

CHAPTER TWO



We are at war with radical Islam. We have waited far too long to admit it. No more. We face zealots seeking to impose draconian ideas on innocent people of every religion who refuse to kneel to their will. Let me be very clear: America will never bow to their will. We have been attacked before. We have defended democracy before. We have endured the worst of hardships to preserve our way of life. We have been the beacon of freedom for the world for over two hundred years. We have been victorious before every enemy. None of that will change. Ever.

—Samantha Harrison, State of the Union address, 2021

The Oval Office
Washington, DC
March 1, 2021

“I’d like to thank each of you for coming today. As former occupants of this office, I hope you feel comfortable being here.”

Samantha was surprised she had been able to convince Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Hillary Clinton to attend a meeting without a prearranged agenda. She didn’t regret Barack Obama’s decision not to attend. His years after office had left Obama bitter as his continued refusal to describe ISIS and others as Islamic terrorists became a lone voice no one particularly wanted to hear. The failure of his health care plan hadn’t helped, either.

The former presidents settled around the coffee table in the center of the Oval Office, the Clintons on one couch and Bush on the opposite. Sam sat on a chair between the two, her desk and windows behind her. She wished she'd sat at the other end. It was a scenic winter day with a light snow falling.

"With the new security, I was surprised I was even able to get through," quipped Bush with a smile. With the ongoing fears of more terrorist attacks on Washington, DC, the White House had become a fortress. A new, higher wall topped with razor wire surrounded the landmark, and Hillary Clinton had doubled Obama's armed security presence. The no-fly zone was enforced with very visible surface-to-air missile launchers. Drones equipped with cameras routinely circled the area.

"Look, George, at least you're not the one they look on as the old man. I think they wanted to offer me a wheelchair," said Bill Clinton.

"Hold on, Bill. I'm two months older than you!" Both Bush and Bill Clinton would turn seventy-five in the coming summer.

Hillary Clinton smiled. "Yes, boys, and I'm more than a year younger than either of you. Let's behave, shall we?"

Men being men, thought Sam. *Why do you always have to joke with one another?*

Hillary Clinton continued. "Somehow, I don't think the president asked us here to debate age"—she turned to Sam—"although we might want to point out that we've *all* got at least ten years' seniority on you!" Sam was sixty-three, born on August 14, 1957.

Yes, Sam thought, *you all have seniority. Yet you each left office with the threat of terrorism greater than it was under your predecessor. That's not going to happen on my watch.* "I promise I'll treat my elders with respect," she said with a smile.

The door opened, and the attendant brought in some refreshments. It was six thirty, so the cart was generously stocked with whatever might satisfy their thirsts.

"Given the hour and what I hope will be an opportunity for a very frank discussion, I thought it best to supply beverages that might loosen all our tongues," joked Sam as the attendant handed her a Macallan on the rocks, the single malt Sam introduced to Hillary when she was President Clinton's secretary of state. Clinton was usually a teetotaler.

When Clinton appointed Sam secretary of state, it raised a lot of eyebrows. A Democrat appointing a Republican to such a high cabinet position was not well received by many party loyalists. But the press applauded it as a true gesture of bipartisan governing that was more concerned with solutions than politics. It was reported as a shining moment for both Clinton and Sam.

"Well then, Sam. A bit like old times. I'll have what you're having." The attendant handed Hillary the same.

"I'll pass for now and just have a Coke, although I'm not sure how long my willpower will last," noted Bush. He had long ago given up drinking, after his youthful adventures had left him with a reputation the press loved to write about time and time again.

"Well, George, you're going to be alone on that. I'll have a beer. Out of the bottle is fine," said Bill Clinton.

The attendant handed Bill Clinton a beer and left. Sam began a conversation she hoped would prove fruitful.

"Thank you again for coming. After I took office, it occurred to me that I'd never seen former presidents getting together at the White House, and I wondered why. So I asked my staff to review the historical logs and discovered that indeed, a meeting like this has never happened—at least not officially. In fact, the last time all living presidents were together in one place was on April 25, 2013, when they dedicated your father's presidential library in Dallas, George."

"I remember, Sam. In addition to me, Bill, and my father, we had Obama and Carter as well," added Bush.

“It was a wonderful occasion honoring a great man,” said Bill Clinton. “I must admit: I did like the one photo that showed us all walking together, with Carter off to the side. The press had a field day with that one, deciding we all disliked him.”

Bush interjected, “That’s one time the press got it right.” They all laughed as Bush raised his glass of soda for a silent toast. Sam simply shook her head.

Boys will be boys.

Sam continued. “Well, I’ve decided to put an end to the one-way exit. I want each of you to feel that the White House is still your home as well. You’re welcome to visit and stay here as often as you’d like.”

Sam could see suspicion in their faces. They knew there was more to the invitation.

“OK, I admit I have ulterior motives. But they’re not bad ones. First, I think it sends the kind of message of solidarity the country and world need to see. While we may disagree on many issues, no one can doubt our resolve to protect this nation at all costs. And quite frankly, I’d like you available for individual and collective insight. It’s a pity that we seem to discard our old presidents when a new one arrives. That makes no sense. While the sitting president always has the last word, what better advisers could a president have than former presidents?” Sam waited for a response.

Hillary spoke first. “Sam, I am truly flattered. And while I wanted to throw Bill out on a number of occasions, I have to admit it was nice having him as a resource.” She smiled. Sam couldn’t tell whether Bill was smiling.

Bush chimed in. “I’m all in. Just don’t think the three of you are going to get me to start drinking again. But I do miss those biscuits and pea soup.” The White House biscuits and pea soup were Bush’s favorites.

“I’ll make it unanimous,” said Bill Clinton. “When do we pick out bedrooms?”

I just bet you’d like to pick out some bedrooms, Bill, thought Sam.

“Let’s not get too far ahead of ourselves, Bill,” cautioned Hillary with a smile. She then asked the unanswered question. “What about Barack? Will you be extending the invitation to him?”

“I invited him,” Sam responded, “but he declined. Personally, while I find that very disappointing, I have no intention of adding insult to injury. If he wants to be part of this, all the better. If not, that’s his choice. I’ll make sure he understands, assuming he calls me.” Sam hadn’t spoken to Obama in years. She was one of his most outspoken critics.

“Perhaps I could call him for you,” suggested Hillary, knowing Obama would return her call. They spoke at least twice a month.

“No, Hillary, I’d prefer that you didn’t. This is something I need to deal with when I believe the time is right. And I don’t want this to be a secret. I’m calling it the Presidents’ Council. We’ll have a press release prepared, and after you each approve it, we’ll get it out by March first. We have a lot of healing to do, and there has never been a greater need for unity among the four—or perhaps five—of us than there is now.” Sam rose and lifted her glass. The others did as well.

“Here’s to the Presidents’ Council,” offered Sam.

“And here’s to the United States of America,” added Bush.

As they touched their glasses and took a good drink, they all knew the trying times for the nation had only begun.