHOR

WNI news desk.

Hope's stomach drops a mile.

FEMALE NEWS ANCHOR

Hello?

Hope HANGS UP. Panicked, she starts to pace and mutter.

HOPE

Shit. Shit. Shit. You idiot. You imbecile. You stupid, foolish girl. Oh, My God. My God. My...

(revelatory beat)

I'm talking to myself.

Hope, pulling it together as best she can, CROSSES over to the "Backtalk" set and stands before the Four Pundits.

Michael Pilson is ranting.

PILSON

Who's he going to be speaking to next, his invisible rabbit? We've had outrageous and out of control but we've never had a President who's out of his mind.

HOPE

Then explain why Calvin Coolidge enjoyed having petroleum jelly rubbed into his head while he was eating breakfast?

PREEN

That is crazy, considering the other option.

WATTLES

But, come on, after the last go around, shouldn't we expect more from our leaders?

HOPE

So, you disagree with his decision to appoint a gay Vice President?

WATTLES

I didn't say that.

HOPE

Or to promote a more humane diet?

WATTLES

You're twisting my....

HOPE

What about the radical reform of campaign funding?

WATTLES

All unprecedented, but....

HOPE

(picking it up)

...You can't allow that to affect your right to exploit the moment. Correct? Because that's what you get paid to do.

WATTLES

(offended)

Excuse me?

HOPE

We sit in judgment, good or bad, because there is no price to pay for being wrong. We can't be voted out of our jobs...only fired for not attracting viewers. This man, in particular, deserves the time it takes to properly assess an action before forming an opinion about it.

PREEN

(to Hope)

Well, hello. Someone had a good Thanksgiving.

Off Hope's wide-eyed shock of exasperation.

REVEAL the President's bedroom. Carpenter is in bed with Tori's Pillow tucked in beside him. With the REMOTE he turns OFF the TV set. LIGHTS OUT on the "Backtalk" set.

Carpenter sighs with discomfort.

CARPENTER

I'll make a public statement admitting that I talk to myself.

He waits for a response. Nothing.

CARPENTER

Agreed? It'll deflect attention from you, and I can connect it to the details of our job training proposal, which we need to nail down. It's already been announced.

Silence.

CARPENTER

Tori?

More silence.

CARPENTER

What's wrong?

(sudden realization)

She was just supporting my right to be judged fairly.

Dead air. Frustrated, he grabs the pillow and shakes it in an effort to get it to respond.

CARPENTER

(desperate)

Talk to me!

Still no response. A devastated and weary Carpenter rises from the bed, CROSSES between the two American flags and approaches the podium.

Stuart Dahl rises from the AUDIENCE.

CARPENTER

(frustrated)

I believe I've been clear on this point. I engage myself in vocal arguments so I can better appraise their validity.

DAHL

Was your wife aware of this practice?

CARPENTER

(taken aback)

What was that?

DAHL

When she was alive?

Carpenter seethes in silence for a moment.

DAHL

Excuse me if the question sounds indelicate, I'm only trying to determine....

CARPENTER

It's more than indelicate. It's indecent. And my wife would agree.

DAHL

Mr. President....

CARPENTER

We talk about this, the ubiquity of media aggression. She believes, as I do, that the lust for drama and conflict has all but obscured the discovery of information.

DAHL

(confused)

You talk to...?

CARPENTER

What?

DAHL

Your wife?

Carpenter pauses in an attempt to replay what it was he said.

DAHL

You said....

CARPENTER

I know what I said.

DAHL

Members of your housekeeping staff report that you have forbidden them to wash her old pillow case. Are we to understand...?

CARPENTER

This is what I mean...the relentless pursuit of the personal. Why aren't you asking about my plans to collapse the economic divide, or engage Lebanon in peace talks.

DAHL

My apologies, Mr. President. I do have a question on another subject.

CARPENTER

(welcoming)

Please.

DAHL

In regard to your job retraining package. Could you elaborate on the principal policies?

Caught off-guard by a question he's not prepared to answer, Carpenter gropes for a response.

CARPENTER

Yes. The uh....the general idea is to identify the growth industries in each state and develop federally sponsored programs that attract the largest pool of candidates.

