



THE UNTOLD STORY OF
ROD BLAGOJEVICH

HERO

MAN IN THE ARENA
BASED ON ACTUAL EVENTS

Matthew D. Hutcheson

H E R O

Man in the Arena

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Blagojevich**

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Dedication

Dedicated to Amy and Anne.

Your father is a hero.

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Disclosures and Disclaimers

Every primary event told in this narrative biography actually happened.

Every character is real.

Rod Blagojevich actually did the things stated in this book.

Events and facts enabling this book to be written from a prison cell were obtained through materials and books available in the law library at the Englewood, Colorado Prison Camp. Other resources, such as online articles, were located, printed, and mailed to the author through the prison mail system. Additional information came to the author from friends and family through the prison email system called CorrLinks.

Creative literary license has been taken to create segue conversations and events in some places in the book to bridge gaps between publicly available information and the underlying story thread so as to improve the story's continuity of flow and understandability. The foundational historical facts set forth throughout the book have not been intentionally altered.

The author alone is responsible for the content of this narrative biography. He made every attempt to capture the events and story in their most pure form.

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FOREWORD

HERO THE UNTOLD HEROIC STORY OF ROD BLAGOJEVICH

My parents taught me that the most important word in the English language is *remember*. Human beings forget important events all too quickly and arrive at incorrect conclusions even faster. The story that you are about to read is based on actual events spanning from 1941 to 2020.

I alone am responsible for the content of this book. That said, the content was organized as a result of thousands of collective personal research hours accumulated by over a dozen free American citizens. I thank them now, collectively and individually. Each of you knows the role you played.

The American public has forgotten the events retold in this book. Most Americans simply think that the totality of Rod Blagojevich's life can be summed up by the false talking point that he, while governor of the state of Illinois, attempted to illegally sell the United States Senate seat left vacant after Barack Obama was elected President of the United States. In other words, what most Americans *remember* (albeit falsely) is that Rod went to prison because of “that” alleged act.

But there was no "act." No such illegal act was ever committed, and the United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit repudiated the United States Department of Justice (DOJ) for seeking such an indictment.

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Rod was retried for wire fraud, a shameful "catch-all" practice used by the Department of Justice to ensnare people that the DOJ, or those directing the DOJ, do not like. Under the Obama administration, bogus wire fraud convictions became a national epidemic.

Back to *remember*.

Do you *remember* the days between March 31, 1999 and May 3, 1999? Probably not. But this book will help you to *remember*. Long before Rod was governor, he was an elected member of the United States House of Representatives. What he did while a member of Congress to help three American soldiers, prisoners of war during the Slavic conflict of the late 1990s, is nothing short of heroic. His actions during that crisis reveal the true Rod Blagojevich. He is an American hero. We have simply forgotten.

Many Americans do not know that Rod was impeached, just like our current president Donald J. Trump.

However, neither impeachment is valid; both are void. Why? Because the United States Supreme Court in *Liteky v. United States* declared that a fraud upon a court renders an official government action void. What is a court? It is the symbol of the power, desire, and wisdom of We the People of the United States of America. Same with Congress. Same with the Presidency. Each is merely We the People, deployed in a method of efficient division of labor.

Madam Speaker, you recently stated, in essence, that once a president is impeached, he or she is impeached forever.

This assertion is not true. We the People repudiate you and all those who participated in the shameful spectacle and declare the impeachment of Donald J. Trump null and void for the fraud you perpetrated upon us.

We do the same with the impeachment of Rod Blagojevich. As you read the pages of this book, you will see that Rod Blagojevich is anything but what the sneaky prosecutors made him out to be. If you could not handle yourself as honorably as Rod has done during his time

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in prison, and it is doubtful that you would, then give credit to him. It is due.

We the People have spoken.

Remember

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PROLOGUE

Macedonia

Near the Border of Yugoslavia, Kosovo Province

March 31, 1999

Staff Sergeant Christopher Stone (25) of Smith's Creek, Michigan, drove his patrol Humvee through a dangerous section of Macedonia known for Yugoslavian special forces attacks. The day started out crisp and wet, 37 degrees Fahrenheit. Mud covered the lower half of the patrol vehicle.

The patrol also consisted of Staff Sergeant Andrew Ramirez (24) of Los Angeles, California, and Specialist Steven Gonzales (21) of Huntsville, Texas.

As the Humvee crept along, Sergeant Stone felt a sense of foreboding. Experienced soldiers sometimes feel the presence of an imminent attack in advance. The feeling is said to be like an injection of cold, thick fluid into one's veins. The body goes into fight mode.

Suddenly, machine gun fire erupted from all around. The Humvee was surrounded by enemy soldiers. Machine gun fire from Yugoslavian Zastava M72 assault weapons using 7.62x39mm ammunition peppered the Humvee.

Specialist Gonzales tried to access the .50-caliber machine gun through the hatch in the roof of the Humvee, but had to duck back inside when bullets sprayed everywhere around him. By Divine protection, he was not hit, but he could not man his weapon to defend

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the patrol vehicle.

Hypersonic machine gun bullets began to penetrate the Humvee's armor. Some made it into the engine, and it began to smoke. In the chaos, Sergeant Stone ran the Humvee into a ditch. The smoking engine died, choking in armor-piercing bullets.

Twenty Yugoslavian special forces soldiers began to tighten the noose, unleashing a torrent of bullets into the Humvee. Sergeant Stone grabbed the radio and called for help.

"We are taking direct fire! I repeat, we are trapped; they're all around us. We can't get out!"

Thinking Specialist Gonzales was shot or dead and believing that there was no way out with their lives, Sergeant Stone raised his hands in surrender. The other two followed.

Yugoslavian special forces ripped open the doors of the Humvee and pulled the three American soldiers to the still cold from winter ground. The cold but not freezing water soaked through their uniforms to the skin. While on the ground, the special forces began to punch and kick the American soldiers. One Yugoslav grabbed one of the American soldier's rifles and beat him with it until the buttstock broke.

The prisoners of war were marched through Kosovo Province with black bags over their heads and their hands cuffed behind their backs. One of the Yugoslav special forces' leaders kept a loaded and cocked pistol to the head of Sergeant Stone, invoking claps and cheers from locals who also participated by throwing rocks at the Americans.

That evening, after the Americans had been paraded around all day in a victory celebration of sorts, they were placed into an interrogation holding facility. The bags remained on their heads. Their hands remained cuffed behind their backs. Food was provided once that day.

Specialist Gonzales whispered to Sergeant Stone, "Are we going to die?"

Then silence.

1

"REMEMBER"

Yugoslavia's initial stance on World War II was to remain neutral.

On March 25, 1941, in a moment of fear-generated equivocation, Yugoslavia decided to join the Axis' Tripartite Pact, which was a three-way alliance between Germany, Italy, and Japan. U.S. and U.K. military leaders gave the pact the nickname Roberto by combining the first letters of Rome, Berlin, and Tokyo.

Horrified that its government joined Roberto, a group of Yugoslavian Air Force officers successfully executed a coup d'état against the Yugoslav government. The coup d'état outraged Berlin and Rome. On April 6, 1941, Axis forces, along with its ally Hungary, attacked Belgrade, the capital of Yugoslavia. Belgrade fell and Yugoslavia became part of the Axis by force in what has been named by military historians as the *Balkans Campaign*.

EARLY MAY 1941

Nazi soldiers pinned down their vulnerable opponent in a fierce firefight just outside of Belgrade. Bullets and bombs overwhelmed the Yugoslavs until fighting was futile.

"Lege im Namen des Fuhrers deine waffen nieder und kapituliere! Wir haben dich!" Or, as to say in English, "In the name of the Fuhrer, drop your weapons! We have you!"

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One by one, Yugoslav soldiers and officers appeared from ditches, bunkers, buildings, and other fortifications. One of those surrendering was First Lieutenant Radisav Blagojevich. Born May 20, 1911, Radisav was 29 years old, soon to turn 30 in days.

Radisav was marched at gunpoint by the Nazis for several miles away from Belgrade, closer to Axis strongholds. There, he was processed as a prisoner of war and placed on a transport truck, along with the other prisoners of war, to be delivered to the prison camp.

As an officer, he was assigned to Offizierslager XIII-B, or Oflag XIII-B for short, which was primarily a prison camp for captured Yugoslav and Allied officers.

Oflag XIII-B, located in Lager Hammelburg, was not a concentration camp, but was more humane and gave the appearance of compliance with the Geneva Convention of 1929. The Germans never adopted the Geneva Convention, or at least the Nazis claimed Germany did not.

OFLAG XIII-B NAZI PRISON CAMP JANUARY 1945

Radisav Blagojevich belonged to the Eastern Orthodox Church and believed in God.

"O Boze," Radisav prayed quietly. "Nisam bas neki covek koji se moli. Smiluj se i uslisaj moju molitvu."

"Oh God. I am not much of a praying man. Have mercy and hear my prayer. Liberate us from the Socialist Germans, the Nazis. Help me find a way to America. Let me start a family and a new life. I will always *remember* this kindness and mercy towards me."

God would answer Radisav's prayer, a little at a time, as Providence so often does.

Five months later, on May 7, 1945, the Germans surrendered to the Allied Forces. Radisav and the Nazi's other prisoners were released and were now displaced citizens. Europe was in ruins. Nations were destroyed. Who belonged where? Literally millions of human beings

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had no nation in which to belong.

Recognizing the crisis in Europe, the United States Congress passed the Displaced Persons Act of 1948 which granted 200,000 displaced Europeans permanent residence status in America. President Harry S. Truman signed the act into law on June 25, 1948.

Radisav was on his way to America.

The 37-year-old Radisav eventually found his way to Chicago where a large Serbian community had previously settled. There he met Mila Govedarica, a beautiful 26-year-old woman who was born in America to immigrant Bosnian-Herzegovinian parents.

Radisav fell in love.

God *answered* Radisav's prayer, and Radisav *remembered* his promise.

2

TWO SONS

Radisav and Mila married on October 20, 1950 in a traditional Eastern Orthodox wedding ceremony. Their attractive black and white wedding photos show two very happy people.

Radisav became a steel worker in Chicago and Mila earned a job at the Ekco utensils factory on busy Cicero Avenue. The Blagojevich home was located only a few blocks away.

Four years after the wedding, Mila became pregnant and later gave birth to their first son, Robert, Rob for short. Radisav wanted to name him Bojidar, a common Serbian male name, but Mila made sure "Robert" ended up on the birth certificate.

Sixteen months later, on December 10, 1956, Mila gave birth to a second son, Rod. Again, Radisav wanted to give him the Serbian name Milorad, but, once again, Mila made sure "Rod" ended up on the birth certificate.

Rob and Rod were Radisav and Mila's pride and joy. American-born sons gave Radisav a special sense of pride, gratitude, and joy. He had not forgotten the great blessing it is to be an American and to now have posterity born on American soil.

Rob and Rod grew up as true-blue American boys. They did all the

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things that American boys do. They played ball, teased girls, liked to examine insects, and more. Although American through and through, the boys' parents were wise enough to preserve in them their Serbian heritage, language, etc.

Radisav taught his sons The Lord's Prayer in Serbian.

"Oce nas, joki si na nebesima . . ." ("Our Father, who art in heaven")

Radisav and Mila took the family to church. They prayed together over family meals. Mila taught her sons to be polite, courteous, and honest. Both sons have remained true to those virtues to a T.

Mila also instilled in Rob and Rod a work ethic which served both well. When Rob turned 11 and Rod 9, their mother helped them establish a shoeshine business at the Ekco utensils factory where she worked.

Each day after school Rob and Rod would walk to the Ekco factory to shine shoes of front office, white collar workers until around 5:15 PM, after which, they would head home for dinner. The boys maintained the business for five years until Rod began high school at age 14. Each shoeshine cost twenty-five cents. Each boy would also earn tips.

It was during this time shining shoes that Rod learned politics. Speaking to successful and accomplished men about every subject under the sun proved to be invaluable to Rod. Better training for public service could not be found anywhere.

EKCO UTENSILS FACTORY 1966

"Shoeshine today?" asked an enthusiastic ten-year-old Rod.

"Sure. Thank you, young man," the Ekco office executive replied. The executive sat down in the chair and put his right foot up on a holding pedestal.

"What do you think about the Chicago Freedom Movement

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demands being made of the city of Chicago now?" asked Rod.

(The Chicago Freedom Movement was led by Martin Luther King, Jr., James Beval, and Al Raby, and was organized under the formal name of the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations. The movement sought to improve access to affordable housing, quality education, increased transportation, job access, higher wages, health care, tenants' rights, criminal justice, and an overall improvement in the quality of life. Americans take most of these things for granted today. The Reverend Jesse Jackson later augmented the movement with Operation Breadbasket, which sought to harness the power of black consumers.)

The executive was taken aback by Rod's political astuteness, especially for such a young man. "That is quite the question for a youngster such as you," replied the executive. Rod beamed.

"Well, all politics are local," responded Rod. "As a small businessman, I need to know how decisions made by my local government might affect residents of Chicago and me."

The executive shook his head and laughed. "Quite a precocious young man," the executive thought. "Perhaps a superstar politician in the making. I'll have to watch this one."

Rod signaled the executive to move his right foot off the pedestal and motioned for his left foot. Once the left foot was on the pedestal, Rod continued to work on that shoe. Black polish. Brush. Rag-shine polish. Perfect.

"Perhaps the Soviets will finally realize they have it wrong," said Rod to continue the conversation's flow.

"Don't count on it," replied the executive.

"Think we will ever make it to the moon?"

"Hmm . . . it's a long shot. Perhaps."

"I think we will. Americans can do anything."

Impressed at the conversation and the shine, the executive gave Rod a dollar bill as a tip.

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"I love capitalism!" exclaimed Rod excitedly.

"So do I," said the executive. "Do not ever forget. Kids in the Soviet Union—and others from your father's world—do not have the privilege to engage in what you are doing right now."

"Don't worry, sir. I will always remember."

3

THE MAN IN THE ARENA

Martha Roosevelt awakened with a start from an anxious sleep at the gasping whimper of her frail son, Theodore, Jr.

"Thee!" Martha screamed. "Ready the horses! Teddy isn't breathing!" ("Thee" was what Martha called Teddy's father, Theodore, Sr.)

