Everybody was talking about politics and baseball — and somebody, at last, was going to do something about them!

By FREDERIK POHL & C. M. KORNBLUTH
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The neutron was a plump young man named Walter Chase, though what he thought he was was a brand-new Engineering graduate, sitting mummified and content with the other 3,876 in Eastern's class of '98, waiting for his sheepskin.

The university glee club sang the ancient scholastic song Gaudamus Igitur with mournful respect and creamy phrasing, for they and most of the graduates, faculty members, parents, relatives and friends present in the field house thought it was a hymn instead of the rowdy drinking song it was. It was a warm June day, conducive to reverence. Of Eastern's 3,877 graduating men and women only three had majored in classical languages. What those three would do for a living from July on was problematical.
But in June they had at least the pleasure of an internal chuckle over the many bowed heads.

Walter Chase's was bowed with the rest. He was of the Civil Engineering breed, and he had learned more about concrete in the four years just ended than you would think possible. Something called The Cement Research and Development Institute, whose vague but inspirational commercials were regularly on the TV screens, had located Walter as a promising high-school graduate. He was then considering the glamorous and expensive field of nuclear physics. A plausible C.R.D.I. field man had signed him up and set him straight. It took twelve years to make a nuclear physicist. Now, wasn't that a hell of a long time to wait for the good things of life? Now, here was something he ought to consider: Four years. In four years he could walk right into a job with automatic pay raises, protected seniority, stock participation and Blue Everything, paid by the company. Concrete was the big industry of tomorrow. The C.R.D.I. was deeply concerned over the lack of interest in concrete engineering, and it was prepared to do something about it: Full four-year scholarship, tuition, living costs and pocket money. Well?

Walter signed. He was a level-headed eighteen-year-old. He had been living with a pinch-penny aunt and uncle, his parents dead; the chance of the aunt and uncle financing twelve years of nuclear studies for him he estimated to lie midway between the incredible and the impossible.

Two solid hours dwindled past in addresses by the Chancellor, the Governor of the State and a couple of other politicos receiving honorary degrees. Walter Chase allowed the words to slip past him as though they were dreams, although many of them concerned his own specialty: shelters. You knew what politician talk was. He and the 3,876 others were coldly realistic enough to know that C.S.B. was a long way from being enacted into law, much less concrete-and-steel Civilian Shelters in fact. Otherwise why would the Institute have to keep begging for students to give scholarships to? He drowsed. Then, as if with an absent-minded start, the program ended.

Everybody flocked away onto the campus.

In the hubbub was all the talk of the time: “Nice weather, but, Kee-rist! those speeches!” “Who d’ya like in the All-Star?” “Nothing wrong with C.S.B. if it’s handled right, but you take and throw a couple thousand warheads over the Pole and —” “My
feet hurt.” Chase heard without listening. He was in a hurry.

There was no one he wanted to meet, no special friend or family. The aunt and uncle were not present at his graduation. When it had become clear from their letters that they expected him to pay back what they had spent to care for him as soon as he began earning money he telephoned them. Collect. He suggested that they sue him for the money or, alternatively, take a flying jump for themselves. It effectively closed out a relationship he loathed.

Chase saw, approaching him across the crowded campus, another relationship it was time to close out. The relationship’s name was Douglasina MacArthur Baggett, a brand-new graduate in journalism. She was pretty and she had in tow two older persons who Chase perceived to be her parents. “Walter,” she bubbled, “I don’t believe you were even looking for me! Meet Daddy and Mom.”

Walter Chase allowed his hand to be shaken. Baggett père was something in Health, Education and Welfare that had awakened Walter’s interest at one time; but as Douglasina had let it slip that Daddy had been passed over for promotion three years running, Walter’s interest had run out. The old fool now began babbling about how young fellows like Walter would, through the Civilian Shelters Bill, really give the country the top-dog Summit bargaining position that would pull old Zhdechnikov’s cork for him. The mother simpered: “So you’re the young man! We’ve heard so much about you in Douglassina’s letters. I tell you, why don’t you come and spend the All-Star weekend with us in Chevy Chase?”

Walter asked blankly: “Why?”

“Why?” said Mrs. Baggett in a faint voice, after a perceptible pause. Walter smiled warmly.

“After all,” he said, shrugging, “boy-girl college friendships. . . . She’s a fine girl, Mrs. Baggett. Delighted to have met you, Mr. Baggett. Doug, maybe we’ll run into each other again, eh?” He clapped her on the shoulder and slipped away.

Once screened from the sight of their faces, he sighed. In some ways he would miss her, he thought. Well. On to the future!

IN THE dormitory he snapped the locks on his luggage, already packed, carried them down to be stowed in the luggage compartment of the airport bus and then circulated gently through the halls. He had in four years at Eastern made eleven Good Contacts and thirty-six Possibles, and he had an hour or two before his plane to joke with, shake the
hand of, or congratulate the nine of those on the list who shared his dorm. He fooled the fools and flattered the flatterable, but in his wake a few of his classmates grimly said: "That young son of a bitch is going to go far, unless he runs out of faces to step on."

Having attended to his nine he charitably spread some of his remaining time among the couple dozen Outside Chances he ran into. To a sincere, but confused, servo-mech specialist he said, man-to-man, "Well, Frankie, what's the big decision? Made up your mind about the job yet?"

The servo-mech man clutched him and told him his tale of woe. "God no, Walt. I don't know which way to turn. Missile R&D's offering me a commission right away, captain inside of two years. But who wants to be a soldier all his life? And there's nothing in private industry for inertial guidance, you know. Damn it, Walt, if only they let you resign from the service after a couple years!" Chase said something more or less comforting and moved on. He was careful not to chuckle until he was out of sight.

Poor Frankie! Got himself educated in what amounted to a military specialty — who else could afford servo-mechanisms? — and discovered he hated the Army.

Still, Chase meditated while nodding, smiling and handshaking, thirty years as an Engineering Officer might not be so bad. As it was one of the alternatives open to himself — that was what C.S.B. was all about — he allowed his mind to drift over the prospects. It wasn't like the bad old days of fighting. A flat and rigid policy of atomic retaliation had been U. S. military doctrine for fifty-three years, and backing it up was a large, well-trained U. S. military establishment of career men. And the regulations said career. The only way out short of thirty-year retirement was with a can tied to your tail and a taint to your name. He dismissed that thirty-year dead end with light contempt, as he had before.

The air-raid warning sirens began to howl their undulating hysteria.

Chase sighed and glanced at his watch. Not too bad. He should still be able to make his plane. Everyone around him was saying things like, "Ah, damn it!" or "Oh, dear," or "Jeez!" But they were all dutifully following the arrows and the "S" signs that dotted the campus.

Chase trailed along. He was kind of annoyed, but nothing could really spoil his day. The first shelter he came to was full up. The freshman raid warden stood at the door — Chase had been a raid warden himself three
years before — chanting: “Basement filled to capacity, folks. Please proceed to Chemistry building. Don’t block the exit, folks. Basement here filled —”

BECAUSE of the extra crowd caused by the graduation the Chemistry building basement was filled, too, but Chase got into the Administration building and sat down to wait. Like everybody else. Women fussed about their dresses — they always had, in every air raid drill he had taken part in, say, four a week for fifty-two weeks of each year for the nearly twenty years since he had been old enough to toddle alongside his late mother and father. Men grumbled about missing appointments. They always had. But for the most part the battery-fed air-raid lights gleamed equally on them all, the warden fussed with the air conditioner and the younger folk smooched in the corners.