DAHL

Specifically?

CARPENTER

Well, if you look at...uh...take, Wisconsin, for example. They have, uh...I'm blanking on the name. It's a...uhm...I'm sorry. Just not coming to me. But, uh....

Clearly undone, he rubs his eyes with his hands. Then, quietly....

CARPENTER

Tori knows this.

REVEAL "The Shooting Straight" set and Stephanie Hollenbeck.

HOLLENBECK

(impassioned)

The President effectively admitted that he consults with his wife without acknowledging the obvious contradiction. Don't e-mail, phone or write anyone. Get in your car, drive to your Congressman's house, grab her by the lapel, him by the ear, and demand they remove this bedlamite from office!

REVEAL Hope and Goldenson in the booth of the Restaurant/Bar. She's not drinking.

GOLDENSON

You can't recuse yourself. This isn't a courtroom.

HOPE

Jon, I'm done.

GOLDENSON

I'll order Jay to lay off your relationship with the President.

HOPE

I don't have a relationship with the President.

GOLDENSON

You've moved from tormenter to apostle.

HOPE

I like what he's accomplished.

GOLDENSON

Great. Continue to bang that drum.

HOPE

I can't bang. I'm not even sure I can tap at this point.

GOLDENSON

You're conflicted. So?

HOPE

So?!

GOLDENSON

And this is your solution, to quit?

HOPE

I don't want to argue with anyone anymore, including you.

GOLDENSON

I'm not giving you a solo shot. Sorry.

She deflates. He rises, leaves some bills on the table and heads off.

HOPE

(sadly)

He's going to fall.

GOLDENSON

They all do.

Goldenson EXITS.

REVEAL the President's bedroom. Carpenter sleeps soundly.

Shortly, we HEAR Tori SINGING Peter, Paul and Mary's "Leaving on a Jet Plane" in a sweet, ethereal manner.

TORI'S VOICE

"I'm leaving, on a jet plane...."

Carpenter's eyes pop open. He looks over at Tori's Pillow, but the song seems to be coming from elsewhere.

TORI'S VOICE

...Don't know when I'll be back again."

He locates it, looks up. The SONG now STARTS TO FADE.

TORI'S VOICE

"Oh, babe I hate to go...."

Carpenter waits for more. But that's it. It's over. Slowly, he begins to WEEP.

REVEAL Dick Newting in his office with Tom Lessor, Sharon Arlington and a dulled John Stallings.

STALLINGS

Don't soil your shorts. We've already taken a call from the Vice President. He knows he holds the queer card in this hand.

ARLINGTON

We're not moving on it. We'll wait for the electorate to dump them both.

NEWTING

That's in thirteen months.

ARLINGTON

I've got a new term for you...lame goose.

NEWTING

You'll lose.

STALLING

Stop trying to game us, Dick. Fifty nine percent already think he's lost the teacup from his place setting.

NEWTING

And almost all of them sympathize with the reason.

STALLINGS

You honestly think they're going re-elect a man who talks to his bedding?

NEWTING

(dead serious)

It's my greatest fear.

Stallings reflects on the remark.

NEWTING

I won't block you from taking immediate measures. And that promise comes with the assurance that the Vice President will not be in a position to occupy the White House.

STALLINGS

How nice for me.

NEWTING

I have first-hand testimony that he tried to seduce a male staffer during his first term of office.

ARLINGTON

And he's willing to come forward?

NEWTING

He already has.

LESSOR

(weary, conflicted)

We had dinner. He tried to kiss me.

REVEAL Carpenter in the Oval Office. He's on the PHONE.

REVEAL Hope in her apartment, ANSWERING.

HOPE

This is Hope.

CARPENTER

You've received a congressional subpoena?

HOPE

(beat)

Yes.

CARPENTER

Do you think I'm delusional?

Conflicted, she has no immediate answer.

CARPENTER

Please answer me.

HOPE

I think you're lonely.

He sighs deeply.

HOPE

Are you alright?

CARPENTER

I am now.

He hangs up. Hope reflects on this moment.