Thee quickly dressed in warm clothes and ran out to the stable where he hitched the team to the carriage.

"Martha!" Thee yelled. "I'm out front with the horses! Bring the boy!"

Martha ran outside to the carriage carrying the bundled Teddy. She climbed aboard the open carriage and placed Teddy on her lap, facing forward.

"Hyah!" exclaimed Thee as he snapped the reins. The horses exploded into a full-out sprint. The wind at young Teddy's face would hopefully be strong enough to find its way into the lungs of their suffocating son.

Teddy suffered from severe asthma. The words of the family physician rang in her ears, "The boy will not likely live past age four."

Holding on for dear life, while also holding onto Teddy, the horses raced through the streets of 19th century New York City in the dark of night.

"Thee! He's breathing! He's breathing!" Thee slowed the horses and thanked heaven his boy would see another day.

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"I don't know if it was the force of air from the speed of the horses or the excitement from the sheer terror of the ride, but whatever it was, it worked," said Martha with a slight tone of relief.

It was probably the flood of adrenaline into the boy's veins caused by what had to have been a most frightening ride.

Seventeen-year-old Rod put the book down, his heart slightly racing from the excitement of what he had just read.

After a few moments, he continued reading.

Teddy survived age four and grew stronger with age. As a teenager, he qualified for admission to Harvard College. Wanting to maintain the progress he had made with his asthma and his breathing, he sought any activity which would start his adrenaline pumping.

"Boxing sounds like the ticket," said young Teddy. So, he joined Harvard's intramural lightweight boxing team in which he became quite skilled. Teddy also loved wrestling and martial arts. He was perhaps, as some have observed, one of America's first mixed martial artists.

After Teddy became President Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. at age 42 by assuming the Presidency after the assassination of William McKinley, he was the youngest president ever. Many believe John F. Kennedy was the youngest president at age 43. It is true that JFK was the youngest president to ever be elected, but Teddy was the youngest president by assuming the office at age 42.

President Roosevelt just could not take the boxing bug out of his system.

One day, the president challenged Army Captain Daniel Meade to a boxing match in the White House gymnasium.

"Don't pull your punches now, Captain. Show me what you've got," said President Roosevelt.

Not one to disobey a direct order, Captain Meade smashed the president in the eye, injuring it. Teddy never did see well out of it again. Physicians say blood vessel damage was the cause, and some suspected retina damage.

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Twelve years after the fact, Captain Meade said, "I did not know that I had blinded the [president] until I read about it in the paper a few days ago."

Thrilled with what he had just learned about America's 26th president, Rod uttered, "Teddy Roosevelt is my kind of guy."

AMUNDSEN PARK DISTRICT CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 1974

The Amundsen Park District sponsored many afterschool activities for kids, ranging from arts and crafts, to basketball, to boxing. Rod knew just what he wanted to do.

"I would like to learn to box," said the slender Rod to the program registrar.

"You would, huh?"

"Yes, please."

"You don't look like a boxer. Those kids can be really tough. Are you sure you want to box?"

"Yes, please," replied Rod.

Within moments Rod was given a locker, equipment, and his training began.

Rod impressed his trainer, Jerry Marzillo, with his desire to fight and win. He was no weakling. He was not afraid. Rod was tough, really tough, tougher than most, and he was a real fighter inside.

"Listen, Rod," said Marzillo. "You are going to have to get some wins under your belt before you will qualify for the Golden Gloves. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir," replied Rod. "I'm ready."

"Now, listen to me and listen good. You are going to fight three kids in your weight division: McAlmden, Bassuk, and Dimino. Each one of them wants to be in the tournament, and each is willing to smash your face to keep you out. Do you understand?"

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"Yes sir."

Rod spent the next twelve months during 1974 and 1975 training and fighting. He defeated those three challengers, qualifying him for the Chicago Golden Gloves tournament.

While Rod trained in the Amundsen Park District Gymnasium, his fights took place in the St. Andrews Gymnasium. It was in St. Andrews that the Golden Gloves tournament would take place.

The first day of the tournament, Rod concentrated and organized his thoughts. "Remember Teddy. Remember Teddy. Remember Teddy," repeated Rod. "If Teddy could do it, so can I."

It was time. Rod stepped into the ring with Thomas Muhme. After three rounds, Rod beat Muhme by judge's decision.

"Great work out there, kid," said Marzillo. "Go home and get some rest. Tomorrow, you have Patrick Porter."

Rod slept well that night and returned to St. Andrews Gymnasium the following evening. After several hours it was Rod's turn to fight.

"Listen, kid. I want you to remember everything I taught you. Porter is a stronger and better fighter than Muhme. This one is going to be a tougher fight. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir."

"Good. Now, go out there and knock him out!"

Things did not go well for Rod. Patrick Porter unleashed an assault that kept Rod in a defensive position for most of the fight. The referee ended the fight, declaring a TKO in favor of Porter because Rod was unable to fight back. Porter was just too much.

But the experience was good, and Rod had stepped into the arena and fought, just like Teddy did.

"The credit belongs to the man in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly . . ." (Theodore Roosevelt, Jr.)

In the end, Rod had 6 wins, two by knockout, and one defeat.

Rod was the man in the arena.

4

ROD BLAGOJEVICH, ESQ.

Rod's short amateur boxing career ended just about the time he graduated from Foreman High School in 1975. It is now known as Foreman College and Career Academy, located in Chicago's Portage Park neighborhood.

In the fall of 1975, Rod began studies at the University of Tampa, in Florida, and did very well. He later transferred to Northwestern University in 1977 and graduated from Northwestern in 1979.

After graduating from Northwestern, he left the Windy City for the Sunny City, Malibu, California.

Pepperdine University is located in Malibu, and Rod began legal studies there, graduating in 1983 with a Juris Doctor degree. After graduation, he returned home to Chicago and began interviewing with law firms.

After a short stint at a Chicago law firm, he was hired in 1986 as a state's attorney with the Cook County District Attorney's Office. Rod was a prosecutor!

A COMPASSIONATE PROSECUTOR 1988

"The court will now hear the case of People v. Brown. Mr.

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Blagojevich, you may proceed," said the judge.

"Your honor," began Rod. "I am a little taken aback. I actually know the defendant personally. It has been a long time, but I know him. I am heartbroken to see him here today. Your honor, would you grant a brief recess so that I can speak to Mr. Brown and to his counsel alone in an interview room?"

Mr. Brown's counsel nodded to the judge, confirming that it was what he wanted, too.

"We have a full docket, Mr. Blagojevich. Make it quick. We will take a 15-minute recess. Be back before then. Understood?"

"Yes, ma'am," Rod replied.

Mr. Brown followed his attorney and Rod into a small interview room just outside the court room.

They sat down at the table looking across at each other.

Rod began. "Mr. Brown, do you remember me?"

"I don't remember you, but you look faintly familiar," replied Mr. Brown.

Rod began to recount a story from long ago when Rod was a young teenager about how Mr. Brown did something to help a struggling family in his neighborhood. Mr. Brown's actions had such a profound impact on Rod's young heart that it changed him forever.

"I'll never forget what you did for the Jones family. Johnny Jones was one of my best friends. Your act of compassion changed their lives," explained Rod.

Mr. Brown's diaphragm shuddered and he took a choppy breath. He remembered the Joneses. His eyes filled with tears and a lump grew in his throat.

"I remember the Joneses," Mr. Brown whispered with a quivering chin.

"Mr. Brown," said Rod. "I do not know what tragic events put you on the path . . ."

Rod stopped and took a big breath, continuing, ". . . but I know for

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certain that you are not who the charges against you imply."

After another brief pause, Rod turned to Mr. Brown's lawyer and said, "The People will drop these charges against your client. Please help him to make any changes in his life to ensure he never shows up here again."

Much needed mercy at just the right time and place can change a person's life forever.

Tears flowed down Mr. Brown's cheeks. Rod took him by the hand and pulled him out of his chair. Then, Rod gave him a big hug and said goodbye and went back into the courtroom.

LATER THAT NIGHT

Rod had butterflies. He had a date with a beautiful woman. He was falling in love.

Her name was Patricia Mell.

He was 31. She was 22.

5

THE BLAGOJEVICHES

In 1988, Rod met Patricia Mell at a fundraising event for her father, who was a Chicago City Alderman at that time. She was beautiful, elegant, and refined. He was gregarious, charismatic, and larger than life.

Patricia was from an influential political family. Rod was from a hard-working, blue-collar family of Serbian immigrants.

Perhaps they were an odd couple by superficial standards. Some asked, "How can those two worlds merge without colliding?" In fairness, almost all worlds collide after marriage. It is the reality of life. Yet, Rod and Patricia not only merged, but they made beautiful music as it occurred; one, a melody; the other, a harmony. Together, it was always a unified chorus.

Rod and Patricia were married in the beautiful and historic Alice Millar Chapel on the Northwestern University campus on the hot and humid day of August 25, 1990.

Little did either of them know that within twenty years, Rod and Patricia Blagojevich would be household names in the United States.

POLITICAL INEVITABILITY

It did not take long for Patricia's family to notice Rod's proclivity for politics. He has an incredible memory which enables him to memorize and recite poems, speeches, and stories by, and/or articles about, his favorite politicians, such as Winston Churchill, Harry Truman, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, and Ronald Reagan. Virtually everyone loved being around Rod. Those who claimed otherwise were lying, or at least strongly resisting the urge to love him. People just love Rod Blagojevich, plain and simple. Ten minutes was all Rod needed to win someone over, and it seemed to happen effortlessly.

In 1991, Patricia and Rod joined her parents for dinner at a favorite Chicago restaurant.

"Rod," began Patricia's very influential father, "have you ever considered running for political office? I think you might be a natural."

"Well, no, not really," replied Rod. "That's for other, more connected people."

"This city was built by people just like you: smart, hard-working, energetic, and likeable. You may be just what the people of State House District 33 are looking for. Myron Kulas has held that seat for fourteen years and he is vulnerable. You could win it."

Rod sat quietly for a moment, which is unusual for him. From that indication, Patricia and her parents knew Rod must be seriously contemplating the idea.

Her father continued, "Give it some thought. Let me know if you would like to discuss it further. Perhaps I can introduce you to some powerful people who could help you."

Over the next week, Rod and Patricia discussed the previously foreign idea to him, but what had been the way of life for her.

Together, they made a decision.

Fifteen months later, Rod was elected to the State of Illinois House of Representatives.

6

CONGRESSMAN BLAGOJEVICH

Just as Patricia's family had expected, Rod was a natural. With his education, coupled with his “street smarts” and difficult-to-resist personality, Rod became a celebrity of sorts in Chicago. More importantly, he became a very effective lawmaker, doing good things for his constituents.

During his time as an Illinois lawmaker, he met one Barack Obama, who at the time was an associate attorney working for the Chicago office of the prestigious Sidley Austin law firm. The two came to know each other fairly well, and at that time, considered the other to be a friend. Mr. Obama had political aspirations of his own.

Rod had served four years as a state of Illinois lawmaker and eventually caught the attention of other powerful Illinois politicians and business leaders. Rod was surging as a political star and was viewed as one having the ultimate political potential; However, one step at a time.

The seat for Illinois' 5th District for the United States House of Representatives was vulnerable because the famed Chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, Dan Rostenkowski, had just pled

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guilty to mail fraud. His guilty plea sent shock waves through Washington, D.C.

Republican Michael Flanagan ran against the vulnerable Rostenkowski in the 1994 election and won.

Michael Flanagan's time in Washington, D.C. would be short-lived, however, because Patricia's father— and others in Chicago's political circles—wanted Rod to campaign for Rostenkowski's former (and Flanagan's current) congressional seat. Chicago's political forces wanted Congressman Flanagan out, and Rod was the man who could make it happen.

Rod's growing popularity and influence made Patricia's parents very proud. He made her proud, too. It seemed like the next logical step in Rod's career was to campaign for that 5th District Congressional seat, and he did. In late 1995, Rod announced his candidacy for U.S. Congress, and in November 1996, he was elected by the people of District 5.

The Blagojeviches were headed to Washington, D.C.

On January 3, 1997, Rod was sworn in as a member of the United States House of Representatives in the U.S. Capitol Building with Patricia by his side.

What Patricia did not know, or anyone else for that matter, is that her husband would soon play a pivotal role in, and become the hero of, a life-or-death drama on the other side of the world in the land of Rod's forefathers—war-torn Serbia—involving one of the most feared war criminals to live in modern history, Slobodan Milosevic.

7

KOSOVO WAR

FEBRUARY 1998 – JUNE 1999

The history of former Yugoslavia is a complicated one. Of course, Yugoslavia no longer exists as it did when officially organized in 1918 following World War I. It has undergone many evolutions and metamorphoses. Explaining all its transformations following the Revolutions of 1989 in Eastern Europe is not a simple task, especially if one is not already familiar with all the ethno-socio-political players.

To explain it in the easiest possible terms for this purpose, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was a "rump state," meaning, it was a spinoff of the communist Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1945–1992) when it collapsed in 1992.

Within the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia are two states: Serbia and Montenegro.

For lack of a better analogy, think of the then Yugoslavia as the United States, and Serbia and Montenegro as Virginia and West Virginia.

Slobodan Milosevic took over control of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1992 as president. That act was viewed as one of aggression by the United Nations, which began a series of economic sanctions ultimately resulting in the collapse of Yugoslavia's economy. The United Nations viewed Yugoslavia to be two separate, sovereign

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nations, Serbia and Montenegro. Milosevic defied that position and continued to rule over Yugoslavia as one nation, with two states.

There is much that could be said about the unrest which existed in Yugoslavia from 1992 through 1999. However, the primary events which caught the attention of the entire world were those of the Kosovar expulsion, which led to what is now called the Kosovo War. For a mental picture, think of Kosovo as analogous to Orange County, California. Kosovo is a province within the state of Serbia, within the nation of Yugoslavia.

In the mid-to-late 1990s, Slobodan Milosevic began expelling hundreds of thousands of ethnic Albanian Muslims from the Kosovo Province. The expulsion was carried out by the Yugoslavian military, under the order of Milosevic, and was viewed by the United Nations as "ethnic cleansing." Over 900,000 Albanian Muslims were displaced, expelled, or killed during the short period between February 1998 and June 1999. Accordingly, those actions were condemned by the free world and viewed as a military aggression against a peaceful people, which could not be tolerated.