It wasn’t a bad shelter, Walter Chase thought. The Law School basement was a mess — too high a pH in the mortar mix, and the aggregate showing hygroscopic tendencies because of some clown not watching his rock crusher, so the walls were cracked and damp. Chemistry’s had been poured in a freeze. Well, naturally it began to sinter and flake. This was better; trust the Chancellor to make sure his own nest was downy! Of course, in a raid none of them would be worth a hoot; but there weren’t to be any real raids. Ever.

A jet plane’s ripping path sounded overhead.

Evidently this was going to be a full-dress affair, at least regional in scope. They didn’t throw simulated manned-bomber attacks for a purely local do. Walter frowned. It had suddenly occurred to him that with the air-transport flight lanes screwed up by military fighters on simulated missions everything within a thousand miles might be rerouted into stack patterns. What the devil would that do to his plane’s departure time?

Then he smiled forebearingly. He was, in a way, pleased to be annoyed. It meant he was entering into the adult world of appointments and passages. They said that when a raid drill began to be a damn interruption instead of a welcome break from classes and a chance to smooch, then, brother, you were growing up. He guessed he was growing up.

“Goddam foolishness,” growled the man who sat next to Chase on the bench, as though it were a personal attack. More jets shredded sound overhead and he glared at Chase. Walter inventoried his English shoes, seal ring and pale cigar and at once engaged him in conversation. The
man was some graduate's father; they had got separated in the raid drill, and Pop was sore as a tramped bunion. The whole drill thing was damned childishness, didn't Walter see that? And vindictive damned childishness when they chose to throw one on graduation day of a major university. If only Crockhouse had been elected in '96 instead of Braden, with his packed ballots in Indiana and Puerto Rico!

HERE Walter Chase's interest cooled, because Pop sounded like a politician, revealed himself to be a Nationalist and thus was out of power. But there was no escaping the bench. What Pop objected bitterly to was the multiple levels of expense. Here the drill was knocking men out of production, but the damn Middle-Road Congress said they had to be paid anyhow. And if the Defense Department was making it a full-scale simulated raid, did Walter know what that meant? That meant that there went thirty or forty Nineveh Ables at a hundred and fifty thousand dollars apiece, and was that enough? No. Then they sent up four or five Tyres at ninety thousand apiece to knock down the Ninevehs. Did that make sense? He paused to glare at Walter Chase.

Walter said, "Well, that's the Cold War for you. Say, who d'you like in the All-Star —" He didn't get to finish the sentence.

"L.A." snapped Pop, without losing a beat. "Get the damn monkey-business over with, that's what I say. I'm a sneak-puncher and I'm proud of it. If we'd put our man in the White House instead of that psalm-singing Braden there wouldn't be any Moscow or Peking or Calcutta by now and we wouldn't be sitting here on our butts!"

Somebody clawed through from the bench in front; with horror, Chase recognized old man Baggett. But Douglasina's Daddy did not recognize him. Flushed with rage and politics he had eyes only for the sneak-punch advocate. "You're right it's monkey-business, fatmouth!" he snarled. "No thanks to you and your Crockhouse we aren't dead in this cellar instead of safe and secure! President Braden is a hundred percent pledged to the C.S.B., God bless it, and —"

The rest of his sentence and Sneak-Punch's angry reply were drowned out by a further flight of jets overhead, and then the wham-wham-wham of interceptor missiles blowing simulated attackers out of the sky.

Somehow, heaven knew how, Walter Chase managed to sneak away, inching through the packed rows of benches. As soon as the All Clear siren toots began he
was up and out, ignoring the freshman warden's puppylike yaps that they should remain in their seats until the front benches had been emptied —

Routine. It was all strictly routine.

Out on the campus, Chase headed for the airport in earnest, and was delighted to find that his flight was still on time. How lucky he was, he thought, with more pride than gratitude. "What are you, sir?" asked the robot baggage-checker, and he said, "Washington," with pleasure. He was on his way. He was headed for Washington, where Dr. Hines of The Cement Research and Development Institute would assign him to his job, doubtless the first rung of a dizzying climb to wealth and fame. He was a young man on his way. Or so he thought. He did not know that he was only a neutron ambling toward events.

II

ARTURO Denzer, in the same sense, was a nucleus. He knew no more about it than Walter Chase.

Denzer woke to the rays of a rising sun and the snarl of his wake-up clock. He took a vitamin capsule, an aspirin tablet, a thyroid injection; a mildly euphoric jolt of racemic amphetamine sulphate; caffeine via three cups of black coffee with sucaryl; and nicotine via a chain of non-filtering filter-tip cigarettes. He then left his apartment for the offices of Nature's Way Magazine, which he edited.

June's blossom was in the air, and so was the tingle of the All-Star Game Number One. The elevator operator said to him respectfully, "Who d'ya like in the All-Star game, Mr. Denzer?" Denzer turned the operator's conversation circuit off with a handwave. He didn't feel like talking to a robot at least until the aspirin began to work.

Absent-mindedly he waved a cab to him and climbed in. Only after it took off did he notice, to his dismay, that he had picked a Black-and-White fleet hack. They were salty and picturesque—and couldn't be turned off. The damned thing would probably call him "Mac."

"Who ya like inna All-Star, Mac?" the cab asked genially, and Denzer winced. Trapped, he drummed his fingers on the armrest and stared at the Jefferson Memorial in its sea of amusement rides and hot-dog stands. "Who ya like inna All-Star, Mac?" it asked again, genially and relentlessly. It would go on asking until he answered.

"Yanks," Denzer grunted. Next time he'd watch what he was doing and get a sleek, black Ripp-
ington Livery with a respectful BBC accent.

"Them bums?" groaned the cab derisively. "Watcha think Craffany's up to?"

Craffany was the Yankee manager. Denzer knew that he had benched three of his star players over the last weekend—indeed, it was impossible to avoid knowing it. Denzer struck out wildly: "Saving them for the All-Star, I guess."

The cab grunted and said: "Maybe. My guess, Fliederwick's in a slump so Craffany benched him and pulled Hockins and Walker so it'd look like he was saving 'em for the All-Star. Ya notice Fliederwick was 0 for 11 in the first game with Navy?"

Denzer gritted his teeth and slumped down in the seat. After a moment the cab grunted and said: "Maybe. My guess is Fliederwick's in a slump so Craffany benched him and pulled. . . ." It went through it twice more before Denzer and his hangover could stand no more.

"I hate baseball," he said distinctly.

The cab said at once, "Well, it's a free country. Say, ya see Braden's speech on the C.S.B. last night?"

"I did."

"He really gave it to them, right? You got to watch those traitors. Course, like Crockhouse says, where we going to get the money?"

"Print it, I imagine," snarled Denzer.

"Figgers don't lie. We already got a gross national debt of $87,912.02 per person, you know that? Tack on the cost of the Civilian Shelters and whaddya got?"

Denzer's headache was becoming cataclysmic. He rubbed his temples feverishly.

"Figgers don't lie. We already got a gross national . . ."

Desperate situations require desperate measures. "I hate p-politics too," he said, stuttering a little. Normally he didn't like smutty talk.

The cab broke off and growled: "Watch ya language, Mac. This is a respectable fleet."