Carpenter CROSSES to the SWING SET.
REVEAL Ted Feely as he watches Carpenter leap up, grab hold of the rungs of the parallel ladder and make his way across.

FEELY

You can't continue to hide behind your desk.

He waits for a response from Carpenter.
Nothing.

FEELY

It's only adding to the negative speculation, re-energizing those old characterizations.
Address the nation.

A weary Carpenter stops mid way to rest.

CARPENTER

Won't work.

FEELY

You're ignoring what you do best. Talk to them, take the offensive, define the hearings as political assassination.

CARPENTER

The Public is done with that tactic. I'm not responding. Patience is the first victim of adversity.

FEELY

One of Tori's commandments?

Carpenter ignores the insinuation.

FEELY

You're waiting for someone other than yourself to save you.

CARPENTER

Aren't we all?

As Feely considers this, Carpenter, unable to continue on, hangs limply from the ladder.

REVEAL HUGH WRIGHT'S WELL-APPOINTED OFFICE. Hope sits opposite his large desk.

Shortly, Hugh Wright ENTERS and crosses behind it.

This is the first time we've seen him in person. He's actually a short, pale, slight man.

WRIGHT

Ms. Sullivan, welcome. I'm pleased we were finally able to....

HOPE

Call them off.

WRIGHT

No.

HOPE

I'm capable of deflecting every question.

WRIGHT

I don't doubt that.

HOPE

Then, what do you expect to get out of this?

WRIGHT

His resignation.

HOPE

He's a good man.

WRIGHT

You mean he's decent.

HOPE

Yes.

WRIGHT

Half the country isn't. I'm saving him from wasting his time.

HOPE

Lincoln was decent.

WRIGHT

He was also qualified to lead. This man is not.

HOPE

You don't believe that.

WRIGHT

I don't need to. You do.

Wright presses a button on his computer. A
RECORDING of Hope's night with Alex fills
the room.

HOPE (O.S.)

(exasperated)

The man has a mental illness, okay? He talks to inanimate objects.

ALEX (O.S.)

How do you know this?

HOPE (O.S.)

I witnessed it.

Wright STOPS the recording. The blood drains
from Hope's face.

WRIGHT

You can deliver the news or become it, your choice. You were correct about him.
Unfortunately, you chose to sit on it. Did you not think the public had a right to this
information? They won't like you for that.

HOPE

I would have thought you were above threats.

WRIGHT

Oh, no.

REVEAL the Female News Anchor at the
W.N.I. News desk.

FEMALE NEWS ANCHOR

Triple N news personality Hope Sullivan appeared before the Congressional Panel on Executive Oversight this morning and revealed a damaging, eye-witness account of the President's recent behavior.

REVEAL Hope seated at a HOUSE
COMMITTEE TABLE.

HOPE

(reading from a statement)

I am not prepared to interpret the intent or the reason for what I witnessed. I'm only reporting what I observed at that point in time.

FEMALE NEWS ANCHOR

In a surprising, unanimous vote late today, the Congressional Panel on Executive Oversight directed President Carpenter to be examined by a team of psychologists.

REVEAL John Stallings, seated at his PANEL
DESK.

STALLINGS

It is our sworn duty as advocates of the public trust to explore all reasonable measures in determining the proper course of action in this regard.

FEMALE NEWS ANCHOR

The White House, in apparent lock down mode, reports that the President is refusing to undergo competency examinations.

REVEAL James Goody, standing at his press
podium.

GOODY

The President is determined to prevent this action from distracting him and is hard at work attending to the business of the people.

FEMALE NEWS ANCHOR

In light of the President's cancelation of public appearances, and his refusal to cooperate with Congressional directives, both the House and Senate, today, agreed to initiate impeachment hearings.

REVEAL Carpenter speaking to a TV camera.

CARPENTER

(boiling)

After four years of defensiveness, paranoia, full-throated lies and just plain insanity, I'm the one they're calling crazy?! This is a clear and shameful attempt to destroy me, my ideas and faith of the American people. I will not accept anyone's judgment on the state of my mental health and, instead, am ordering my staff to draft an Executive Order that compels anyone who tries to remove me from office to undergo a professional examination of their own psychological competence.