To stop the ethnic cleansing, in March 1999, NATO's Allied Command Operations ordered its military forces to begin a bombing campaign in Kosovo and across Serbia to compel Milosevic to discontinue the ethnic cleansing.

American soldiers had patrolled the Yugoslavian borders for years following the fall of communism in 1989. The American presence was felt by all nations in the Balkan region. However, when the Kosovo War began in February 1998, many American soldiers were thrust into live action. The Kosovo War raged for eleven weeks with nightly bombings and daily firefights between Yugoslavian forces controlled by Milosevic and the Kosovo Liberation Army fighting alongside NATO to protect and to liberate the Albanian Muslims.

**A MATTER OF LIFE OR DEATH
CHÂTEAU DE RAMBOUILLET, NORTHERN FRANCE
FEBRUARY 4, 1999–MARCH 22, 1999**

In Northern France, in a town called Rambouillet, is a magnificent structure with a storied past. Built in 1368, the Rambouillet Castle, or Château de Rambouillet, was the home of kings and diplomats. Over the centuries, the Château was occupied, then abandoned, and then reoccupied multiple times.

From 1896 until 2009, Rambouillet was the residence of French kings and presidents, and also a place in which international leaders would gather in summits to work out difficult matters of state, similar to what the White House is to the United States.

Today, Rambouillet is a national monument managed by the Centre des Monuments Nationaux (CMN).

On February 4, 1999, diplomats from the United States, Great Britain, and Albania—on the side of the Kosovar Albanian majority—and Serbian and Russian delegations—on behalf of Yugoslavia—gathered at Rambouillet for a peace summit. The objective was to find a solution to the ethnic cleansing of Albanians taking place in Kosovo which began in February 1998.

The summit failed.

WHERE DIPLOMACY FAILS, VIOLENCE PREVAILS

Conflict among nations or people rises when one nation or people encroaches upon the rights, land, beliefs, values, or social structure of another nation or people. Encroachment, even perceived encroachment, results in conflict. Always. Once conflict begins, it is not easily abated.

In southeastern Europe, just east of Italy, across the Adriatic Sea, is the Balkan Peninsula. There are five nations which call the Balkan Peninsula home: Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, and Yugoslavia.

In 1389, the Turks took the Balkan Peninsula by force and absorbed

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it into the Ottoman empire. There the nations of the Balkan Peninsula would stay until 1912. Because Albania was an economically and politically weak nation, lacking much influence, stronger European nations caused a portion of Albania, along with its resident Albanians, be given to Yugoslavia. That partition is known as Kosovo.

Yugoslavia, a predominantly Eastern Orthodox nation, almost immediately found itself at odds with the Muslim Albanians. The Albanians were mostly Muslim as a result of previously belonging to the Turkish empire for over 500 years.

Tensions between two cultures and religions, caused by real and perceived encroachments, only grew with time. In February 1998, the tensions reached a boiling point.

Socialist-communists assumed control of Yugoslavia following World War II, although Yugoslavia was not one of the fifteen members of the Soviet Bloc, it could have just as easily been. During that time of communist rule, Yugoslavian President Slobodan Milosevic learned the old-school communist way of doing things—mercilessly crushing resistance and eliminating ethnic, political, and cultural incongruencies.

SLOBODAN MILOSEVIC OLD-SCHOOL COMMUNIST

President Slobodan Milosevic did not value human life. Ethnic Albanians and their culture, religion, and history became intolerable to many old-school communist hardliners. Even though communism had failed, the anti-religious attitudes cultivated by atheist communism was still anchored in the hearts of many post-Cold War European leaders.

To Milosevic, expelling the ethnic Albanian Kosovars seemed like the right thing to do. Send the Albanians back to Albania, essentially saying, "You are not us. We don't want your kind here. Get out." But Kosovo was their home. The Albanian culture was permanently and

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inextricably embedded in Kosovo. The two could not be separated, even by the threat of expulsion and death.

President Milosevic probably treaded lightly, remembering how the world dealt with Nazi war criminals. Extinguishing an entire race or culture due to differences of beliefs is condemned by the human family at large. However, clashes with Yugoslavian troops beginning in 1998 gave Milosevic the justification to begin expelling the ethnic Albanians from Kosovo.

FAILED DIPLOMACY

The international community would not have it.

The United States and NATO allies called a summit to be held at the Château de Rambouillet. Although negotiations with President Milosevic would not be easy, and it could take several weeks to work out an agreement, the United States and NATO allies believed something would be worked out to the benefit of all parties.

The negotiations did not go well.

The summit lasted from February 4, 1999 through March 22, 1999. An agreement was drafted which has since been referred to as the Rambouillet Agreement.

President Milosevic and his envoy balked at the terms of the agreement. It required that Yugoslavia give up Kosovo to the ethnic Albanians. Think of it this way; what if some foreign nation demanded that the United States give up Florida to the ethnic Cubans so they could have their own country? Needless to say, the agreement did not go over well.

THE PROVOCATION OF THE RAMBOUILLET AGREEMENT

Congressman Blagojevich objected to the Rambouillet Agreement. It was written by NATO in an attempt to reconcile Yugoslavia with the Kosovar Albanians. Any other sovereign nation, including the United States, would have reacted the same way President Milosevic did. Even

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Henry Kissinger said, "The Rambouillet text, which called Serbia to admit NATO troops throughout Yugoslavia, was a provocation, an excuse to start bombing. Rambouillet is not a document that an angelic Serb could have accepted. It was a terrible diplomatic document that should never have been presented in that form."

The American, British, and Albanian delegations signed the agreement.

The Serbian and Russian delegations refused to sign.

OFFICE OF CONGRESSMAN BLAGOJEVICH RAYBURN BUILDING, WASHINGTON, D.C. MARCH 23, 1999

Congressman Blagojevich spoke from the floor of the House of Representatives in the U.S. Capitol Building.

"As the only member of Congress of Serbian descent," Rod explained, "I strongly object to a NATO military campaign against the Serbs. This is not due to a conflict of loyalty. My loyalty is solely to the United States of America and to my constituents. My objection, rather, is based upon an understanding about what Slobodan Milosevic will do to the ethnic Albanians if bombing begins. Milosevic has 40,000 Yugoslavian troops ready to enter Kosovo and thrust the remaining Albanians out. It will be a humanitarian disaster beyond anything we have seen thus far."

Congressman Blagojevich's colleagues listened intently, but perhaps did not fully understand what he was trying to explain. Rod's words also fell upon deaf ears within the Clinton administration.

Upon concluding his remarks, Rod returned to his office.

There, a man was waiting for him by the name of Gajic, pronounced "Guy-eech" in English.

Mr. Gajic claimed he was a member of President Milosevic's government and hoped to persuade Congressman Blagojevich to try one more time to stop the promised NATO bombing.

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Rod was skeptical, however. People frequently claim to be more important than they actually are. For all Rod knew, Mr. Gajic could be an international reporter, or some thug sent to blackmail him somehow.

"Congressman Blagojevich," Mr. Gajic began. "Do you think your president and NATO intend to follow through on the threat to bomb Serbia?"

"There is no doubt in my mind that President Clinton is going to follow through on his threat. I have done all I could do," replied Rod.

Mr. Gajic gave Rod a card and invited him to contact him anytime.

The following day, March 24, 1999, NATO bombs began to rain down on Serbia.

LAKE GENEVA, WISCONSIN EASTER BREAK MARCH 27, 1999–APRIL 12, 1999

Rod and Patricia spent the Easter break with her parents in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. On March 27, 1999, Rod was watching the national news. There on the screen was President Slobodan Milosevic in his presidential office in Belgrade. Next to him were other high-ranking Yugoslavian officials including—lo and behold—Mr. Gajic.

Mr. Gajic was for real.

8

MACEDONIA NEAR THE BORDER OF YUGOSLAVIA, KOSOVO PROVINCE

MARCH 31, 1999

Staff Sergeant Christopher Stone carried ammunition and supplies to the patrol Humvee he had commanded for several weeks. He loaded the supplies and ammo, hopped into the driver's seat, and waited for his team to join him on the day's patrol.

His team consisted of Staff Sergeant Andrew Ramirez and Specialist Steven Gonzales.

Although American troops could be found scattered across former Soviet Union states, these three soldiers were there to support and protect the Kosovar Albanians who were being expelled from just across the border.

At 5:30 a.m., the three Americans began patrolling the Macedonian/Yugoslavian border, very close to the Kosovo Province.

By 8:00 a.m., it was a "warm" 37 degrees and a cold drizzle fell from the low Balkan clouds.

"I can't wait to eat a real American meal and to sleep in my own

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bed," said Specialist Gonzales.

"What, is shooting that .50-caliber beast starting to rattle your bones?" laughed Sergeant Ramirez. "I would probably be tired of that by now, too," Ramirez continued.

Suddenly, Ramirez noticed an unusually serious look on Sergeant Stone's face.

"What's wrong?" Ramirez asked.

"Something's not right."

"What do you mean?"

"I have a really bad feeling coming over me, a premonition. Get ready. We may be in for some action."

Suddenly, machine gun fire erupted from all around. The Humvee was surrounded by enemy soldiers.

Machine gun fire from Yugoslavian Zastava M72 assault weapons using 7.62x39mm armor-piercing ammunition peppered the Humvee. Specialist Gonzales tried to access the .50-caliber machine gun through the hatch in the roof of the Humvee, but he had to duck back inside when bullets sprayed everywhere around him. By Divine protection, he was not hit, but he could not man his weapon to defend the patrol vehicle.

Hypersonic armor-piercing machine gun bullets began to penetrate the Humvee. Some bullets made it into the engine and it began to smoke and sputter in the chaos. Sergeant Stone ran the Humvee into a ditch. The smoking engine died, choking on bullets.

Twenty Yugoslavian special forces troops began to tighten the noose, unleashing an additional torrent of bullets into the Humvee.

Sergeant Stone grabbed the radio and called for help.

"We are taking direct fire! I repeat, we are trapped; they're all around us. We can't get out!"

Thinking Specialist Gonzales was shot or dead and believing that there was no way out with their lives, Sergeant Stone raised his hands signaling the enemy to discontinue fire. The other two followed.

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Yugoslavian special forces ripped open the doors of the Humvee and pulled the three American soldiers to the still cold from winter ground.

The cold but not freezing water soaked through their uniforms to the skin and chilled them to the bone. Hypothermic shivers began. While on the ground for what seemed like an eternity, the special forces began to punch and kick the American soldiers.

One Yugoslav grabbed one of the American soldier's rifles and beat him with it until the buttstock broke.

The American prisoners of war were marched through Kosovo Province with black bags over their heads and their hands cuffed behind their backs.

One of the Yugoslav special forces' leaders kept a loaded and cocked pistol to the head of Sergeant Stone, invoking claps and cheers from locals who also participated by throwing rocks at the Americans.

That evening, after the Americans had been paraded around all day in a victory celebration of sorts, they were placed in an interrogation holding facility. The bags remained on their heads. Their hands remained cuffed behind their backs. Food was given once per day.

Specialist Gonzales whispered to Sergeant Stone, "Are we going to die?"

Then silence.

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UNDISCLOSED LOCATION, KOSOVO PROVINCE INTERROGATION ROOM

MARCH 31, 1999

The three American soldiers lay on a rodent-infested cement floor with nothing more than a single, thread-worn blanket to protect them from the cold. Vicious Balkan winds whipped through the abandoned building, blowing at the black curtains intended to block out all light. The glass windows, like the occupants of the building, had long since disappeared following the communist collapse in 1989.

American soldiers Stone, Ramirez, and Gonzales lay as close to each other as possible for warmth, but to no avail. It is still cold in Serbia during March and April, mid-30s in the morning to mid-50s, at best, in the afternoon.

The Yugoslavian special forces laughed and talked just outside of the holding room where the three brave Americans were temporarily detained.

The special forces had the decency to take the black bags off the Americans' heads and cuffs off their wrists while detained in the dark,

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damp holding room. Relief would be short-lived.

Slobodan Milosevic's troops spoke perfect English. Sergeant Stone concluded that the troops that attacked and captured them must have been specially trained. Perhaps they were remnant black-op specialists of the Cold War?

"Hang in there, brothers. We can handle this. It is going to be ok. Our government will come for us," said Sergeant Stone in a confident and reassuring tone. "That's right. That's right," affirmed Sergeant Ramirez. Specialist Gonzales nodded his head in comfort and let out a huge sigh. He trusted his fellow soldiers. He had good reason to trust.

Suddenly, they heard a rustle at the door and it burst open.

"You!" he said, pointing at Sergeant Stone. "On your feet!"

One of the operators placed a black bag over his head while another cuffed him. Two others grabbed Sergeant Stone above each elbow and forcefully walked him out of the room. The remaining captors slammed and locked the door behind them.

After a brief walk through what seemed to be a meandering corridor, Sergeant Stone was slammed down in a metal chair. Voices echoed in the empty room. Vermin urine violated his nostrils.

The talking suddenly stopped and Stone could feel the reverberation of footsteps coming toward him through the cement floor. Someone grabbed the black bag and ripped it off his head. Stone winced at the light.

A man sat before him. Black coat. Black turtleneck. Black slacks. Black boots. Black leather gloves.

"So, you arrogant Americans are at it again. You think you can come in here and tell us how to run our country?" the man said with a very strong Serbian accent. He continued, "No one will come for you. You will die here, unless, of course, you tell us what we want to know."

Sergeant Stone stared stoically ahead. He did not speak a word.

"So, you are going to be American hero, are you?" The interrogator slapped Stone across the face as hard as he could.

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Stone's breathing quivered and accelerated. He gritted his teeth. Inside, he spoke to himself. "Never! I will never cooperate with you! The Americans will come for me. You will see!"

"It seems we have a tough guy here," said the interrogator as he turned and laughed with the other special operators witnessing the scene. "Go get the other sergeant," ordered the interrogator. Stone was returned to the holding room and Ramirez was brought and placed in the metal chair down the corridor.

The interrogator's leather-covered, open hand struck Ramirez in the face.