THE cab corkscrewed down to a landing in North Arlington-Alex and said, "Here y'are, Mac." Denzer paid it and stepped from the windy terrace of the Press House onto a crowded westbound corridor. He hoped in a way that the cab wouldn't turn him in to a gossip columnist. In another way he didn't care.

Around him buzzed the noise of the All-Star and the C.S.B. "... Craffany ... $87,912.02, and at least $6,175.50 for Shelters ... Foxy Framish and Little Joe Fliederwick ... well, this is next
year... nah, you sneak-punch 'em a couple thousand missiles over the Pole and... needs a year in the minors."

"Hello, Denzer," someone said. It was Maggie Frome, his assistant.

"Hello, Maggie," he said, and added automatically: "Who do you like in the All-Star game?"

In a low, ferocious voice she muttered: "You can take the All-Star game, tie it up in a b-b-brassiere and dump it in a Civilian Shelter. I am sick of the subject. Both subjects."

He flushed at her language and protested: "Really, Maggie!"

"Sorry," she grunted, sounding as though she didn't mean it. He contrasted her surly intransigence with his own reasoned remarks to the cab and tolerantly shook his head. Of course, he could have been taken the wrong way... He began to worry.

They stepped off together at the Nature's Way offices. Sales & Promotion was paralyzed. Instead of rows of talkers at rows of desks, phoning prospects out of city directories and high-pressuring them into subscriptions, the department was curdled into little knots of people cheerfully squabbling about the C.S.B. and the All-Stars. Denzer sighed and led the girl on into Transmission. The gang should have been tuning up the works, ready to shoot the next issue into seven million home facsimile receivers. Instead, the gang was talking All-Stars and C.S.B. It was the same in Typography, the same in Layout, the same in Editorial.

The door closed behind them, isolating their twin office from the babble. Blessed silence. "Maggie," he said, "I have a headache. Will you please work on the final paste-ups and cutting for me? There isn't anything that should give you any trouble."

"Okay, Denzer," she said, and retreated to her half of the office with the magazine dummy. Denzer felt a momentary pang of conscience. The issue was way overset and cutting it was a stinker of a job to pass on to Maggie Frome. Still, that was what you had assistants for, wasn't it?

He studied her, covertly, as she bent over the dummy. She was a nice-looking girl, even if she was a hangover from the administration of President Danton and his Century of the Common Woman. Maggie's mother had been something of an integrationist leader in Sandusky, Ohio, and had flocked to Washington as one mote in Danton's crackpot horde, bringing her sub-teenage daughter Maggie. No doubt there had been a father, but Maggie never mentioned him. The mother had died in a car crash that looked
like suicide after Danton lost all fifty-four states in his bid for re-election, but by then Maggie was a pert teen-ager who moved in with cousins in Arlington-Alex and she stayed on. Must just like Washington, Denzer thought. Not because of Female Integration, though. Danton’s Century of the Common Woman had lasted just four years.

He winced a little as he remembered her coarseness of speech. She was round and brown-haired. You couldn’t have everything.

Denzer leaned back and shut his eyes. The hubbub outside the office was just barely audible for a moment—some red-hot argument over the Gottshalk Committee’s Shelter Report or Fliederwick’s R.B.I. had swelled briefly to the shrieking stage—and then died away again. Heretically he wondered what the point was in getting excited over baseball or the building or non-building of air-raid shelters capable of housing every American all the time. One was as remote from reality as the other.

“Sorry, Denzer.”
He sat up, banging his knee on his desk.

“Lousy staff work, I’m afraid. Here’s the Aztec Cocawine piece and no lab verification on the test results.” She was waving red-crayoned galleys in his face.

He looked at the scrawling red question-mark over the neat columns of type with distaste. Nature’s Way promised its seven million subscribers that it would not sell them anything that would kill them; or, at least, that if it did kill them nobody would be able to hang it on the product directly. At substantial expense, they maintained a facility to prove this point. It was called The Nature’s Way National Impartial Research Foundation. “So call the lab,” he said.

“No good, Denzer. Front-office memo last month. Lab verifications must be in writing with notary’s seal on hand before the issue goes to bed.”

“Cripes,” he protested, “that means somebody’s got to go clear over to Lobby House.” He did not meet her eye. Going over to Lobby House was a worthwhile break in the day’s routine; the free snack-bar and free bar-bar the lobbies maintained was up to the best expense-account standards, and everyone enjoyed talking to the kooks in the lab. They were so odd.

“I’ll go if you want, Denzer,” she said, startling him into looking at her.

“But the issue—”

“Did most of it last night, Denzer. The Aztec story is all that’s left.”

“We’ll both go,” he said, rising. She had earned it; he needed a
bromo and a shot of B-1 vitagunk in the Lobby House snack-bar; and since there would be two of them in the cab he had a ruse for cutting out the cab’s talk about All-Stars and the C.S.B.

The ruse was this: As soon as the cab took off he flung his arms around her and bore her back against the arm rest.

The cab chuckled and winked at them with its rear-view lens, as it was programmed to do. They discussed proofreading, the vacation sked and the choice of lead commercials for the next issue of Nature’s Way in soft whispers into each other’s ears all the way to Lobby House, while the cab winked and chuckled at them every fifteen seconds.

The kooks on the 93d floor were under the care of a sort of half-breed race of semi-kooks. These were science majors who had minored in journalism... or in marrying rich... and thus wandered into press agentry for scientific concerns. As liaison men between Nature’s Way and the test-tube manipulators the semi-kooks occupied an uncertain middle ground. It sometimes made them belligerent. Denzer and the girl were let in to see the Director of Bennington’s Division, a Dr. Bennington, and Denzer said: “We came for the Aztec Cocawine certification.”

Dr. Bennington boomed: “Damn right! Coming right up! Say, who’s gonna take it in the Game?” He thumped a button on his desk and in a moment a tall, stooped youth with a proudly beaked nose swept in and threw a document on his desk. “Thanks, Valendor. Lessee here, um, yeah. Says it’s harmless to the nerves, ya-ta-ta, ya-ta-ta, all signed and stamped. Anything else today, Arturo? Gland extract, fake a heroin prescription, shot of Scotch?”

The beaked youth said loftily: “Our findings are set forth precisely, Dr. Bennington. The fluid contains an alkaloid which appreciably eroded the myelin sheaths of the autonomic nerve trunks.”

Denzer blanched, but the semi-kook administrator agreed carelessly, “Right, that’s what I said. It’s that word ‘appreciably.’ Anything less than ‘markedly,’ we write it down as negative.” He slipped it in an envelope that was already marked Confidential Findings, Aztec Wine of Coca Corporation, Sponsor, and sailed it across to Denzer. “Well, what about C.S.B., boy? They gonna get us dug in before it’s too late?” He made them promise to stop in at the snack-bar or bar-bar before leaving the building, then offered them a drink out of his private stock. They refused, of course. That was just his way of saying
good-by. It was the only way he knew to end a conversation.

WITH the certification in his pocket and the issue locked up, Denzer began to feel as though he might live, especially if he made it to the B-1 vitagunk dispenser in the snack-bar. He took Maggie Frome by the arm and was astonished to feel her shaking.

"Sorry, Denzer. I'm not crying, really. If somebody's going to sell crazy-making dope to the public, why shouldn't it be you and me? We're no better than anybody else, d-d-damn it!"

He said uncomfortably, "Maybe a drink's not such a bad idea. What do you say?"