REVEAL Newting addressing the press.

NEWTING

I'm afraid the President has banged the last nail into his own coffin. His own party will not resist attempts to try him for incompetence.

FEMALE NEWS ANCHOR

In breaking news, White House sources are reporting that the President was missing from morning meetings.

REVEAL Carpenter in the President's bedroom, holding what is left of TORI'S PILLOW. The SCREEN depicts a SWIRLING STORM OF FEATHERS. The SOUND OF LOUD DOOR KNOCKING is heard off.

FEMALE NEWS ANCHOR

This evening at six thirty-eight PM, the President of the United States of America was admitted to a private facility in an undisclosed location.

REVEAL James Goody back at the press podium.

GOODY

The Vice President has been involved in the proceedings, is fully briefed, and is already on the job.

FEMALE NEWS ANCHOR

This morning, President Feely, amidst mounting suspicion of improper sexual activity, while serving in his capacity as congressman, announced his resignation from the highest office in the land.

REVEAL Ted Feely addressing the nation.

FEELY

Although I strongly deny having participated in any activity that could be described as illegal or even unjustified, it is unfair for me, under this cloud of suspicion, to effectively serve the interests of this country.

*

FEMALE NEWS ANCHOR

President Stallings today broke with a long standing partisan tradition by reaching across the aisle and selecting Senate Majority leader Richard Newting as his Vice President. For the first time since Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson, members of both parties will be serving in the country's two highest offices.

REVEAL John Stallings standing between the two American flags at the podium. Behind him stands a poised Dick Newting. Cameras FLASH.

STALLINGS

In no other time in the history of this great nation has there been a more necessary and appropriate moment for bipartisan solutions. I make this choice in the interests of national unity and call on all concerned Americans to stand with us as we strive to regain your trust and return this country to its proper station as the world's foremost power.

FEMALE NEWS ANCHOR

This morning, Stephanie Hollenbeck, the newly appointed head of Homeland Security, addressed the nation with a firm warning for public dissenters.

REVEAL Stephanie Hollenbeck at a podium.

HOLLENBECK

President Stallings has made it clear, in the interests of public safety, that, during this time of transition, there will be zero tolerance for illegal assembly. It is my intention to support this directive with every means at my disposal.

REVEAL a bearded Carpenter, staring through the bars of a FANCY ROD IRON GATE. It's a chilly fall day. Carpenter is dressed in a parka with the hood pulled over his head.

A SECRET SERVICE MAN stands off.

SECRET SERVICE MAN

Ready to go in, Mr. President?

Carpenter doesn't respond.

SECRET SERVICE MAN

Getting cold.

But Carpenter has become aware of something more compelling....

The SOUNDS OF THE CITY...traffic, horns, sirens, conversation, street music; the very pulse of the urban night, SLOWLY RISE IN VOLUME, filling up the vacant space in his consciousness.

SECRET SERVICE MAN

Even the deer have found shelter. I don't think we're going to see anymore today.

Carpenter heads for the Secret Service Man who turns and EXITS.

Carpenter EXITS after him. A moment later, he, RUSHES BACK IN and begins CLIMBING the fence.

REVEAL Hope Sullivan, in her red blazer, finishing up her "America in Crisis" special.

The SCREEN reads:

"Present Day."

HOPE

Despite possessing a charismatic public persona, we now know that President Carpenter was not in full possession of his faculties. His radical agenda, as fresh and exhilarating as it may have appeared at the time, was the result of a fevered state of mind. Many of us, in fact, seemed to be in the sway of his progressive hallucination. In a sense his recent disappearance suggests ephemerality, the feeling that the episode was more fantasy than history. The consequences, however, are real...a disgraced Vice President, unworkable campaign finance legislation, a confused and saddened electorate, continued protests in our cities. As President Stallings and Vice President Newting enter their first full term in office, armed with the promise to undo the damage and fashion a more secure executive environment, we owe it to our future to never again be coaxed into the dark forest of easy answers.

(beat)

Thank you, and good night.

On the SCREEN, accompanied by the SWELLING SOUNDTRACK, The Liberty Bell from the opening re-appears...this time WITHOUT THE CRACK!