"So, we have another tough guy here. We may need to change our approach. Things for you, my brave little American, are about to get much worse."

For a moment Ramirez watched as the interrogator walked away until the black bag was placed over his head again.

"Take them to the detention center in Belgrade by the Sava River. Keep them in separate cells so they cannot speak to each other, and keep the black hoods on them unless I direct otherwise," said the interrogator.

"Yes, sir," was the reply.

Once in the Belgrade military detention center, the Americans were escorted, one by one, to an interrogation chair. Each day, the Americans said nothing.

But silently, they prayed.

Yugoslavian soldiers took photos of the bullet-riddled American Humvee. The photos were then shared with members of the international press.

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"Where are the Americans?" asked a reporter.

"Our prisoners now," replied a Yugoslavian soldier.

Word spread around the world like wildfire that Yugoslavian special forces had taken three American soldiers as prisoners of war.

BREAKING NEWS NBC NIGHTLY NEWS WITH TOM BROKAW APRIL 1, 1999

Vivian Ramirez usually watched television as she prepared dinner for her family. Around 4:45 PM PST on April 1, 1999, the program she was watching was suddenly interrupted by breaking news.

The NBC breaking news graphic populated the screen.

"Good evening, Tom Brokaw reporting. Pentagon officials have confirmed that three American soldiers have been captured by Yugoslavian military forces following a fierce firefight just outside the Serbian province of Kosovo. What you see on your screen is an enemy photo of the bullet-riddled American patrol Humvee carrying the three soldiers. We have no word on the whereabouts of our three soldiers, or whether they are alive. If they are alive, they are prisoners of war. The Pentagon has confirmed that Staff Sergeants Christopher Stone, from Smith's Creek, Michigan, and Andrew Ramirez, from Los Angeles, California, along with Specialist Steven Gonzales, from Huntsville, Texas, were the Americans captured."

Vivian collapsed to the floor wailing, "My son! My son! Please, God, help my son!"

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LAKE GENEVA, WISCONSIN

**PATRICIA'S PARENTS' HOME
EASTER/PASSOVER BREAK
APRIL 2, 1999**

Patricia watched the news in the kitchen as she prepared breakfast. The story about the three American POWs was on every channel.

"Rod!" she said loud enough for him to hear her. "You need to come watch the news! It's about those three American soldiers captured near Kosovo!"

Rod joined Patricia in the kitchen, still waking up.

"Are you seeing this, Rod?!"

"Yes, I have been following that story. Tragic. That's a really dicey situation. Not sure how those boys are going to make it out of there."

"Rod, you need to do something!"

"There's nothing I can do, Patti. We have to let the Pentagon and State Department do their jobs."

"Those boys are Americans, Rod. They have families. Their mothers must be worried sick."

"There's a war going on over there. There is no way the Pentagon would let a sitting congressman go into that war zone. Too unstable. Too unpredictable. Too dangerous. Every evening, Serbia is being bombed. I wish there were something I could do, but my job is to

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represent my constituents in Illinois. The White House will have to handle that situation."

THE WHITE HOUSE KENNEDY CONFERENCE ROOM, BASEMENT OF THE WEST WING APRIL 3, 1999

President Clinton sat at the head of the long table in the Kennedy Conference Room, more commonly known to the American public as The Situation Room.

The Situation Room is a 5,525-square-foot conference room in the basement of the West Wing of the White House, in which military operations are planned and executed.

President Clinton was joined by his Secretary of Defense, William Cohen, and his Chief of Staff, John Podesta.

"Well, this is a curveball we did not need right now," said President Clinton. "Bill, what are we going to do?" he continued.

The worry inscribed on William Cohen's face betrayed his otherwise calm and professional demeanor.

"We have a team at the Pentagon working on our options even as we speak," Secretary Cohen replied.

"You know, Mr. President," John Podesta interjected, "this may not be a bad thing."

With incredulity and a hint of rebuke, the president responded, "John, how can three American soldiers being held as prisoners of war be a good thing?"

"Milosevic is a monster," answered Chief of Staff Podesta. "The American people finally get to see how evil he really is."

President Clinton sat back in his chair, his hands clasped across his midsection with his index fingers pointing upward in a spire, touching at the tip. He contemplatively tapped his fingers together.

"I don't like it. I understand the political optics which you describe, but I don't like playing games with the lives of our soldiers. We need to

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get those boys out of there."

Secretary Cohen rejoined, "Mr. President, it could be years before we get them out. NATO is bombing Serbia into the Stone Age. Those boys could become sacrificial lambs before we can safely send an envoy to negotiate their release."

"So, you want me to tell the American people that we are going to just leave them there? Are you serious? I can't do that!"

"Mr. President," said Podesta, "let's reconvene on this tomorrow. Let the experts in the Pentagon and State Department spend some time on it. We'll figure something out."

"I want a solution sooner than later. This is making me very uncomfortable. I don't like it. All right, gentlemen. That is all. See you tomorrow."

"Thank you, Mr. President."

"Goodbye, Mr. President."

OFFICE OF THE REVEREND JESSE JACKSON CHICAGO, ILLINOIS APRIL 3, 1999

The Reverend Jesse Jackson intently watched the television screen as the news replayed the story about the three captured American soldiers over and over again. He stood up from behind his desk and walked to his assistant's office. "Notify our team. We are going to Serbia."

Jesse Jackson was no stranger to "missions impossible." Many years prior, Mr. Jackson plunged himself into a war zone at his own peril to extricate an American pilot shot down over Syria during the Lebanese-Syrian conflict of 1983–84.

"We did it in Syria. We will do it again in Serbia," said Reverend Jackson with justified confidence.

**DAMASCUS, SYRIA
LEBANESE-SYRIAN CONFLICT
DECEMBER 4, 1983**

Twenty-seven-year-old Lieutenant Robert Goodman sat in the navigator seat of the A-6 Intruder recon jet as it launched from the USS John F. Kennedy aircraft carrier on alert in the Persian Gulf.

As the A-6 jet crossed over Syria, ground-to-air missiles were launched to intercept. One of the missiles hit the A-6 in the tail. It lurched forward as though it had been rear-ended by a Mack truck. Then, it began to free fall in a tumble. Both pilot and navigator successfully ejected and parachuted to the ground alive. Unfortunately, Syrian soldiers were waiting for Lieutenant Goodman. He was immediately bound and thrown into the back of a truck and driven to Damascus as an enemy of war.

The Reverend Jesse Jackson, with his envoy, traveled to Syria and met with President Hafez al-Assad. Negotiations did not go well at first. Both parties held their ground. Ultimately, however, Jesse Jackson prevailed. On January 2, 1984, Lieutenant Goodman was released and Jackson brought him home.

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LAKE GENEVA, WISCONSIN

**EASTER/PASSOVER BREAK
APRIL 3, 1999**

Rod lay in bed in his in-law's Lake Geneva, Wisconsin guest room wide awake at 2 AM. Patricia was correct, of course. He needed to do something, but what? And how? Eventually, he dozed off and slept until 7 AM.

Rod decided to call National Security Advisor Sandy Berger at the White House. Around 9:30 AM, he picked up the phone and dialed the switchboard number. Congressman Blagojevich's call was patched through to Mr. Berger's office and his secretary took the call.

"Mr. Berger, Congressman Blagojevich is on the phone. He would like to speak with you about our three POWs in Yugoslavia," she said.

Pacing back and forth in his office, Berger said to himself, "This is not good. I have nothing to tell him."

"Mr. Berger?"

"Yes, I'm here. Just thinking. I'm immersed in another crisis. Please take a message."

"Yes, Mr. Berger," she replied.

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She then continued, "Congressman Blagojevich, I am sorry, but Mr. Berger will need to call you back."

"I understand," Rod replied.

Rod, not one to be easily deterred, called John Podesta, President Clinton's Chief of Staff.

Same result.

STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICE OF MADELEINE ALBRIGHT, SECRETARY OF STATE APRIL 3, 1999

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright reluctantly picked up the phone.

"Reverend Jackson! To what do I owe this honor?" she said with feigned enthusiasm.

"Secretary Albright," the Reverend began. "As you are well aware, three American soldiers are being held as prisoners of war in Yugoslavia."

"Yes, I am following that situation closely."

"I am going over there with a delegation in an attempt to negotiate their release."

He heard Secretary Albright sigh loudly on the other end of the phone.

"Reverend Jackson, the United States is working on the situation. The last thing we need right now is another international incident. There are daily bombings happening all around Belgrade. You could be killed by a NATO bomb."

He let her finish and then gave respectful pause to convey to her that he was listening intently.

He continued, "It is your choice to continue bombing while we are there and that's our risk. We have made the decision to take the risk. We hope that you will persuade the Department of Defense and NATO to be sensitive to our presence there, and our mission."

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There was another very long pause.

"Hello?"

"I'm still here," replied Secretary Albright. "Let me speak to the president."

BREAKING NEWS NBC NIGHTLY NEWS WITH TOM BROKAW APRIL 4, 1999

Rod sat in a recliner chair in his in-law's Lake Geneva home. As usual, he was watching the evening news; and as expected, it was all about the American POWs.

"Good evening. This is Tom Brokaw. NBC News has learned that the Reverend Jesse Jackson is planning a rescue mission to Yugoslavia with the intent to negotiate the release of the three American soldiers taken prisoner in Macedonia, near the Kosovo border, five days ago. White House sources tell NBC News that the White House does not sanction, endorse, or otherwise support the mission and that the Reverend Jackson, and his delegation, will be on their own. Should he actually proceed, he will do so at his own peril."

THE WHITE HOUSE APRIL 4, 1999

"Mr. President," began Secretary Albright. "I spoke to . . ."

President Clinton raised his hand to stop her.

"Who has been talking to the media about this? It's all over the news. We have no plan or official position on anything. Meanwhile, Mr. Jackson is making things diplomatically difficult, if not impossible. He could embarrass my administration."

"Mr. President," continued the Secretary. "Mr. Jackson says that our soldiers are of no value to Milosevic as trophies of war. He's correct. He also says that our soldiers' continued imprisonment only incites an intensity of the war effort. The only currency our boys offer Milosevic is their immediate release. Jackson is correct about that, too."

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President Clinton sat contemplatively as he considered what Secretary Albright had explained.

"I cannot support Reverend Jackson in this suicide mission. That's what it is. He'll be killed by an airstrike and I'll be blamed. Tell him as forcefully as you can, without crossing the line of forbidding it, that we do not support his mission. Tell him we object and that he and everyone with him will likely be killed. Make sure the media knows our position."

"Yes, Mr. President."

"One more thing. Don't forget, Jackson's mission could literally undercut the NATO bombing campaign and could potentially damage relations with our allies. His efforts could destroy my credibility and give birth to anti-American propaganda. This is very serious. Thank you, Madam Secretary. That is all."

12

WASHINGTON, D.C.

WEEK OF APRIL 12, 1999

Three weeks had passed since the first NATO bomb fell on Serbia. Each morning from midnight until 4 AM, NATO pounded away, destroying buildings and residential homes. One particular bomb hit the home of a sleeping man. He maintained a small sidewalk cafe on the first floor of his home. The explosion threw the man out of his bed onto the hood of his car parked across the street. He survived, but just barely. Both of his legs were pulverized.

Milosevic felt NATO's unrelenting assault on Serbia amounted to criminal acts against a sovereign nation. In an attempt to gain international sympathy, Milosevic invited two high-profile Americans to visit Serbia as humanitarian ambassadors to witness NATO's destruction.

One American was former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark. He visited and saw firsthand what damage had been done by NATO bombing. However, he was denied the opportunity to meet with the three American soldiers.

The second American was the Reverend Jesse Jackson. Reverend Jackson conditioned the acceptance of the invitation upon a guarantee from Milosevic that Jackson would be able to meet with the three American soldiers face-to-face, together at the same time.

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Milosevic balked at Jackson's demand and the talks stalled.

On Tuesday, April 13, 1999, Rod walked from his office in the House of Representatives' Rayburn House Office Building to the Capitol across the street to vote on the house floor. Rod, along with all members of Congress, had been away for two weeks for Easter and Passover break. It was time to go back to work.

As Rod walked, his jaw clenched as he ruminated over what he had heard on the news moments before he left his office.

"Yugoslavian President Slobodan Milosevic has refused the Red Cross access to the American soldiers."

"That is an outrage," Rod said to himself.

Rod then turned his thoughts to a newspaper article which he had read the previous day.

The article began, "The Reverend Jesse Jackson was invited by Milosevic to visit war-torn Serbia to inspect damage inflicted by NATO bombing." The article continued, "Jackson says he has not accepted the invitation and will not until Milosevic guarantees him access to the American soldiers."

Jackson drew a hard line. The condition to Milosevic was clear. No visit to Serbia without a guaranteed visit with the American soldiers. Period.

Suddenly, Rod saw the path of rescue for the Americans. Reverend Jackson would not be able to secure a guarantee without some "X factor" added to the negotiations.

Rod was that "X factor."

As the only member of Congress of Serbian descent, he could bridge the divide between America and Yugoslavia. Rod would be the linchpin in bringing the American soldiers home. Yet, of course, it would require both Rod and Jackson working together closely. Together they would succeed. Alone, they would not.

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The way to the Reverend Jackson was through his son, Jesse Jackson, Jr., who like Rod, was a member of the United States House of Representatives from Illinois.

THE HAND OF PROVIDENCE

When events occur that are so improbable, yet are obviously orchestrated by some unseen and unexplainable power, even the most anchored atheist must pause for a moment to consider the awe and wonder of it.

Rod finished voting on the House Floor. He looked around. He saw the Speaker Pro Tempore and various staffers and clerks scurrying around, wrapping up the administrative duties following the vote. It occurred to him that he might be alone. "Am I the only remaining member of Congress in here?" he inquired of himself.

As he scanned more closely, he saw one other member of Congress, someone he knew. It was Congressman Jesse Jackson, Jr.

Congressmen Blagojevich and Jackson were right where they needed to be at precisely the right moment.

It was not lost upon either of them what power had orchestrated the improbable one-on-one encounter on the floor of the United States House of Representatives.

Nothing in life is more awesome than witnessing the Hand of Providence in action.

God wanted the American soldiers out of harm's way, and He was going to use those two Congressmen from Illinois to make it happen.