"I'd love it," she sobbed. But then the sirens began to wail and they said, "Damn it," and "Oh, dear"—respectively, she did and he did—and they took their bearings by the signs and made for the shelters. Under Lobby House was nothing like enough space, so the air-raid shelter was the interior parts of the 10th through 85th floors, away from the flying glass of the curtain walls but not too near the elevator shafts. It was not a bad shelter, actually. It was proof against any bomb that the world had ever known, up to, say, early 1943.

There was plenty of room but not enough benches. Maggie and Denzer found a place on the floor where they could put their backs against a wall, and he allowed her to lean against his shoulder. She wasn't such a bad kid, he thought sympathetically, especially as the perfume in her hair was pleasant in his nostrils. There wasn't anything really wrong with Female Integration. Maggie wasn't a nut. Take baseball. Why, that was the Integrationist's major conquest, when women demanded and got equal representation on every major-league team in spite of the fact that they could not throw or run on competitive terms with men. They said that if all the teams had the same number of women it wouldn't matter. And it hadn't. And Integrationists were still crowing over the victory; and yet Maggie had refused to fall into the All-Star hysteria.

A roar like an outboard motor in the crown of your hat shook the building; A. A. "carpet" cannon laying a sheet of sudden death for missiles across the sky above them. Denzer relaxed. His headache was almost gone. He inclined his head to rest his cheek against Maggie's hair. Even with a hangover, it had been pleasant in the cab with his arms around her. He had been kind of looking forward to the return trip. If Denzer were indeed a nucleus, as in a way he was, he was beginning to feel a certain tugging of binding
energy toward certain other nuclear particles.

As soon as the noise stopped, he thought he would speak to her.

The noise stopped. The voices of the men beside them bellowed into the sudden quiet: “—damned foolish idea of Therapeutic War was exploded ten years ago! And that’s what we’d be if your idiot Crockhouse was in—exploded!”

And the man next to him: “At least Crockhouse wouldn’t have us sitting in these fool imitation shelters! He’d do something.”

“Whadya think Braden wants, for God’s sake? Not these things. He’s right on the record for C.S.B.”

And then Maggie Frome, breathing fire, her head no longer resting on Denzer’s shoulder: “What the hell is so great about C.S.B.? Shelters, no shelters, can’t you get it through your head that if this keeps up we’re dead? Dear God above, deliver me from fools, baseball players and p-p-politicians!”

Denzer tried to look as though he’d never met her; he was white-faced. Round, yes, sweet-smelling, yes, warm—but how could he ever get used to her dirty talk?

III

If Denzer was a nucleus and Walter Chase a neutron, what can we call the President of the United States? He played a part. Without him nothing could happen. Perhaps what he did was to shape the life of the neutron before fission happened; in that sense one could call him a “moderator.” This was an apt term for President Braden.

On this bright June morning in Washington—not Arlington-Alex or the bedroom municipalities in Maryland but the little old Federal District itself—the President of the United States held what was still called a “press” conference. He was late. The cathode-tube “newspapermen” grumbled a little as Secret Service men frisked them, but it was habit. They were used to being frisked, ever since that fanatic Alaskan nationalist publisher emptied a .32 at then-President Hutzmeyer in ’83. And they were used to now-President Braden being late.

They rose when President Braden came in. As usual, he protested in his pleasant adopted border-South accent: “Please, ladies, please, gentlemen, don’t bother—” So they sat down and smiled, and waited while Braden arranged some papers on his desk. He always did that. He never referred to them during the session, because he didn’t have to, but every week there was the minute or two of silence in the room while the President, his rimless glasses gleaming studiously,
pursed his lips over the documents in their red, blue and cream-colored folders.

He looked up and beamed.

Unobtrusive camera - eyes mounted flush with the walls of the conference room began to record. The elephanteine Giuseppe von Bortoski, N.B.C. Washington bureau chief, incomparably senior correspondent, was privileged to lead off. He did: “Good morning, Mr. President. Do you have a statement for us today?”

“Nothing prepared, Joseph. It’s been a quiet week, hasn’t it?”

Von Bortoski said solemnly, “Not for Craffany,” and everybody roared. Von Bortoski waited out his laugh and said: “But seriously, Mr. President, is there any comment on the radar picket situation?”

The President paused, then looked faintly surprised. “I didn’t know there was a ‘situation,’ Joseph. Our radar picket vessels off the Atlantic and Pacific coasts have been pulled in approximately two hundred miles. They all have the new microradar; they don’t have to be so far out. This gives us a gratifying economy, since the closer we can pull them in the fewer ships we need to stick out there on picket duty. Is that what you wanted to know, Joseph?”

“No, Mr. President. I was referring to Representative Simpson’s telecast yesterday. He alleged that the new radars haven’t been adequately field-tested. Said the move was premature and, well, dangerous.”

The President paused, then looked faintly angry. “I seem to recall that Illinois Simpson. A Democrat.” Everybody nodded. “I am surprised that you are taking up our time, Joseph, with the wild charges that emanate with monotonous regularity from the Party of Treason.” Everyone looked at the stout N.B.C. man with annoyance. The President turned toward a young lady correspondent, paused, and said, “Miss Bannerman, do you have a question?”

She did. What about the Civilian Shelters Bill?

The President paused, grinned and said, “I’m for it.” He got a small laugh.

“I mean, Mr. President, what is its status now? As the leader of your Party, is it going to go through?”

The President paused longer than usual. Everyone in the room knew what he was waiting for, though it was a convention of the Press Conference to pretend he was answering off the cuff. At last the other end of the transprompter circuit got its signals cleared and the President said levelly: “As the leader of my Party, Miss
Bannerman, I can say this thing is being hammered out. Slower than some of us would wish, true. But it will be done. It is the platform of my Party; on that platform I was elected in '98; and I have not the reputation of going back on my pledges.” He inclined his head to an approving stir among the correspondents.

Von Bortoski made a mental calculation. He decided that the press conference had supplied enough matter for his upcoming newscast and to hell with the rest of them. “Thank you, Mr. President,” he said. The other reporters swore under their breaths once more at the tyranny of the senior-correspondent rule, the President rose smiling and the armed guards stepped away from the doors.

C.S.B., C.S.B., the President mediated. Some day he would have to ask a question himself and find out just what this C.S.B. was all about. No doubt the R&I desk that fed him answers or speeches via the transprompter could tell him. He promised himself he would get around to it first thing, say, Monday. Or wait, wasn’t Monday the first All-Star game?

A swift conveyor belt whisked him from the Annex to the Old White House and an escalator to the Oval Room. His personal secretary ventured to say: “You made good time, Governor. There’s thirty-five minutes clear before the first appointment. How about a nap?”

President Braden snapped: “I see General Standish has been talking to you again, Murray. Tell that quack when I want doctoring I’ll ask for it, and get me a drink.”

The President, who liked to think he was a hard-riding, hard-drinking southern gentleman, although he had been a New Jersey accountant until he was thirty, sipped a glass of mineral water lightly tinted with whisky, decided he was refreshed and buzzed for the first appointment to start ahead of time.

The first appointment was with Senator Horton of Indiana. While he was coming in the transprompter whispered into the President’s ear: “Call him David, not Dave. No wife. Ex-professor, for God’s sake. Watch him.”

The President rose, smiling, and gripped Horton’s hand with warmth and the pressure of an old campaigner. “It’s a great pleasure, David. How’s Indiana shaping up for next year? Lose all your best seniors?”