ANNOUNCER (O.S.)

This has been a presentation of Wright News International.

BOOTH VOICE (O.S.)

And we're out.

Relieved but weary, Hope removes her ear bud. A PRODUCTION ASSISTANT steps in and unhooks her mike.

As she stands, we see that she is wearing, bright, shimmering RUBY RED PUMPS.

Hugh Wright PASSES.

HUGH WRIGHT

Expectations exceeded, Ms. Sullivan.

He gives her the thumbs up, soon EXITS.

Hope CROSSES to TWO ROWS OF CAR SEATS. The front seat has an attached steering wheel. Sitting behind it is GARY, her driver. Hope slides into the rear seat.

GARY

How are you this evening, Ma'am?

HOPE

(weak)

Fine, Gary.

Gary STARTS UP the car.

A FIGURE appears in the nearby shadows and rummages through a trash can.

HOPE

(impulsively)

Wait. Don't go yet.

Hope reaches into her bag, pulls out her purse and lowers her window.

HOPE
(to the Figure)

Here.

Hope offers a bill to the Figure, who's hidden in the shadows. He doesn't respond.

HOPE

Please.

Shortly, a dirty, moonlit HAND APPEARS, takes the money, then withdraws. Hope closes her window and relaxes back into her seat.

HOPE

Okay.

LIGHTS DOWN on the car. We HEAR IT DRIVE AWAY.

The Figure EMERGES from the shadows.

It's a soiled and street-grizzled Chris Carpenter!

Carpenter stares at the money in his hand.

The image of a TWO DOLLAR BILL appears on the SCREEN. (**Note:** We are seeing what he is seeing).

After a moment Carpenter cocks his head and peers at it curiously.

The ONSCREEN face of THOMAS JEFFERSON, as emblazoned on the bill, stares back...then SUDDENLY SPEAKS (digitally)!

TWO DOLLAR JEFFERSON

I've been thinking, Chris...about the nature of imprisonment.

Carpenter stares back with confusion.

TWO-DOLLAR JEFFERSON

I mean why was I consigned to this space? I guess they thought they were immortalizing me, but in fact they were reducing my image to an icon of material worth.

CARPENTER

Yes.

TWO DOLLAR JEFFERSON

Well, that won't work, will it?

CARPENTER

No. Money only creates division.

TWO DOLLAR JEFFERSON

And anxiety. Leaders become isolated by their need to protect the power that wealth attracts. Isolation, in turn, leads to madness. That's what happened to King George.

CARPENTER

I'm not a King. I'm the President.

TWO DOLLAR JEFFERSON

Yes, you are.

CARPENTER

I represent the will of the people.

TWO DOLLAR JEFFERSON

Indeed. Especially those who can think for themselves.

As Carpenter considers the challenge, a PUBLIC GATHERING forms at another part of the stage.

The scene is TENSE, ready to explode.

PARTICIPANTS hoist homemade signs that sport messages such as, "You Can't Cancel The President," "Recall Dumb And Dumber," "Bring Back Bipartisan Bickering," "Star Spangled Bummer."

A PROTESTER chants into an ELECTRIC BULLHORN.

PROTESTER

Fight for your country. Join the Revolution!

OTHER PROTESTORS pick up the chant.

Carpenter moves slowly among them, taking in the energy.

He stops, takes his signature YELLOW TIE from his pocket and slips it over his head. He then sits peacefully in the middle of the chaos and removes his hood, revealing LONG, SHOULDER-LENGTH HAIR.

A WOMAN notices, peers at him carefully, puts her hand to her mouth in amazement.

TWO MEN note her reaction and scrutinize him. Surprised by their discovery they quietly PASS THE WORD.

The OTHERS now become aware of his presence. Slowly, inexorably, they STOP CHANTING, gather peacefully around him, and sit.

Carpenter regards his disciples with contentment.

He then turns to the AUDIENCE.

In a moment he is surrounded by HEAVENLY, RADIANT LIGHT that ROTATES GENTLY AROUND HIM.

As he gazes upon the audience with unconditional love.....

The lights slowly FADE TO BLACK.

END OF PLAY