Matt Hutcheson

ROD BLAGOJEVICH PHOTOS



Radislav and Mila
Wedding Day, 1950



Rod High School Photo
Circa 1973-74

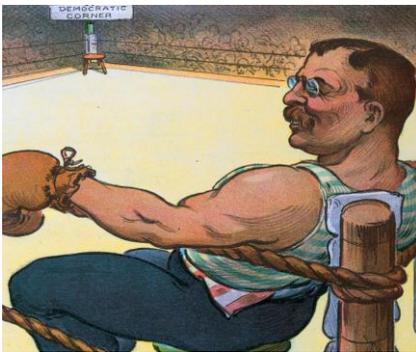
HERO – Man in the Arena



Rod Chicago Golden
Gloves, 1975



One of Rod's
Inspirations
Theodore Roosevelt
Pencil Sketch
Natali Hutcherson



More Teddy
Inspiration

Matt Hutcheson



More Teddy
Inspiration



Rod Cook County
Assistant District
Attorney

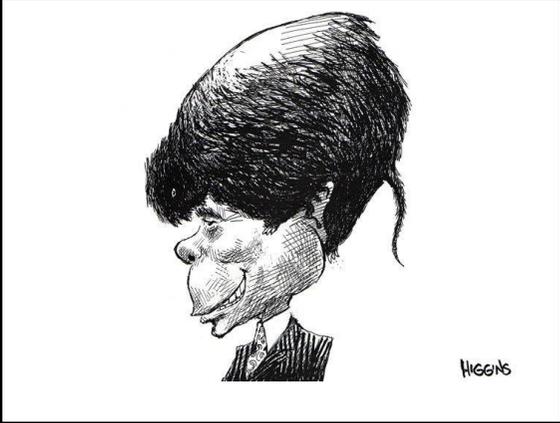
Circa 1986



Alice Millar Chapel at
Northwestern
University

Where Rod and
Patricia Were Married

HERO – Man in the Arena

	<p>Rod is Fair Game as Politician</p>
	<p>Congressman Rod with then Illinois Senator Barack Obama</p> <p>Circa 1998–99</p>
	<p>Rod with Unhappy Future Voter</p> <p>Circa 1999</p>

	<p>Map of Yugoslavia</p>
	<p>Château de Rambouillet, Northern France</p> <p>Where Kosovo Summit was Held and Failed</p>
	<p>President Clinton Announcing NATO Military Action in Serbia</p> <p>March 24, 1999</p>

HERO – Man in the Arena



Beli Dvor
"The White Palace"
Milosevic Presidential
Compound



Yugoslavian Special
Forces



NATO Bomb Damage,
Belgrade
March–June 1999

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NATO Bomb Damage,
Belgrade

March–June 1999



Staff Sergeant
Christopher Stone

Badly Beaten

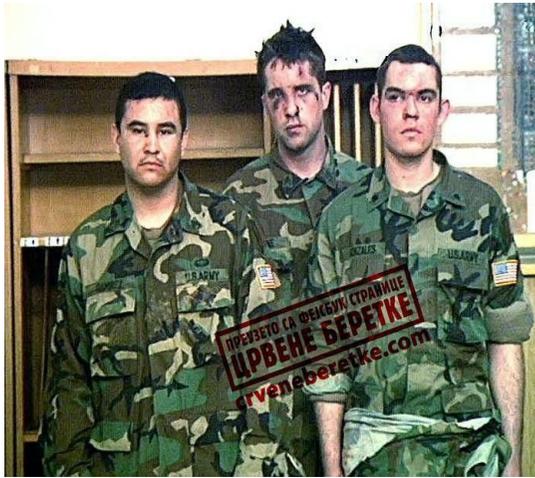
Yugoslavian State
Television

April 1999



Yugoslavian President
Slobodan Milosevic
and his Wife

HERO – Man in the Arena



Staff Sergeant Christopher Stone (25) of Smith's Creek, Michigan, Center; Staff Sergeant Andrew Ramirez (24) of Los Angeles, California, Left; Specialist Steven Gonzales (21) of Huntsville, Texas, Right

Source: Yugoslavian State Media



Praying with POWs at Military Detention Center, Belgrade

Source: Associated Press



Group Photo, Military Detention Center, Belgrade

Source: Associated Press



Some Much-Needed
Levity

Group Photo, Military
Detention Center,
Belgrade

Source: Associated
Press



Negotiating With
Milosevic

Rod, Top Right

Source: Associated
Press



Continued
Negotiations

Source: Associated
Press

HERO – Man in the Arena



Staff Sergeant
Christopher Stone
Calling Home

April 30, 1999

Source: Associated
Press



Final Diplomatic
Arrangements

May 2, 1999

Source: Associated
Press



Delegation Bus with
Three American
Soldiers on Board

Get out of Dodge

May 2, 1999

Source: Associated
Press



Deplaning from C-9
Medical Transport at
Ramstein Air Force
Base from Zagreb,
Croatia

May 2, 1999

Source: Associated
Press



Back Home, Andrews
Air Force Base

Maryland, USA

May 3, 1999

Source: Associated
Press



Back Home, Andrews
Air Force Base

Maryland, USA

May 3, 1999

Source: Associated
Press

HERO – Man in the Arena

 <p>A large group of people, including children and adults, are gathered outdoors. They are holding a long white banner with the words "Welcome Home" written in a cursive font. The banner is decorated with American flags. In the top right corner of the photo, there is a small "AP" logo. The background shows a building and some trees.</p>	<p>Back Home, Andrews Air Force Base Maryland, USA May 3, 1999 Source: Associated Press</p>
 <p>The image is split into two parts. On the left, a young woman with long dark hair is speaking into several microphones. One microphone has a "WISN" logo and another has a "62" logo. On the right, a man in a dark suit is standing with a woman and a young girl. The man is looking down at something in his hands. The woman is looking towards the camera. The girl is standing between them.</p>	<p>Rod's Family on Sentencing Day December 7, 2011</p>
 <p>Three men are walking outdoors. The man on the left is wearing a light blue shirt and a striped tie. The man in the middle is wearing a dark suit jacket. The man on the right is wearing a grey jacket. They are walking past a red car. The background is a chain-link fence.</p>	<p>Rod Reports to Federal Prison, FCI Englewood, Colorado March 15, 2012</p>

Matt Hutcheson



Strong Women

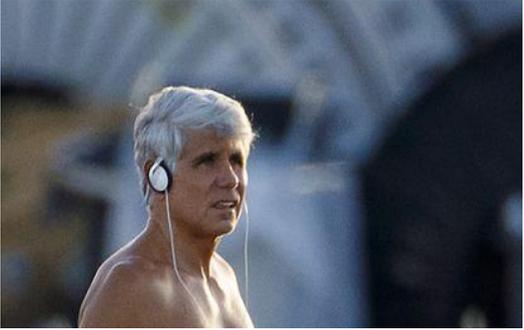
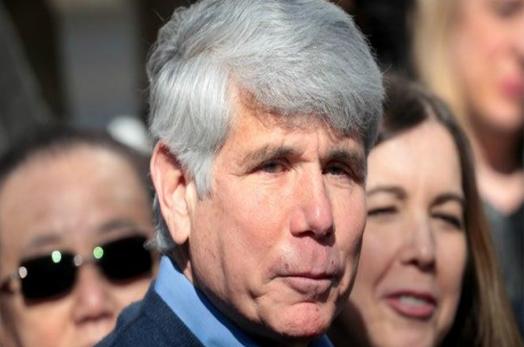


Strong Women



Rod at Englewood
Prison Camp
2018

HERO – Man in the Arena

 A photograph of a man with short, white hair, shirtless, wearing white earbuds. He is looking off to the side with a slight smile. The background is blurred, suggesting an outdoor setting.	<p>Rod at Englewood Prison Camp</p> <p>Daily Run</p> <p>August 2019</p>
 A group of five people standing in a hallway. On the left, a man holds a copy of JET magazine. The magazine cover features a photo of a man in a military uniform and the headline "Rev. Jesse L. Jackson wants Freedom For American POWs in Yugoslavia". The group includes a woman in a light-colored dress and several men in suits and casual attire.	<p>American POWs 20 Years Later</p> <p>July 14, 2019</p> <p>Reverend Jesse Jackson and Patricia Blagojevich</p>
 A close-up photograph of the same man with white hair, looking slightly to the right. He is wearing a dark blue jacket. The background shows other people, including a woman with sunglasses on the left and a woman with a slight smile on the right.	<p>Rod is Finally Home</p> <p>February 20, 2020</p>

13

THE REVEREND

Congressmen Blagojevich and Jackson approached each other with outstretched hands and friendly smiles. After shaking hands, Rod jumped right into what was on his mind.

"I read in yesterday's paper that your father wants to go to Yugoslavia to see our three POWs," Rod said.

"Yes, however, he won't agree to go unless the Yugoslavian government guarantees that he will see our three soldiers," Jesse replied. "So far, no such guarantee has been given," he continued.

Rod paused for a moment and looked Jesse squarely in the eyes to establish a higher level of seriousness.

"I have some contacts," explained Rod, "Contacts in the Serbian-American community and also within Milosevic's government itself," he continued.

Jesse knew precisely what Rod meant. He looked at Rod with a "please continue" look, and Rod did.

"If I could secure through my contacts a face-to-face meeting with our soldiers, do you think your father would want to go to Yugoslavia to try to bring our boys home?"

"Absolutely!" replied Jesse. "Why don't you call the Reverend this very moment?"

"The Reverend? You call your father 'The Reverend?'" asked Rod. It

HERO – Man in the Arena

struck Rod as strange that Jesse did not refer to him as "Dad" or "Father."

"Ok, so you call your father 'The Reverend.' Great. But I am not comfortable calling him directly. I would like to speak with him after you have confirmed he would like to speak to me."

"Fair enough," said Jesse. "I'll speak with him and be in touch with you as soon as possible."

The Congressmen parted ways and Rod returned to his office.

Within 20 minutes Jesse called Rod.

"Rod!" Jesse said. "The Reverend is excited to speak to you and he wants you to call him right now. Here is his cell phone number. . .write it down."

Rod wrote down the Reverend's phone number and hung up with Jesse. Rod immediately dialed the Reverend's number.

TALKING IN CODE

One of the Reverend's aides answered the phone. "Hello, may I help you?"

"Yes, this is Congressman Blagojevich. I believe the Reverend is expecting my call."

"Yes, of course, Congressman, one moment."

Rod could hear the buzz of many voices in the background. "The Reverend was in a public place with lots of people around," Rod thought to himself.

After a minute or so Rod heard a soft voice say, "Hello?"

"Reverend Jackson?" asked Rod.

"Yes," the Reverend said in nearly a whisper.

"This is Congressman Blagojevich. I just spoke with your son."

"Yes, Congressman!" he replied, betraying a hint of excitement, but still speaking in a whisper.

"Is now a good time?" asked Rod.

"I'm in Mississippi at a voting drive," explained the Reverend, "So I

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have to speak softly. I don't want anyone hearing our conversation."

At that moment, Rod had a fleeting moment of terror. He was on the phone with the Reverend Jesse Jackson, and they were about to freelance around the President of the United States and the U.S. State Department in an unsanctioned, unsupported, unauthorized diplomatic and humanitarian rescue mission to liberate three American prisoners of war. This mission was a real game of life-or-death chess. If something went wrong, Rod and the Reverend could find themselves prisoners of war there, or worse, prisoners of the United States justice system here, for violating some obscure law prohibiting citizens from interfering in international matters of state. Or, worse still, be killed by a NATO bomb. He was uncertain which of the three unfavorable outcomes was the worst.

The Reverend whispered into the phone, "Talk in code."

"Code? What code?" thought Rod to himself. He did not know any code. However, Rod figured that the Reverend simply wanted to create enough opacity to the conversation that it could not be deciphered by an eavesdropper or by a phone tap.

Rod continued, "I may be able to arrange a guaranteed visit over there with Alpha, Bravo, and Charlie."

To which the Reverend replied, "Understand."

"I may also be able to arrange an in-person visit with the 'big cheese,'" Rod continued. The big cheese, of course, was Milosevic himself, and Jackson knew precisely what Rod meant.

"Understand."

"Someone under the direction of the big cheese met with me in my Congressional office a few weeks ago."

"Understand."

"If I can secure a guarantee, are you prepared to move quickly?"

"Yes."

"I will reach out right now. We will likely have an answer by 5 PM Washington, D.C. time tomorrow."

HERO – Man in the Arena

"If it happens," whispered Jackson, "we will move!"

VUK DRASKOVIC VICE PRESIDENT OF YUGOSLAVIA

Through Mr. Gajic, with whom Rod had met in his Washington, D.C. office the day before NATO bombing started, discussions began with Vuk Draskovic, the vice president of Yugoslavia. Decisions were made quickly, as the Serbs were tired of being bombed and hoped that, perhaps, a visit by a United States Congressman signaled a light at the end of the tunnel.

As expected, the call from Yugoslavia's vice president came the following day.

"Congressman Blagojevich," Mr. Draskovic said, "I can verbally guarantee that you and Mr. Jackson will be able to meet with your soldiers if you will also agree to tour Belgrade and witness firsthand the devastation NATO has inflicted upon our people."

"Thank you, Vice President Draskovic," responded Rod, "we agree to tour Belgrade. We require a formal written invitation from your government. As soon as we receive it, we will make arrangements to arrive sometime late April or early May."

Late April was merely two weeks away. Successfully organizing and executing such an envoy in and of itself would be a miracle.

Within hours, Rod and the Reverend Jackson each received a formal invitation from the government of Yugoslavia.

The rescue mission was going to happen.

14

WHAT CAN GO WRONG, WILL

In the early stages of planning, the rescue delegation seemed to encounter every possible roadblock. During a meeting at the Reverend Jackson's Rainbow Push office in Georgetown, Washington, D.C., a question was presented to the group.

"Should we actually do this mission? It is so dangerous and expensive. We are literally risking our lives and that of our three soldiers. Are we making a mistake?"

After some open discussion, the Reverend asked Rod what he thought.

Rod answered, "Reverend, we owe it to those boys to get them out, no matter what the cost."

It was decided. The nerve-racking mission would go forward, no matter what.