Senator Horton had a shock of gray hair, a mournful face and a surprisingly springy, lean body for a fifty-year-old ex-professor. He said abruptly: “I don’t follow the school’s football schedule. Mr. President, I want something.”
"Unto the half of my kingdom," Braden said gaily, attempting to throw him off balance.

Horton gave him a meager smile. "I want you to bear down on the Civilian Shelters Bill. You are, after all, committed to it. It helped elect you. But twenty-two months have gone by and the bill is still in the Public Works Committee. I am on that committee, Mr. President, and it is my impression that I am the only member interested in seeing it enacted into law."

The President said gravely, "That's a mighty serious charge, David. One I cannot act on without the fullest—"

"Excuse me for interrupting, Mr. President, but your time is valuable and there are some things you needn't bother explaining to me." Deeply affronted, the President stared at him. "Believe me when I say that I've come to you as a last resort. I get only bland evasions from Harkness. The Interior Department—"

Harkness was the committee chair and he had been Braden's personal campaign manager in the '96 run. The President rose and said, "Excuse me, Senator, but I don't permit people to speak about Jim Harkness like that in my presence."

Senator Horton distractedly ran his hands through his shock of hair. "I didn't mean to offend you. God knows I don't mean to offend anyone. Not even the Secretary of Interior, though if he thinks—No, I won't say that. All I want is to get the C.S.B. on the floor and get the construction work under way. Mr. President, how long can all this go on?"

The President remained standing, looked at his watch and said coolly, "All what, David?"

"We are in the fifty-third year of the Political War, Mr. President. Somehow, by a succession of last-minute, hairs-breadth accidents, we have escaped nuclear bombing. It can't go on forever! If the missiles came over the Pole today they'd annihilate this nation, and I don't give one juicy damn that China and Russia would be annihilated in the next forty minutes—"

He was trembling. The President's earphone whispered tinily: "Hospitalized one year; nervous breakdown. The guard-ports have him covered with sleepy guns, sir." That was a relief; but what about this Horton? He was Doane's personal choice, chairman of the National Committee; had Doane put a raving maniac in the Senate? The President remembered, from those young, county-committeeman days when he remembered things clearly, that something like that had happened before. It had been during
the Party of Treason’s first years—a lunatic from the Northwest got elected to Congress and was mighty embarrassing until he committed suicide. The President, then a schoolboy, had chuckled with the rest of the nation over Congressman Zion-check; but now he was not chuckling. It was his Administration and in the Senate. And a member of, God help him, his party.

The President did not look toward the guard-ports and the riflemen behind them. He said quietly, “David, I want you to calm down. No pledges have been forgotten and no pledges are going to be violated. I’ll speak to Jim Harkness about the Shelter Bill today. That’s a promise.”

“Thank you,” Horton said gratefully, and tried to smile. “I’ll hold you to that, sir. Good day.”

THE President buzzed, not for his next appointment but to talk to his secretary. “Murray, get me Senator Harkness on the phone.” And to his chest microphone: “Transprompter desk? Get out of circuit. I’ll buzz you.” He heard the faint carrier tone in his ear die and the guard-ports click. For the first time since he stepped out of his shower that morning, the President was able to say a word that no one but himself could hear. He said it. It had only one syllable, but it improved his mood very much.

Harkness’s voice was resonant and comforting. The President, sometimes nagged by a secret feeling that he was not very bright, knew damned well that he was brighter than Harkness.

He said: “Jim, I’ve got to wondering about this C.S.B. that you’ve got in Public Works. The day’s young yet and I’ve had two questions about it. I know we campaigned on it—what is it, exactly?”

Harkness said comfortingly: “It’s under control, Brad. That fellow Horton is trying to unbottle it, but we can keep him quiet. He doesn’t know the ropes.”

“Know that, Jim. I just had him in here, wailing and mad. What’s it all about?”


“Not quite my point, Jim. I mean—” the President searched for what it was he did mean—“I mean, I can find out the facts and so on, but what’s got people so stirred up? Put it this way, Jim: What’s your philosophy about the Civilian Shelters Bill?”

“Philosophy?” Harkness sounded vaguely scared. “Well, I would
not know about philosophy, Brad. It’s an issue, C.S.B. is, and we’re very fortunate to have got it away from the Nationalists. C.S.B.’s very popular.” The President sighed inaudibly and relaxed; Senator Harkness was clearly about to launch into one of his famous explanations of things that never needed to be explained. “You see, Brad, an issue is lifeblood to a party. Look over the field today. What’s to argue about? Damn little. Everybody knows the Party of Treason is the Party of Treason. Everybody knows the Commies are crazy hoodlums, can’t trust ‘em. Everybody knows atomic retaliation is the only sound military policy. There, at one sweep, you knock domestic, foreign and military policy off the board and haven’t anything left to play with except C.S.B.” He paused for breath, but before the President could try to get him back on the track of the question he was rushing on: “It’s a godsend, Brad! The Nationalists guessed wrong. They turned C.S.B. down in the name of economy. My opinion, they listened too much to the Defense Department people; naturally the generals didn’t want to admit they can’t intercept whatever the Commies throw at us, and naturally they want the money for interception instead of shelters. Well, that’s all right, too, but the people say the last word. We Middle-Roaders guessed right. We slapped C.S.B. in our platform, and we won. What else is there to say about it? Now, we’re not going to turn loose of an issue like that. Fools if we did. The strategy’s to milk it along, get it on the floor just before we adjourn for campaign trips and if a Nationalist filibuster kills it, so much the better. That saves it for us for next year! You know, you never get credit in this game for what you’ve done. Only for what you’re going to do. And, hell, Brad,” he crowed, suddenly exultant as a child who found a dime in the street, “this thing is good for years! There has to be a big conference committee with the House on financing C.S.B., we haven’t even set up liaison with Military Affairs. We’ve got four more years easy. How’s that sound, Brad, eh? Ride right in to re-election in Twenty Oh Oh, the first President of the twenty-first century!”

THANKS, Jim,” said the President, “I knew I could get a straight answer out of you.” It was the only way to stop him. Otherwise he might go clear on to the C.S.B. and its effect on the Integrationists, the C.S.B. and Labor, the C.S.B. and Colorado water diversion or the C.S.B. as viewed in the light of Craffany’s
benching of Little Joe Fliedewick.

And yet, pondered the President, he still didn’t know even the question, much less the answer. Why was C.S.B. a good issue? The missiles hadn’t hit in the past 53 years, why should a voting population march to the booths and elect its leaders because of their Shelter philosophy now?

Braden changed the subject. “What do you think of Horton, Jim?”

He could always count on Harkness being frank, at least. “Don’t like him. A boat-rocker. You want my advice, Brad? You haven’t asked for it, but it’s get rid of him. Get the National Committee to put a little money in his district before the primaries.”

“I see,” said the President, thanked his former campaign manager and hung up.

He took a moment before buzzing Murray for the next appointment to sip his lightly tinted soda-water and close his eyes. Well, he’d wasted most of the thirty-five minutes he’d gained, and not even a nap to show for it. Maybe General Standish was right.

Once when Braden was younger, before he was governor of New Jersey, before he was state senator, when he still lived in the old Rumford house on the beach and commuted to Jersey City every day—once he had been a member of the National Guard, what he considered his obligation as a resigned West Pointer. And they had killed two of their obligatory four-hours-a-month one month watching a documentary film on nuclear attack. The arrows marched over the Pole and the picture dissolved to a flight of missiles. The warheads exploded high in air. Then the film went to stock shots, beautifully selected, selected and paced: the experimental houses searing and burning on Yucca Flats, the etched shadows of killed men on the walls of Hiroshima, a forest fire, a desert, empty, and the wind lifting sand-devils. The narration had told how such-and-such kind of construction would be burned within so-many miles of Ground Zero. It remarked that forest fires would blaze on every mountain and mentioned matter-of-factly that they wouldn’t go out until winter snow or spring rains, and of course then the ground would be bare and the topsoil would creep in mud down to the oceans. It estimated that then, even then, the year was no later than 1960, a full-scale attack would cost the world ninety per cent of its capacity to support life for at least a couple of centuries. Braden had never forgotten that movie.

He had never forgotten it, but he admitted that sometimes he
had allowed it to slip out of his mind for a while. This latest while seemed to have lasted quite a few years. Only C.S.B. had brought it back in his recollection.

Because that was the question, the President thought, sipping his tinted soda-water. What was the use of C.S.B.? What was the use of any kind of shelters, be they deep as damn-all, if all you had to come out of them to was a burned-out Sahara?

IV

NOW that the simulated raid was over everybody was resuming their interrupted errands at once. Denzer was crammed in any-which-way with Maggie Frome wedged under an arm and that kook from the Institute—Venezuela?—gabbling in his ear about computer studies and myelin sheaths.

The elevator jollied them all along. “Don’t forget tomorrow, folks. Be a lot of grandmothers buried tomorrow, eh?” It could not wink, but it giggled and, well, nudged them. Or at least it shook them. It was overloaded with the crowds from the shelter floors, and its compensators flagged, dropping it an inch below the sill of the lobby door, then lifting it. “Sorry, folks,” it apologized. “Good night, all!”

Denzer grabbed Maggie’s arm. The laboratory man called after him, but he only nodded and tugged the girl away through the crowds, which were mumbling to each other: “Foxy Framish . . . slip ’em a couple thousand nook-yoular . . . caught off first . . . oh, hell.” The “oh, hells” became general as they reached the main lobby outside of the elevator bays.

Civilian Air Wardens formed chains across the exits. Like fish weirs they chuted the exiting civilians into lines and passed each line through a checkpoint.

“Denzer,” groaned Maggie, “I’m cooked. I never wear my dosimeter badge with this old green dress.”

The wardens were checking every person for his compulsory air-raid equipment. Denzer swore handily, then brightened. They did have their press cards; this was official business. Aztec Wine of Coca was a powerful name in industry, and didn’t they have a right to take care of its affairs even if they overlooked a few formalities that nobody really took very seriously anyway? He said confidently: “Bet I get us out of it, Maggie. Watch this.” And he led her forcefully to the nearest warden. “You, there. Important morale business; here’s my card. I’m Denzer of Nature’s Way. This’s my assistant, Frome. I—”

Briskly the warden nodded. “Yes, sir, Mr. Denzer. Just come
Well, that was something else the Century of the Common Woman had accomplished. They had integrated the lockups, for better or for worse. Not that Maggie, asleep, was deriving the benefit she might from the integrated, but still very loud, yammering of the inmates of the bull-pen.

They weren't all A.R.P. violators. A sizeable knot in one corner were clearly common drunks, bellowing about the All-Star Game when they were not singing raucously. They were the chief targets of the bull-pen's repeated thunderings for quiet, as its volumetric ears registered an excessive noise level. They must wear out those tapes in a week, Denzer thought.

A diffident finger touched his arm. "Mr. Denzer?" It was the research fellow from the Institute.

Softly, to refrain from disturbing Maggie, he said: "Hello, Venezuela. Make yourself comfortable."

"Valendora, Mr. Denzer."

"Sorry," said Denzer absently, inhaling Maggie's hair.

"I ask you, Mr. Denzer," Valendora said, choosing his words with as much care as though he were taping a question for his computers, "is it proper that I should be arrested for being twenty-six feet away from where I would not be arrested?"

Denzer stared at him. "Come again?" Maggie stirred restlessly on his shoulder.

"I was two floors below the Foundation, Mr. Denzer, no more," said the research man. "We are not required to wear dosimeters in the Institute itself. Two floors is twenty-six feet."

DENZER sighed. This was not a time when he had patience for nuts. The girl on his shoulder stirred and he said, "Good morning, Maggie." Valendora swept on:

"Naturally, Mr. Denzer, it did not occur to me to go back for my dosimeter. My probable error was more than twenty-four hours minus, though zero plus, and it might have been the real attack. I was carrying a most important document and I could not endanger it."

Maggie looked at him with faint curiosity and then twisted around to look at Denzer's face. "The deadline, Denzer?" she muttered. He crossed his fingers and shrugged.

"Mr. Denzer," cried Valendora, "you are a man of influence. Statist. Analysis Trans. is waiting for this study—and besides," he added wonderingly, "I suppose if the attack is to come tomorrow someone should do something about it. Can you not secure justice for me in this matter?"

Rocked by the sudden vision of
himself as a man of influence, Denzer hardly heard the rest of what the research man was saying. Maggie Frome pushed herself away from him and stared thoughtfully at Valendora.

“We’re all in the same boat, friend,” she said kindly.

Valendora scowled at the floor.

“But what’s this about an attack?”

With bitter sarcasm Valendora said, “Nothing at all, Miss Frome. Merely what I have spent eleven months of my time on. And twenty-two computer hours.”

“I’m impressed, friend. You said something about an attack?”

Valendora said, “You would not understand single-event prediction, Miss Frome. It is a statistical assessment of probabilities. Oh, nothing in itself that has not previously been studied, true; but it is in the establishing of quantitative values for subjective data that I have, I do know, made a contribution.” He shrugged moodily. “And by tomorrow? The event, you see. If I have not published before the event it is only a mathematical statement. The test of a theory is the predictions that can be made from it; I have made my prediction. During the All-Star Game, you see—”

“There you are!” cried a new voice.

It was the plump youth who had been quarreling with Valen-

dora at the booking desk. He was still angry. “Baseball,” he snapped, “that’s all I hear. Can’t I make anyone understand that I am a special investigator on Senator Horton’s personal staff? The senator is waiting to interview me right now! And this man has stolen my thesis!” He put a hand out and briskly pumped Denzer’s. “Walter Chase, sir. M.A., C.E., and all the rest of that nonsense,” he twinkled, for he had made a quick estimate of Denzer’s well-cut clothes and hangdog look and pigeonholed him at once as second-string executive, subject to flattery.


“I’m in cement, Mr. Denzer,” he said. “Did a bit of research—my dissertation, actually—and received another degree—and Senator Horton is most taken by it. Most taken, Mr. Denzer. Unfortunately I’ve just the one copy, as it happens and it’s, well, rather important that it not be lost. It concerns cement, as it affects our shelter program—and, after all, what is a shelter but cement? Eh? Probably should’ve been classified at the start, but—”

He shrugged with the faint amused distaste of the man of science for the bureaucrat. “Anyway, I must have it; the senator

CRITICAL MASS

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must see it with his own eyes before he’ll give me the j— before making final arrangements. And this man has stolen it.”