A LOGISTICAL MIRACLE

As any parent can attest, making travel arrangements to Disneyland is no simple feat. It can take weeks to plan the entire trip.

Consider what planning a rescue mission into a war zone must have been like.

HERO – Man in the Arena

It was a delicate operation in and of itself, even for one person. Yet, in this delegation there would be up to twenty individuals, and they would be plunging headlong into an active bombing zone. There was no guarantee that any of them would make it out alive. The stress of the operation was compounded by the consequences of a potential diplomatic misstep resulting in the execution of the American soldiers. It would not be something any of them would want to live with. But not trying was also unacceptable. The delegation was committed.

The Reverend Jackson negotiated the use of a World Airways jet that would take the delegation directly into Belgrade. However, when the U.S. State Department notified the airline's CEO that the plane would be flying into a war zone, the flight was cancelled until Jackson could secure a war insurance policy on the plane to cover any potentiality. The insurer's underwriting department presented the premium to the Reverend and he decided that World Airways could no longer be an option. The policy was simply too expensive.

The rescue party would have to fly commercial. Flights were booked from the United States to Rome, Italy. A connecting flight would be taken from Rome to Belgrade. However, when NATO heard of the new plans, it intervened and had the flights cancelled.

Not to be deterred, the Reverend Jackson and Congressman Blagojevich deftly reorchestrated the flight logistics. The delegation would now fly from Washington, D.C. to Frankfurt, Germany. They would then take a connecting flight to Zagreb, Croatia. From Zagreb, they would take a bus five hours across Croatia to the Yugoslavian border, and another two hours through Yugoslavia to Belgrade, arriving just before midnight, April 29, 1999.

To say traveling to Yugoslavia was logistically complex would be an absurd understatement. But the American heroes, the delegation, had three other American heroes to save—our soldiers. No sacrifice or discomfort was too great. It was not a movie or a book. It was a real maximum-stakes drama.

BELGRADE, YUGOSLAVIA
APRIL 29, 1999

The delegation's bus arrived just before midnight, just as planned, at the hotel in Belgrade on April 29, 1999, to a large crowd of curious locals, government and military officials, and the international press.

After a midnight meal with several Yugoslavian government officials in a darkened restaurant to minimize the chance of being bombed, Congressman Blagojevich and the Reverend Jackson retired to their rooms around 3 AM.

From the hotel room window, Rod could see and hear explosions from NATO bombs and missiles that were disturbingly close. One missile appeared so close that Rod thought that it would hit the hotel, so he scrambled to the floor. It hit its target not far from the hotel, just across the Danube River. It was a close call.

During the distress of what he was witnessing, the telephone rang. Rod was relieved to hear Patti's voice on the other end.

"It is so good to hear your voice," said Rod. "But, how did you get this number?"

She replied, "1-800-GO-HYATT."

15

THE SITUATION ROOM, THE WHITE HOUSE WASHINGTON, D.C.

THURSDAY, APRIL 29, 1999

President Clinton sat at the head of the huge conference room table in the West Wing "Situation Room."

He was visibly agitated.

In the room with him was Madeleine Albright, Secretary of State, and William Cohen, Secretary of Defense.

"The optics of this are all bad, Madam Secretary," said the president.

"Yes, I know, Mr. President," she replied.

President Clinton could get frighteningly angry when the public viewed him as politically or executively inept. His fists slammed down on the table and Secretaries Albright and Cohen jumped with a start.

"There is an elected official over there, a member of the United States Congress. Tomorrow, he will meet with the highest-ranking members of the Yugoslav government. He will engage in real talks.

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Unofficial, yes, but it won't matter. It never does. It will seem official to them. It will feel official to them. They will think they are building points of leverage with the United States!"

"Mr. President," Secretary Albright interjected. "The State Department has the best minds in America working on this problem. We will find a solution."

President Clinton's jaw clenched.

"Madam Secretary," the president began, "perhaps you do not fully appreciate the issue. The American people resent career bureaucrats making decisions affecting their lives. Do you appreciate that? So, what if you have wonkish, snot-nosed Ivy League kids working on the problem? Those wonks are sitting in a comfortable office, all haughty and smug. They are discussing our three soldiers with callous and snobbish indifference. Your 'best minds,' with their smug intellectual indifference for the lives of our boys, won't bring them home. Our boys are not mere pawns in an afternoon game of chess!"

President Clinton slammed his fists down on the table again. Both secretaries jumped again.

"This is bad, very bad," the President continued. "We have an American civil rights hero, and an American congressman, risking their lives to get our boys out while your 'best minds' are sitting smugly in the safety of air-conditioned offices. Not good."

The two secretaries nodded in understanding, but remained silent.

"But, do you want to know what bothers me most?" continued the president.

Both secretaries made an "I don't know" look with their faces. They might as well have shrugged.

"If Jackson and Blagojevich succeed, and bring our boys home, in the face of our objections, the American people will see my administration, no, me, as either having lost my moral compass or as being a coward, or both!"

Silence.

HERO – Man in the Arena

The president continued, "And if they succeed, I will be forced to bring those two renegades to the Oval Office for a photo op, or risk being seen as petty. Why did you two put me in this position?"

The two secretaries shifted in their seats, betraying the discomfort each was feeling, while simultaneously stealing a brief "uh-oh" glance at the other.

"That is all," the president said as he stood to his feet and walked out of the Situation Room.

MILITARY DETENTION CENTER, BELGRADE MILITARY PRISONER HOLDING CELLS FRIDAY, APRIL 30, 1999

Thirty days had passed since the capture of the American soldiers.

Each American soldier sat in isolation in his individual cold, prisoner-of-war cell. The cells were contained within a military detention center near the Sava River in Belgrade.

Solitary confinement is difficult to explain. It is a psychological warfare tool used on prisoners. The effect is the same whether the cell's occupant is a prisoner of war, or a prisoner due to having been convicted in a court of law. The prisoner is usually all alone in a 6' x 9' cement cell. Occasionally, another prisoner may be placed in the cell, not for basic human companionship, but to make the quarters even more cramped, more noisy, more smelly, more tense. But in the American soldiers' case, each was alone.

In solitary, every little noise reverberates against the cement into a deafening collision with the prisoner's senses. The room is either too dark or too light. Outside the cell door, guards taunt the prisoners with the most horrific words about family, mothers, wives—what they would like to do to them if given the chance.

America's prisons are no exception to this barbaric method of

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torture. A prisoner's mind may begin to play tricks on him. He may visually or audibly hallucinate. His moods will swing dramatically. Every possible horrible thought covers the prisoner's mind and emotions like a cold, wet, moldy, vermin-soiled blanket. The thought of a quick death begins to seem really nice.

SOMETHING IS HAPPENING OUT THERE

The activity outside the cell door seemed to have picked up significantly.

Staff Sergeant Stone whispered under his breath, "Something is happening out there. They are getting ready to execute us."

A coldness ran through Stone's veins. It is a coldness only a prisoner who has experienced solitary confinement can understand.

A loud, heavily accented voice spoke English through the corner of the door. "American, get ready. We are coming to get you immediately."

Sergeant Stone stood to his feet.

"Well," he thought to himself. "This is it. I am going to die for my country. I am proud to be an American soldier!"

16

GAME DAY, 6 AM

FRIDAY, APRIL 30, 1999

The phone in Rod's room rang.

"Mr. Blagojevich. This is your wake-up call."

Rod cleared and focused his eyes. The clock said 6 AM. He had been asleep for a little over an hour. Every muscle in his body ached from the prior day's travel. The midnight meal with the Reverend, Mr. Gajic, and Zivadin Jovanovic, Yugoslav Foreign Minister, only increased his exhaustion and concern.

Prior to leaving the United States for Belgrade, Vuk Draskovic, Yugoslavian Vice President, issued official government invitations to Rod, to the Reverend, and to the delegation. The invitations came with a guarantee that they would be permitted to visit with the three American soldiers in person. Hours before the delegation was to leave Washington, D.C., Milosevic learned of Draskovic's invitation and guarantee, and was not pleased. Milosevic removed Draskovic from further interactions with the delegation. The guarantee to see the American soldiers went up in smoke with Draskovic's removal. What happened to Draskovic was not disclosed to the delegation.

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As Rod lay in bed trying to focus his mind and prepare for the day, he replayed the late-night dinner conversation had only hours earlier and committed it to memory.

The candles flickered in the dark restaurant. Darkness was required so as to not attract the attention of a NATO bomb.

"Mr. Jackson," Minister Jovanovic began, speaking English, but with a very heavy Serbian accent, "we are uncertain whether you will be able to see your soldiers during your visit. I am sorry."

"Is that so?" replied the Reverend.

"Yes. It appears that Mr. Draskovic gave you a guarantee that he was not authorized to give."

"I see."

Silence.

Rod could not sit by and allow this devastating revelation to go unchallenged. The entire trip was contingent upon that guarantee to see the POWs. Now, the trip may have been in vain. The Reverend would be humiliated. He would be mocked by the press and by his enemies. Rod could be excoriated by his constituents. The Clinton administration could say, "We told you so."

Rod spoke up. "Minister Jovanovic," he began. "If I may, I would like to express my deep disappointment by this unexpected news."

Minister Jovanovic nodded.

Rod turned and looked at Mr. Gajic, whose face betrayed the fear and anxiety he felt. He understood that if this "hiccup" could not be worked out, NATO would take it as yet another act of bad faith by the Milosevic government, and that it would amplify its bombing campaign, leading to more death and destruction.

Rod understood the stakes. What he was about to say would either save or destroy thousands and thousands of lives.

"It sounds as though we need to convey to President Milosevic that we understand his concerns. He needs to know that we are listening to him. It cannot be a one-sided dialogue."

HERO – Man in the Arena

Mr. Gajic's face lightened with relief. Mr. Jovanovic nodded again.

Rod continued, "We will fulfill our end of the agreement. We will tour the destruction caused by NATO bombs. In return, we ask that you gently convey to President Milosevic that we want to hear him out. We want to help end the death and destruction if possible. It will take both sides doing what the other agreed to do. Will you please attempt to persuade your president to officially extend the invitation to us to visit with our soldiers?"

Minister Jovanovic nodded. Mr. Gajic looked at Rod with an approving and relieved look, one fitting for someone who was concerned about his own life and that of his family and friends. Not one of them was immune from a NATO bomb.

"If I may, Minister Jovanovic," Rod continued, "if your president obstructs our ability to see our soldiers, after an official from your government promised to let us see them, any potential sympathy you might have had from the free world will evaporate in an instant once we provide the international media with a copy of the invitation letter and guarantee which we were given. It will not be a good look for your president. You will have duped Americans on a humanitarian goodwill mission. Those optics alone, may, in the view of NATO, justify accelerated and intensified bombing. Do you understand?"

Minister Jovanovic and Mr. Gajic nodded soberly.

Although Rod was not in Serbia in an official capacity, the service he had just rendered to human beings in the land of his forefathers, and also to the three American soldiers, was as important as anything he would ever do in Congress, and it was certainly more brave.

It was after 3 AM when the dinner concluded.

Unbeknownst to millions, in a darkened, candlelit tiny restaurant in downtown Belgrade, Serbia, Rod had established a path of action which would save countless lives. His heroism would not end there.

After the replay of the dinner discussion concluded in his head, he stepped out of bed and stretched. He looked out the window to plumes

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of smoke rising just across the Danube River from the previous night's bombing campaign.

SAVING MOTHER TERESA WOULD NOT SUFFICE

While Rod and the Reverend were literally saving lives, critics at home mercilessly attacked Rod for plunging himself into an international crisis. He was not there in an official capacity as a United States congressman. He paid his own way with personal funds. He was there on an unofficial humanitarian mission to help save three American soldiers, and to hopefully lay the groundwork to end the war.

As Rod looked out the window, he thought about the long day ahead. The delegation would tour bombed civilian neighborhoods, visit refugee camps along the Kosovo border, visit the U.S. military base across the Adriatic Sea in Italy from which NATO's bombing sorties launched, and visit NATO headquarters in Brussels. It would be a whirlwind day, hopefully ending in a visit with the American soldiers.

Fleeting thoughts of unfair criticism came and went in his head. He shook the thoughts out of his mind and remembered that "The credit belongs to the man in the arena . . ." Unfair and unjust criticism, regrettably, would become the norm later in Rod's life.

"I'm in the arena trying to help our boys," Rod thought to himself. "If Mother Teresa were one of those prisoners and we got her out, we would still be criticized."

That thought cleared his mind and solidified his resolve. Adrenaline flooded his veins.

"We must get our boys out!"

At 9 AM, the Reverend Jackson and Congressman Blagojevich, along with the delegation, looked out the windows of the bus as it drove

HERO – Man in the Arena

toward Milosevic's presidential compound, the Beli Dvor, or "The White Palace" as Serbs call it. Off to one side, they could see smoke rising from a destroyed Serbian television station still smoldering from NATO's most recent bombing mere hours earlier.

Minutes later the bus arrived at the Beli Dvor. The team was exhausted from the previous day's long flight, long drive, and minimal sleep. However, adrenaline surged through the veins of the members of the delegation. They were on a mission, literally, and they had to be on top of their game. This was it. The moment of truth. Life or death.

As the delegation and three camera crews walked toward the front entrance of the presidential compound, reporters nearby yelled out questions hoping someone would bite.

"Reverend Jackson, what if you fail to secure the release of the Americans?" yelled one reporter.

"Then we have failed trying to do the right thing," responded the Reverend.

INSIDE THE PRESIDENTIAL COMPOUND

Mr. Gajic, who visited with Rod in his Washington, D.C. office just before NATO began bombing, along with Nebojsa Vujovic, spokesman for the Yugoslavian Department of Foreign Affairs, met the delegation in the large entryway to the presidential compound. The two Yugoslavian government officials shook everyone's hands with welcoming, yet worrisome smiles.

The Reverend Jackson was the tip of the spear, and everyone understood it. However, without Rod, there would not likely have been a trip to Belgrade at all. It was Rod's negotiations with Vice President Vuk Draskovic, Yugoslavian Foreign Minister Zivadin Jovanovic, Messrs Gajic, and Vujovic which opened the doors to Milosevic. Rod was the linchpin. Rod was the key that would hold everything together. The

importance of his role would be immediately tested.

**BELGRADE, BELI DVOR, 4 PM
PERMISSION GRANTED**

As the delegation toured bombed areas and witnessed refugee camps, there was plenty of time to listen to the Yugoslavian officials' points of view. Many of them went on and on about how they were the victims, with nothing said of the ethnic Albanians.

After nearly seven hours of breakneck-paced touring, the delegation returned to Belgrade and entered into the Beli Dvor, the Yugoslavian equivalent of the White House.

Minister Jovanovic, the Yugoslavian Foreign Minister with whom Rod and the Reverend dined until 3 AM, along with Mr. Gajic, stepped out of President Milosevic's office and walked toward the delegation who was casually socializing in the Beli Dvor's large entryway.

Minister Jovanovic gently took Rod by the arm and said, "Mr. Blagojevich, a word, please?" Mr. Gajic followed.

After stepping aside, Minister Jovanovic said, "Mr. Blagojevich, I am pleased to inform you that you will be permitted to visit your soldiers." Mr. Gajic smiled hopefully.

Rod felt a wave of relief wash over him.

"However," he continued, "there is a condition."

"Oh?" Rod replied with curiosity.

"Yes, only two from your delegation will be permitted into the military prison facility. In other words, only you and the Reverend Jackson will be permitted."

"The others in the delegation will not be happy," said Rod.

"Yes, we understand," continued Minister Jovanovic. "The Reverend Jackson is, well, the Reverend Jackson. Clearly, he must be one of the two."

HERO – Man in the Arena

Rod nodded in acknowledgment.

Jovanovic continued, "And you, Mr. Blagojevich, will be the second visitor. Please meet us here in the lobby at 6 PM. We have a short drive. Your visit will begin at 6:30 PM."

"Why me and not one of the other members of our delegation?" inquired Rod.

"Because you are the Serbian John Kennedy."

17

TIME TO SEE OUR BOYS

LOBBY OF THE BELI DVOR, 6 PM
FRIDAY, APRIL 30, 1999

As instructed, the Reverend Jackson and Rod arrived at the Beli Dvor at 6 PM. Minister Jovanovic and Mr. Gajic greeted them in the lobby with a friendly smile and handshake.

Two running Mercedes Benz autos were waiting in the parking lot, along with other vehicles, including a media van. Jackson and Rod were shown to one of two awaiting Mercedes and entered the back seat.

Jovanovic and Gajic entered the other Mercedes with several other Yugoslavian officials. Camera crews entered the media van and the local and international press entered their respective vehicles.

One by one, the vehicles left the Beli Dvor. The ride was short. After traveling to central Belgrade, and having crossed the Sava River, the motorcade stopped in front of a small building that looked like it could have been a very old post office.

All parties exited the vehicles and approached the front door.

Mr. Gajic looked at Rod and the Reverend and said, "This is a military detention center. Your soldiers are held in separate cells here and have been since their capture. When we walk through this front door, we will enter the courtroom. A judge and other Serbian officials

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will join us.

The parties entered the building. Mr. Gajic instructed Rod and the Reverend to sit on the right side of the room. A CNN camera crew and a New York Times reporter sat to the left. Within moments, the military judge entered and sat down behind a large desk at the head of the room.

All parties sat quietly while the CNN cameras rolled.

The New York Times reporter furiously scribbled notes to capture the scene.

"The activity outside the cell door seemed to have picked up significantly," Sergeant Stone said to himself. "They are getting ready to execute us."

Sergeant Stone stood to his feet.

The heavy steel door swung open and two Yugoslavian soldiers each grabbed an arm. They escorted him out of his cell, down the cold hallway to an open door. Sergeant Stone saw the judge sitting in his chair. He entered and looked right into Rod's eyes but did not recognize him, other than that he looked like a local in a suit. "Just another Serb," Sergeant Stone said to himself. He then panned the room and saw a news camera. "They are going to video my execution!" An ominous chill came over him. He then looked at the remaining faces in the room and saw the Reverend.

Sergeant Stone gasped.

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It took a moment for the young soldier to comprehend what was happening. Here was the Reverend Jesse Jackson, in person, in the Serbian jail in which he was being held! It was simply difficult to wrap his mind around it all.

When the Reverend saw him, he turned to Rod and said, "Look at him. He's just a boy." The Sergeant was 25 years old.

"Look at his face. He must have been beaten quite badly," Rod replied. "His wounds appear to be healing, though."

The Reverend stood and walked toward Sergeant Stone. Sergeant Stone walked toward the Reverend and the two embraced and shed tears of joy.

Sergeant Stone had left a young wife and a baby back in the United States. He thought he would never see them again.

"Sergeant, this is Congressman Rod Blagojevich. He is from Illinois, just like I am. He has been instrumental in establishing a bond with the Serbians. Otherwise, we would never have been permitted to see you," said the Reverend.

Sergeant Stone trembled. He was overwhelmed.

"How are your fellow soldiers?" the Reverend continued.

"I do not know, sir. I have not seen them since we were captured."

The Reverend turned to Minister Jovanovic. "Where are the other two?"

An English interpreter in the courtroom explained to the Reverend that they would be able to see only Sergeant Stone.

"No, no, no!" said the Reverend. "That will not do. We will not leave until we have seen all three!"

The military judge grew impatient. The tension in the room was enormous. Suddenly, the air-raid siren outside began to blare, adding to the precarious situation.

Rod leaned over to the Reverend and whispered, "Don't worry about that air-raid siren. It is a ruse. NATO bombs between only midnight and 4 AM. It's not even 7 PM yet. They are trying to frighten us to get us to

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leave."

The Reverend nodded with understanding.

"Gentlemen, we will not leave until we have seen all three!" the Reverend demanded.

Silence in the room.

"We will not leave until we see all three!" the Reverend said again.

The interpreter conveyed the meaning to the judge, who then looked at the other government officials with astonishment. "This man is either the bravest man on earth, or the craziest. For all he knows, a NATO bomb is about to come crashing through the roof and kill us all and he is refusing to leave!" said the judge in Serbian to his interpreter.

Once again, "We will not leave until we see all three!"

Rod fixed a steely gaze upon the Serbs in the courtroom, daring them not to capitulate.

The military judge was utterly unnerved.

"Izvadi druga dva!" the judge ordered. ("Bring out the other two!")

The air-raid siren went silent.

In moments, all three Americans stood before the Reverend and Rod in the same fatigues they wore when captured, albeit laundered.

In total, the meeting lasted 40 minutes.

The Reverend Jackson and Congressman Blagojevich controlled that military courtroom with their moral authority and presence. They were guests from the United States. The United States was a member of NATO who was actively bombing those in whose courtroom they stood. Think of it! Their demands were peaceful, yet firm. They stood on the moral high ground and the Serbs knew it. The Serbs relented.

It was the first time the American soldiers had seen each other since their capture over thirty days prior. It was a joyous reunion. For all they knew, the others were dead.

Jackson gave Sergeant Stone a cell phone and he called his family. Specialist Gonzales was asked by CNN if he wanted to say something.

"Dad, I'm so sorry I put you through so much pain and agony."

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The tenderness of it all melted every heart.

The Reverend took the hands of each boy and began to pray: "Our Father in Heaven. The jail experience is a time to write, a time to think, a time to pray, a time to think about how one wants to build his life. Let this imprisonment experience strengthen the character and faith of these three young American heroes. By Your mighty power, allow them to come home with us tomorrow. Out of their scars, let there come stars. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen."

18

TOMORROW (MAY 1) IS THE BIG DAY

**THE BELGRADE HYATT HOTEL
FRIDAY, APRIL 30, 1999**

Rod, the Reverend, and the delegation returned to the Hyatt Hotel and convened around 8 PM. Everyone was simultaneously exhausted and elated at the same time.

"Get a good night's sleep," said the Reverend. "Tomorrow is the big day."

The "big day" meant that it was the day the delegation would meet with President Slobodan Milosevic in his presidential office in the Beli Dvor.

"Be in the lobby of the hotel at 7 AM. We will go over to the Milosevic meeting together," the Reverend concluded.

"Good night. Good work, everyone," said Rod.

**LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA
SATURDAY, MAY 1, 1999**

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Vivian Ramirez kneeled by her bed and bowed her head in prayer.

"Please, God. Help Reverend Jackson and Congressman Blagojevich succeed. Allow them to bring my boy home."

BELI DVOR, 8 AM SATURDAY, MAY 1, 1999

The bus pulled up to the front door of the Milosevic presidential palace. It was beginning to feel like a familiar place to the delegation.

Once again, Minister Jovanovic and Mr. Gajic met the delegation with handshakes and smiles. Each was a consummate diplomat.

Those two Serbian officials spent every possible moment with President Milosevic, preparing him for this meeting. The stakes for all those individuals in the Milosevic government were as high as stakes can be.

After waiting a short time, the delegation was escorted to President Milosevic's office. There was a receiving line ready for the delegation and Milosevic was in it.

One by one, beginning with the Reverend Jackson, then Rod, and then the rest of the delegation members, they went through the receiving line and shook hands with each official.

When Rod got to Milosevic, he said "zdravo," which is "hello" in Serbian. Milosevic ignored the gesture and shook Rod's hand limply.

"That was a pathetic handshake for the president of a sovereign nation," Rod said to himself. He continued, "Milosevic is quite tall. That was not expected."

Once all the delegation's members shook hands with the Yugoslavian officials, the Reverend took charge. He took President Milosevic by one hand, and Rod by the other, and began to pray. Milosevic did not know what had hit him. It happened so fast.

The scene was something stranger than fiction.

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Three men, holding hands.

The man in the center was a living legend civil rights leader from the United States.

The man on the left was a hardcore Marxist, communist dictator accused of genocide and ethnic cleansing.

The man on the right was a duly elected United States congressman from Illinois.

Conventional cameras clicked away. Video cameras captured the moment.

During the prayer, Rod could not help himself. He opened his eyes to catch a peek at Milosevic. "What was he doing? How was he reacting to this occurrence that to Milosevic, was no doubt strange and unusual?"

Milosevic seemed to be either actively participating or playing along in an attempt to get along. In either event, it was a sight to behold.

Minister Jovanovic and Mr. Gajic stood looking on in astonishment. They could not believe their eyes. "Some unseen power was guiding this meeting," said Jovanovic. "I am sure of it. How else could any of this be happening?" he whispered to Mr. Gajic.

After the Reverend concluded his prayer, they all sat down at a large table and proceeded to business.

President Milosevic sat at the head of a large conference room table.

To Milosevic's right sat the Reverend.

To the Reverend's right sat Rod.

Minister Jovanovic sat slightly behind Rod and to his left. An English interpreter sat immediately next to Jovanovic.

The other officials, including Mr. Gajic, and all other delegation members, sat around the remainder of the table and in other chairs along the wall of the large presidential office.

Stewards brought out Turkish coffee, carbonated citrus drinks, and cookies.

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Milosevic seemed to be a nervous wreck and began to chain smoke, making it difficult for some in the delegation to breathe. They continued on as the champions they were. Those boys were the prize and they were determined to bring them home that very day.

WHAT IS HOMEBOY?

Before the Reverend or Rod could speak, Milosevic went on a diatribe, condemning NATO, and speaking as though the nightly bombings were directed at him personally. He did not mention the pain and suffering of his people, including the ethnic Albanians. It was all about him. The delegation patiently listened. Once his filibuster was over, the Reverend spoke.

"President Milosevic," the Reverend began, "we share mutual interests. You want the bombing to stop. So do we. We are not here on a mission from our government. Our government does not endorse nor condone this humanitarian mission. We cannot speak for our government or NATO. We cannot influence the continuation or cessation of any military campaign. However, from a purely human-interest standpoint, we believe that the international community will view the release of the three American soldiers as a gesture of peace and reconciliation."

Milosevic's interpreter rattled off the translation in Serbian.

Milosevic spoke in near-perfect English. However, not every official in the room did. There were some words and terminology Milosevic did not understand.

Once the Reverend Jackson concluded his appeal to Milosevic for the release of the American soldiers, he turned to Rod and said, "Now, your homeboy would like to say a few words."

Milosevic's face suddenly looked perplexed. He did not understand what the Reverend meant.

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"What is homeboy?" Milosevic asked his interpreter in a strong European accent stereotypical of a hardliner communist.

Suddenly his interpreter was in a state of panic. There were reporters, photographers, and video cameras in the room. It was dead silent. Everyone was waiting on the interpreter. Beads of sweat began to accumulate on his brow as he stammered and stuttered.

The interpreter was unfamiliar with the vernacular of the word "homeboy," so commonly used in neighborhoods throughout American cities.

Milosevic became impatient. Anger began to show on his face.

Rod worried for the poor guy's life. "Would he be executed if he could not interpret the meaning?" Rod asked himself. He did not want to find out.

Rod leaned over and whispered to the interpreter, "Homeboy is a neighbor from your village."

The interpreter provided the explanation to Milosevic and he nodded in understanding and turned his attention to Rod.

Rod appealed to Milosevic in a way that no one else in the delegation could. He shared information about his father who spent four years in a Nazi prison camp during World War II. He explained that there could be a permanent solution to the conflict. But first, the American soldiers needed to be released.

"Can we, please, have our soldiers back?" Rod plainly asked in humility.

"Will you let them come home with us today?"

THE BALKAN MIRACLE

The meeting concluded and the delegation was asked to step out of the room while Milosevic and his government officials discussed the matter.

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After what seemed like an eternity, Minister Jovanovic and Mr. Gajic exited the room and approached the Reverend and Rod.

"Congratulations. The president says you may take your soldiers home today."

19

BELGRADE MAKES THE ANNOUNCEMENT TO THE WORLD

**AMERICAN SOLDIERS RELEASED FROM YUGOSLAVIAN
MILITARY PRISON
MAY 1, 1999, 12 NOON**

Minister Jovanovic and Mr. Gajic worked with staff to prepare a statement that would be given to the press once approved by President Milosevic. Rod and the Reverend were instructed to go “radio silent” until the Yugoslavian government made an official statement. Then, if they chose to do so, statements could be made by the delegation.

Rod and the Reverend respectfully accommodated the request and gathered the entire delegation into the corner of the hotel lobby where every member was accounted for and isolated from the press.