“Stolen!” screamed Valendor. “Man! It is your fault, man! I was only—”

“Be careful!” commanded Chase furiously. “Don’t blame me! I was merely—”

Denzer felt a tug on his arm. Maggie Frome winked and led him away, near the group of singing drunks. They sat down again. “Quieter here!” she shouted in his ear. “Put your shoulder back, Denzer! I want to go back to sleep!”

“All right!” he yelled, and helped her settle her head against him; but in a moment she raised it again.

“Denzer!” she asked over the singing of the group, “did you hear what your friend from the Institute was saying? Something about an attack? I had the funny idea he meant missile attack—a real one, I mean.”

“No,” he shouted back, “it was only baseball! All-Star Game, you know.”

And he hardly heard the raucous bellowing of the drunks for the next half hour, inhaling the fragrance of her hair.

They were released at last, Denzer making bail; the bail corresponded to the amount of their fines for A.R.P. violation, and small print at the bottom of their summons pointed out that they could forfeit it if they chose, thus paying their fines, simply by failing to appear at the magistrate’s trial. They got out just in time to get the bulldog edition of Nature’s Way from a sidewalk scriber.

They looked at once on the spread, pages 34 and 35, expecting anything, even blank pages.

Tragically, the pages were not blank at all.

Pages 34 and 35 had nothing to do with Aztec Wine of Coca. It was a straight news story, headlined:

U.S. MISSILE VULNERABILITY TOTAL IN ALL-STAR GAME, SAYS GOVERNMENT STATISTICS EXPERT

From there it got worse. Maggie screamed faintly over Denzer’s shoulder as she read parts of it aloud: “‘The obsessive preoccupation of the American public with baseball stems from a bread-and-circuses analogy with ancient Rome. Now, as then, it may lead to our destruction.’ Denzer! Does this maniac want us to get lynched?”

“Read on,” moaned Denzer, already several laps ahead of her. Neatly boxed on the second page was a digested, sexed-up version
of something Denzer recognized faintly as the study of cement in the shelter program Chase had mentioned. What the Nature's Way semantic-digester had made of it was:

SHELTERS DEATH TRAPS

Study of the approved construction codes of all American shelter projects indicates that they will not withstand even large chemical explosives.

"I think," sobbed Arturo Denzer, "that I'll cut my throat."

"Not here, Mac," snapped the news-scribing machine. "Move on, will you? Hey! Late! Whaddya read?"

Shaking, the couple moved on. "Denzer," Maggie gasped, "where do you think Joe got this stuff?"

"Why, from us, Maggie." Denzer tried to swallow, but his throat was dry. "Didn't you hear Chase before? That was the mix-up at the desk; we must have got his papers, and I suppose what's his-name's, Venezuela's, and bundled them off to Joe. Nice job of rush typography, though," he added absently, staring into space. "Say, Maggie. What Venezuela was talking about. You think there's any truth to it?"

"To what, Denzer?"

"What it says here. Optimum time for the Other Side to strike—during the All-Star Game, it says. You think—?"

Maggie shook her head. "I don't think, Denzer," she said, and they walked on for a moment.

They heard their names called, turned, and were overtaken rapidly by Valendora and the cement engineer. "You!" cried Chase. "You have my thesis!"

"And you have my study!" cried Valendora.

"Not I but humanity," said Denzer sadly, holding out the damp faxed edition of Nature's Way.

Valendora, after one white-faced oath in Spanish, took it calmly. He glanced up at the sky for a second, then shrugged. "Someone will not like this. I should estimate," he said thoughtfully, "that within five minutes we will all be back in the calabozo."

But he was wrong.

It was actually less than three.

V

It was the third inning, and Craffany had just benched Little Joe Fliederick. In spite of the sudden ban on air travel the stadium was full. Every television screen in the country followed Little Joe's trudging walk to the dugout.

In the White House President Braden, shoes off, sipping a can of beer, ignored the insistent buzzing in his ear as long as he could. He wanted to watch the game. "—
and the crowd is roaring,” roared the announcer, “just a-boiling, folks! What’s Craffany up to? What will he do next? Man, don’t we have one going here today? Folks, was that the all-important turning point in today’s all-im—in today’s record-breaking All-Star Game, folks? Well, we’ll see. In sixty seconds we’ll return to the field, but meanwhile—”

The President allowed his attention to slip away from the commercial and took another pull at his beer. Baseball, now. That was something he could get his teeth into. He’d been a fan since the age of five. All his life. Even during the Century of the Common Woman, when that madman Danton had listened to the Female Lobby and put girls on every second base in the nation. But it had never been this good. This Fliederwick, now, he was good.

Diverted, he glanced at the screen. The camera was on Little Joe again, standing at the steps to the dugout, looking up. So were his teammates; and the announcer was saying: “Looks like some more of those air-to-air missile-busters, folks. A huge flight of them. Way up. Well, it’s good to know our country’s defense is being looked after and, say, speaking of defense, what do you suppose Craffany’s going to do now that—”

The buzzing returned. The President sighed and spoke to his invisible microphones. “What? Oh. Well, damn it . . . all right.”

With a resentful heart he put down the beer can and snapped off the television set. He debated putting his shoes back on. He decided against it, and pulled his chair close to the desk to hide his socks.

The door opened and Senator Horton came in.

“Mr. President,” cried Horton, “I want to thank you. There’s no doubt your prompt action has saved your country, sir. I imagine you’ve been filled in on the, ah, incident.”

Well, he had been, the President thought, but by Senator Harkness, and maybe the time had come when Jim Harkness’ view of world affairs needed a little broadening. “Suppose you tell me about it,” he said.

Horton looked faintly perplexed, but said promptly: “It was basically an accident. Two men, working independently, came up with reports, strictly unofficial but important. One was a graduate student’s thesis on shelter construction; happens the boy was looking for a job, the Cement Research & Development Institute recommended him to me, he was on his way to see me when the thing happened. That’s how I became involved in it. The other
fellow's a lab worker, at least as far as earning a living's concerned, but he's a mathematician something-or-other and was working out a problem with his lab's computers. The problem: If the Reds are going to sneak-punch us, when will they do it? The answer: today. While we're all off base, with the All-Star Game. In the old days they'd maybe pick a presidential election to put one over, just like Hitler used to pick the long weekends. Now all they need is a couple of hours when everybody's looking the other way, you see. All-Star Game's a natural."

The President said mildly, "I can see that without using a computer, Senator."

"Certainly, sir. But this boy proved it. Like to meet him, by the way? I've got the lot of them, right outside."

IN for a penny, in for a pound, thought the President, motioning them in. There were three men and a girl, rather young, rather excited. Senator Horton rattled off introductions. The President gathered the other two had been involved in the security leak that had occurred on the reports.

"But I've talked to them," cried Senator Horton, "and I can't believe there's a grain of malice in all of them. And what they say, Mr. President, requires immediate action."

"I was under the impression I'd taken immediate action," said the President. "You asked me to ground all civilian air traffic so the missile-watchers could have a clear field; I did. You asked me to put all our defense aircraft airborne; I did. You asked for a Condition Red defense posture and you got it, all but the official announcement."

"Yes, Mr. President. The immediate danger may have been averted, yes. But what about the future?"

"I see," said the President, and paused for a second. Oddly, there was no voice from the prompter in his ear to suggest his next words. He frowned.

"I see," he said again, louder. The tiny voice in his ear said at last:

"Well, sir, uh—" It cleared its throat. "Sir, there seems to be some confusion here. Perhaps you could ask the Senator to continue to brief you."

"Well—" said the President.

"David," whispered the prompter.

"—David, let's get our thinking organized. Why don't you continue to fill me in?"

"Gladly, sir! As you know, I'm Shelters all the way. Always have been. But what this young man here says has shaken me to the
core. Mr. Venezuela says—" Valendora grinned sullenly at the rug—"that at this very moment we would be in atoms if it hadn’t been for his timely publication of the statistical breakdown of our vulnerability. He’s even a little sore about it, Mr. President."

“Sore?”
The senator grinned. “We spoiled his prediction,” he explained. “Of course, we saved our own lives… The Other Side has computers too; they must have assessed our national preoccupation with baseball. Beyond doubt they intended to strike. Only the commotion his article caused—not only in our own country but, through their embassies, on the Other Side—plus of course your immediate reaction when I telephoned you asking for a Red Alert, kept the missiles from coming down today, sir. I’m certain of it. And this other young fellow, Mr. Chase—” Walter Chase bowed his head modestly—“brought out a lot of data in his term paper, or whatever it was. Seemed like nonsense, sir, so we checked it. Everything he said is not only fact but old stuff; it’s been published hundreds of times. Not a word of new material in it.” Chase glared. “That’s why we’ve never built deep shelters. They simply won’t stand up against massive attack—and cannot be made to stand up. It’s too late for shelters. In building them we’re falling into the oldest strategic trap of human warfare: We’re fighting yesterday’s war today.”

President Braden experienced a sinking feeling when the ear-prompter said only, and doubtfully, “Ask him to go on, sir.”

“Go on, si—Go on, David.”

“Why,” said the senator, astonished, “that’s all there is, Mr. President. The rest is up to you.”

President Braden remembered vaguely, as a youth, stories about the administration of President—who was it? Truman, or somebody around then. They said Truman had a sign on his desk that read: The buck stops here.

His own desk, the President noticed for the first time, was mirror-smooth. It held no such sign. Apart from the framed picture of his late wife there was nothing.

Yet the principle still held, remorselessly, no matter how long he had been able to postpone its application. He was the last man in the chain. There was no one to whom the President could pass the buck. If it was time for the nation to pick itself up, turn itself around and head off in a new direction, he was the only one who could order it to march.

He thought about the alternatives. Say these fellows were
right. Say the shelters couldn’t keep the nation going in the event of all-out attack. Say the present alert, so incredibly costly in money and men, could not be maintained around the clock for any length of time, which it surely could not. Say the sneak-punchers were right . . .

But no, thought the President somberly, that avenue had been explored and the end was disaster. You could never get all the opposing missile bases, not while some were under the sea and some were touring the highways of the Siberian tundra on trucks and some were orbital and some were airborne. And it only took a handful of survivors to kill you.

So what was left?

Here and now, everybody was waiting for him to speak—even the little voice in his ear.

The President pushed his chair back and put his feet up on the desk. “You know,” he said, wiggling his toes in their Argyle socks, “I once went to school too. True,” he said, not apologizing, “it was West Point. That’s a good school too, you know. I remember writing a term paper in one of the sociology courses . . . or was it history? No matter. I still recall what I said in that paper. I said wasn’t it astonishing that things always got worse before they got better. Take monarchy, I said. It built up and up, grew more complex, more useless, more removed from government, in any real sense, until we come to things like England’s Wars of the Roses and France’s Sun King and the Czar and the Mikado—until most of the business of the government was in the person of the king, instead of the other way around. Then—bang! No more monarchy.”

“Mr. President,” whispered the voice in his ear, “you have an appointment with the Mongolian Legate.”

“Oh, shut up, you,” said the President amiably, shocking his prompter and confusing his guests. “Sorry, not you,” he apologized. “My, uh, secretary. Tells me that the Chinese representatives want to talk about our ‘unprecedented and unpeace-loving acts’—more likely, to see what they can find out.” He picked the plug out of his ear and dropped it in a desk drawer. “They’ll wait. Now, take slavery,” he went on. “It too became more institutionalized—and ritualized—until the horse was riding the man; until the South here was existing on slaves, it was even existing for slaves. The biggest single item of wealth in the thirteen Confederate states was slaves. The biggest single line of business, other than agriculture, was slavery, dealing and breeding. Things get big and formal, you see, just before they
pop and blow away. Well, I wrote all this up. I turned it in, real proud, expecting, I don’t know, maybe an honorary LL.D. At least a compliment, certainly . . . It came back and the instructor had scrawled one word across the top of it: Toynbee. So I read up on Toynbee’s books. After, of course, I got over being oppressed at the instructor’s injustice to me. He was right. Toynbee described the whole thing long before I did.

“But, you know, I didn’t know that at the time. I thought it up myself, as if Toynbee had never lived,” said the President with some pride. He beamed at them.

Senator Horton was standing with open mouth. He glanced quickly at the others in the room, but they had nothing but puzzle-men to return to him. He said, “Mr. President, I don’t understand. You mean—"

“Mean? I mean what’s happened to us,” said the President testily. “We’ve had our obsessive period. Now we move on to something else. And, Senator, Congress is going to have to help move; and, I’m warning you, you’re going to help me move it.”

WHEN they left the White House it was late afternoon. The lilacs that bordered the walk were in full, fragrant bloom. Denzer inhaled deeply and squeezed the hand of Maggie Frome.

Passing the sentry box at the end of the drive, they heard a voice from a portable radio inside. It was screaming:

“It’s going . . . it’s going . . . it’s GONE, folks! Craffany has pulled one out of the fire again! And that wraps it up for him, as Hockins sends one way out over center-field and into the stands . . .” The guard looked out, rosily beaming, and waved them on. He would have waved them on if they had worn beards and carried ticking bombs; he was a Craffany rooter from way back, and now in an ecstasy of delight.

“Craffany did it, then,” said Walter Chase sagely. “I thought when he benched Hockins and moved Little Joe Fliederwick to —"

“Oh, shut up, Chase,” said Denzer. “Maggie, I’m buying drinks. You want to come along, Venezuela?”

“I think not, Mr. Denzer,” said the research man. “I’m late now. Statist. Analysis Trans. is expecting me.”

“Chase?” Politeness forced that one out of him. But Chase shook his head.

“I just remembered an old friend here in town,” said Chase. He had had time for some quick thinking. If the nation was going over to a non-shelter philosophy—if cave-dwelling was at an end and a dynamic new program was
going to start—maybe a cement degree wasn’t going to be the passport to security and fame he had imagined. Walter Chase had always had a keen eye for the handwriting on the wall. “A young lady friend,” he winked. “Name of Douglasina Baggett. Perhaps you’ve heard of her father; he’s quite an important man in H. E. & W.”

The neutron, properly paced, had struck the nucleus; and the spreading chain was propagating rapidly through their world. What was it going to be from now on? They did not know; does a fissioned atom know what elements it will change into? It must change; and so it changes. “I guess we did something, eh?” said Denzer. “But... I don’t know. If it hadn’t been us, I expect it would have been someone else. Something had to give.” For it doesn’t matter which nucleus fissions first. Once the mass is critical the chain reaction begins; it is as simple as that.

“Let’s get that drink, Denzer,” said Maggie Frome.

They flagged a cab, and all the way out to Arlington-Alex it chuckled at them as they kissed. The cab spared them its canned thoughts, and that was as they wished it. But that was not why they were in each other’s arms.

—FREDERIK POHL
AND C. M. KORNBLUTH

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