After approximately an hour, Yugoslavian officials read its statement to the world.

"After deep reflection and deliberation, President Milosevic has ordered the immediate release of three Americans held as prisoners of war by the Yugoslavian military."

The international media went into a frenzy. Everyone loves a story

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about the impossible becoming reality.

An official Mercedes Benz delivered the three soldiers to the hotel where a running bus awaited. Without a moment of hesitation, the three soldiers, along with the delegation, were loaded onto the bus and it drove straight to the Croatia border, covering the same route of days earlier.

At the border, the bus stopped. Rod exited to speak to Minister Jovanovic and Mr. Gajic who had been following in another official Mercedes Benz.

Rod shook their hands. The emotion of it all affected him and he felt a lump growing in his throat. Tears welled in the eyes of his two new friends.

It was a bittersweet goodbye. All three men were of Serbian descent. Two would stay. One would return to America.

"Goodbye, my friends," said Rod with a sincere, gracious humility which Jovanovic and Gajic appreciated.

"Goodbye to you," they replied. "Mr. Blagojevich . . . you saved those three boys' lives. You are a true American hero."

Rod's lungs quivered as he took a big breath, contemplating the thought.

"It would not have happened without each of you. You are true heroes to your country and to that of my father," Rod responded.

It was not lost upon them that the bombing might intensify until Milosevic yielded to NATO's demands. It would be a dangerous six weeks for Minister Jovanovic and Mr. Gajic. The war would eventually end on June 11, 1999, and it was the release of the American soldiers which marked the beginning of the end.

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Rod stepped back on the bus and off they went to Zagreb, Croatia. Around 2 PM, the Reverend handed Staff Sergeant Andrew Ramirez his cell phone.

"Here, call your mother," he said.

"Sir, it must be four in the morning, Los Angeles time," Staff Sergeant Ramirez said.

"Don't worry, soldier. Believe me, your mother won't care."

Staff Sergeant Ramirez dialed the number and waited to hear it ring. A soft voice answered.

"Hello?" said Vivian Ramirez.

"Mom? Hey, Mom! I'm free!"

Vivian reacted the way any loving mother would—she cried. She asked dozens of questions. She was beyond ecstatic.

"Mom, the Reverend Jackson would like to speak to you."

"Mrs. Ramirez," Jackson said softly.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" she said.

"You are welcome. Get your things together. A flight is waiting to bring you to Germany to be reunited with your son."

After the call ended, she dropped to her knees.

"¡Gracias a Dios por salvar a mi chico! ¡Gracias por responder mis oraciones!"

"Thank you, God, for saving my son! Thank you for answering my prayers!"

Around 3 PM, the bus arrived in Zagreb, Croatia. There, the

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delegation and soldiers boarded a C-9 medical transport aircraft and it quickly departed for Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany.

The jet landed and the soldiers walked down the stairs. It was a bright and sunny day. In the distance they could see a large crowd waving American flags near a hangar. A huge sign read, "It Doesn't Get Any Better Than This!"

Base officials gave the delegation and the three soldiers clean rooms in the military quarters. Hot shower. Hot food. Much needed rest after a harrowing experience for all involved.

Everyone tarried at Ramstein for the families of the soldiers to arrive.

Reporters published article after article. The release of the soldiers was the big story. Rod's involvement was not far behind.

"Without Rod Blagojevich," the article stated, "there might not have been a trip to Belgrade, no meeting with President Slobodan Milosevic, no tearful reunions with family this week for U.S. soldiers Christopher Stone, Andrew Ramirez, and Steven Gonzales. Blagojevich was the arranger, working his contacts in the Serbian-American community and in Serbia as well, when it looked like the trip was dead. Those contacts ultimately cleared a path to Milosevic himself."

As the international media buzzed with excitement, the soldiers' families began to arrive at Ramstein Air Force Base. Hugs, tears, stories.

Each family member looked at Congressman Blagojevich with a look that transcended mere thanks. They knew what Rod had done. Rod smiled back in an understanding acknowledgment.

HERO – Man in the Arena

FAREWELL EUROPE, HELLO ANDREWS AIR FORCE BASE, MARYLAND MAY 3, 1999

The United States military transport aircraft touched down at Andrews Air Force Base late in the afternoon on May 3, 1999. Stepping onto American soil after captivity in a foreign land is something few have ever experienced. It is a feeling that the three American soldiers vowed never to forget.

Rod and the Reverend huddled briefly to prepare for their important meeting at the White House with the president of the United States to occur later that evening. They then shook hands and gave each other a triumphant smile and departed for their respective homes to clean up after a long day's travel. They would meet each other later at the White House at the designated time.

THE WHITE HOUSE SITUATION ROOM WASHINGTON, D.C. EVENING, MAY 3, 1999

President Clinton, National Security Advisor Sandy Berger, White House Chief of Staff John Podesta, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, and Secretary of Defense William Cohen sat at the large conference room table in the Situation Room.

"Can you believe it? Our boys pulled it off!" the president exclaimed in astonishment. "We have to make sure my administration gets credit somehow, at least some credit. Make sure Press Secretary Lockhart is on it."

William Cohen said nothing, but incredulously shook his head.

John Podesta wanted to make sure everyone knew what was on the

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agenda for the evening. "Mr. President, the Reverend Jackson and Congressman Blagojevich will arrive here at the White House in thirty minutes for a briefing," Podesta said.

"Fine, thank you. This whole situation is so unbelievable," replied the president. "I still can't believe that they pulled it off," he continued with a slight smile while shaking his head.

"The news says that Congressman Blagojevich was the 'X factor.' He was the key to everything," Secretary Cohen pointed out.

"Obviously, the mission would not have been a success without the Reverend," President Clinton replied. "But he's done this before. I suppose in this particular case, Blagojevich was the linchpin."

"There's no doubt," Secretary Cohen replied.

"It looks like we have a new hero in town," replied Secretary Albright.

"Yes, yes we do," said the president in a complimentary tone. "A real life 'man in the arena.'"

EPILOGUE

On February 16, 2020, Rod Blagojevich, or "the Gov" as inmates call him, sat on his bunk in cell 26 and put on his athletic shoes in preparation for his daily afternoon run. It is a ritual he has performed nearly every day for almost eight years. One can only guess how many total miles he has racked up. While he runs, he recites poetry, speeches, and stories to himself from memory. It is therapeutic for him.

As he walks down the prison hallway to head out to the track, inmates pass by and say, "Hi Gov!" and he kindly responds.

"The Gov" has passed inmates in the hallways of prison on his way to his daily run more than a thousand times.

To each, he has been gracious and kind.

Never in eight years did an inmate complain that "the Gov" acted as though he were "better than I."

Listening to Rod talk about sports and politics is entertainment in and of itself. Rod Blagojevich is a walking encyclopedia full of all kinds of fascinating facts and laugh-inducing stories.

Frankly, he is a joy to be around.

He would light up when he talked about his wife and daughters.

He is positive, upbeat, and hopeful about life. His mop of dark brown hair, long since gone, is replaced with a head of white, distinctive hair that gives him an air of dignity.

In August 2019, Rod was told to pack up all his belongings because the president had commuted his sentence. He did as he was told, and the Lieutenant escorted him to Receiving and Discharge. There he was placed in a holding tank and he sat and sat and sat. Alone. For hours. Then, officers gave him the bad news, *"Sorry, you will not be going home. Your sentence has not been commuted. We will take you back to your cell."*

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Few men have experienced such a kick in the gut. Freedom is "just right there." He could taste it. In an instant, the "rug of liberty" was unceremoniously yanked out from under him.

As I write this chapter, I have been in prison for nearly seven years. I have seen this story play out before; a prisoner is told he has been released. "Pack your things. Immediate release." Then, only to discover after several hours of waiting in a holding tank that there had been a cruel mistake. No apology or sympathy. Only, "Get over it and get back to your cell, you dirty criminal." The inmate usually tries to hurt himself or attempts to find illicit drugs to cope. He will usually curl up in a ball and sleep for days as a deep depression comes over him. It is terribly sad.

When Rod came back later that evening, he handled the entire experience like the dignified man that he is. No complaining. No anger. No lashing out at others. No curling up in a ball and crying or sleeping for days. No, Rod went for a jog. The next day, he "swam the same stroke" as though nothing happened at all. He could be heard in the sports TV room commenting on the recent play, or in the news TV room commenting on the political pundits.

Now, I ask you, the reader, the following question:

If you were demonized by political opponents; declared a criminal for saying silly, and yes, regrettable things on a phone call; acquitted of a criminal act for saying those silly words, angering your political opponents even more; new bogus charges are brought against you so as to not allow you to legitimately escape the attack of your political opponents; found guilty; ripped from your wife and daughters for 14 years; placed in federal prison; told you would be released after 7 years; then told you would not be released after you had already packed all your belongings and told your family that you would be home that evening; while a false and fantastic public narrative about you rages on, how would you handle it? How would your family handle it? Many men, perhaps just like you, are literally crushed within weeks and

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die a slow, pathetic death (either physically or mentally/emotionally, or both) from *e carcere mortem*.

Most never recover. Would you?

There are a few men, rare men, however, who become stronger. That rare man's family relationships become unbreakable. He and his family become refined in the crucible of it all and emerge as triumphant heroes. Such a man, and his family, should be celebrated and admired by all people everywhere.

Such a man like Rod.

Such a woman like Patricia.

Such daughters like Amy and Anne.

Finally, on February 18, 2020, the word came.

"Blagojevich, pack up your stuff. Immediate release," said the officer. "The president has commuted your sentence."

This time it was for real.

The Gov humbly, without fanfare, exited the building.

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**THE MAN IN THE ARENA
“CITIZENSHIP IN A
REPUBLIC”
THEODORE ROOSEVELT
APRIL 23, 1910**

"It is not the critic who counts;
not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles,
or where the doer of deeds could have done them better.
The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena,
whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood;
who strives valiantly;
who errs,
who comes short again and again,
because there is no effort without error and shortcoming;
but who does actually strive to do the deeds;
who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions;
who spends himself in a worthy cause;
who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement,
and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly,
so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls
who neither know victory nor defeat."

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<p>Rod Blagojevich</p>	<p>https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rod_Blagojevich</p> <p>https://www.cnn.com/cnn/2013/03/23/us/rod-bлагоjevich-fast-facts/index.html</p> <p>https://chicago.cbslocal.com/2019/08/08/rod-bлагоjevich-five-fast-facts-about-the-</p>

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Rod Golden Gloves	<p>http://www.Boxing-Scoop.com</p> <p>https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rod_Bлагоjevich#Amateur_boxing_career</p>
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<i>The Reverend Jesse Jackson</i>	<p>https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-24081498</p> <p>https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1999-05-01-9905010074-story,amp.html</p> <p>https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-1999-04-30-9904300135-story.html</p>
<i>Definition of Political "Log Rolling"</i>	<p>https://www.dictionary.com/browse/logrolling</p>

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<p>Chicago Sun Times - July 14, 2019</p> <p>Where are They Now?</p> <p>20 years later, Rev. Jackson reunites with servicemen he helped release from Belgrade</p>	<p>https://chicago.suntimes.com/news/2019/7/14/20693237/rev-jackson-servicemen-belgrade-release-free</p>
<p>The Fate of Slobodan Milosevic</p>	<p>https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Slobodan_Milo%C5%A1evi%C4%87</p>

KEY DATES

5/20/1911	Radislav Blagojevich born in Kragujevac, Serbia.
10/12/1922	Mila Govedarica born in Chicago to Bosnia and Herzegovina immigrants.
5/1941	Radislav captured by Nazis, placed in prison camp.
5/7/1945	Radislav released from prison camp.
6/25/1948	Radislav arrives in America.
10/20/1950	Radislav and Mila, Rod's mother, marry.
12/10/1956	Rod Blagojevich born.
5/1975	Rod's Chicago Golden Gloves tournament.
6/1975	Rod graduates from high school.
1979	Rod graduates from Northwestern.
1983	Rod graduates from Pepperdine Law School.
1988	Rod meets Patricia Mell.
8/25/1990	Rod and Patricia marry.

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11/3/1992	Rod elected to Illinois State House of Representatives.
11/5/1996	Rod elected to U.S. House of Representatives.
11/5/2002	Rod elected as governor of Illinois.
11/7/2006	Rod elected to a second term as governor of Illinois.
2/1998	Kosovo War begins.
3/22/1999	Rambouillet Summit fails.
3/23/1999	Rod meets with Mr. Gajic in Congressional office.
3/24/1999	NATO bombing of Serbia begins.
3/31/1999	Three American soldiers captured as POWs.
4/13/1999	Rod speaks with Congressman Jesse Jackson, Jr. on House floor.
4/13/1999	Rod speaks with the Reverend Jesse Jackson regarding rescue mission.
4/29/1999	Delegation arrives in Belgrade.
4/30/1999	Tour of war-torn Serbia and meeting with American POWs.

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5/1/1999	Meeting with Yugoslavian President Slobodan Milosevic.
5/1/1999	American soldiers released as result of Rod's persuasion.
5/2/1999	Ramstein Air Base, Germany.
5/3/1999	Freed soldiers arrive back in United States along with delegation.
6/11/1999	Kosovo War ends.
6/27/2011	Rod convicted of conspiracy to commit mail and wire fraud.
3/15/2012	Rod begins 14-year sentence at FCI Englewood, Colorado.
4/26/2019	Rod meets Matthew D. Hutcheson at Englewood prison camp.
5/30/2019	Hutcheson begins writing this book.
1/15/2020	Hutcheson finishes manuscript of <i>Hero</i> .
2/18/2020	Rod released from prison by presidential commutation.

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INTERESTING FACT

Rod was incarcerated for twice as long as his father was a Prisoner of War in World War II.

Matt Hutcheson



AUTHOR

Matthew D. Hutcheson advocates for those who do not have a voice. His advocacy favorably impacts the lives of over seventy million Americans, including investment transparency, prison reform, race relations, jobs creation in struggling economies, affordable health care access, and uniting those of varying cultures, religions, and political persuasions. A Seattle native, he is blessed with a beautiful wife and four children.

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Psalm 82: 3-4

Defend the weak and the fatherless;
uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed.

Rescue the weak and the needy;
deliver them from the hand of the wicked.

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