

Prologue



MID-MAY

There was no way for the White House or the Secret Service to stop the announcement of the kidnapping and ransom demand for President Elliot's children. The movie/videotape of the announcement was sent to every national network, cable and satellite provider in every major city in the United States. The envelopes arrived at their destinations within 30 minutes of each other and contained a 128-gigabyte flash drive on which was the video clip. Many of the envelopes were opened by secretaries or assistants to the person to whom the envelope was addressed. Less than forty percent of those who recognized it as a flash drive took it to the addressee. Less than fifty percent mounted the flash drive and clicked on the clip. The remainder took the flash drive to the company's IT guy to have it checked for viruses – there weren't any to be found. The destructive nature of the flash drive was contained in the content of the video clip. Most of the addressees who received the clip before it was watched or scanned for viruses also had it checked for viruses before checking out its contents. There were many who failed to check for viruses who found themselves on the chopping block of their immediate superiors and several of the addressees who failed to have it checked for viruses found themselves in trouble with their boards. After all, these are turbulent times in which we live. Once having viewed the clip the conscientious ones contacted or attempted to directly contact the president herself and found themselves transferred to the Secret Service.

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Charles Wright was the man to whom most contacts were routed and his standard answer to the usual query “Is this real? Can we use it in our news broadcasts?” was “The validity of the video clip has not been verified and therefore it would be inappropriate and potentially fraudulent to make its existence known.”

This answer did more to spur the use of the video clip than anything else and it was on the air within ten minutes of its receipt. One of the first to publically show it was Jerrad Watts of NBC news.

“We have just received a video tape that purports to show Nathan, Natalie, Jennifer and James Elliot, children of President Elliot and the First Gentleman ... excuse the faux pas ... her husband Dexter, being held prisoner in a desert that appears to be almost identical to the one where several Americans were beheaded by Jihadi John. You might remember that Jihadi John was a British born man who was the leader of a four-person terrorist group who because of their British accents were known to most people as ‘The Beatles’. We warn you that you might find this video a little graphic and advise you to not let your young children see it. I cannot make any further comment on it because I will see it with you for the first time.” Jerrad then nodded at the camera and the film started.

The first thing a viewer saw was a desert, with a light wind stirring up wisps of dirt or sand. As though from a distance the viewer could hear the sound of a motor which increased in volume until a dirty tracked vehicle rumbled in from screen left and stopped in front of the camera, its motor idling. The camera moved in until the vehicle became a blur and after the vehicle apparently sat there idling for about 30 seconds then the engine rumbled and the blur moved and disappeared screen right. As the dust settled a man,

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suspected to have been in the carrier and dismounted when it was stopped, could be seen standing in the middle of the screen. He was dressed from head to toe (or as least as far down as one could see) in black and in that respect bore a striking resemblance to Jihadi John. Except for two things: First he wore black gloves on his hands and second, his eyes were covered with reflective sunglasses. Unlike Jihadi John, he was not going to let anyone see the color of his eyes and more easily pursue his identification. The dust had not yet settled when the man spoke, his voice obviously distorted by a vocal resonator.

“In case you have not already heard about it, I am sorry that you have to learn of the kidnapping of the president’s children in this manner.”

There were audible gasps on the set as well as around the country.

“Of course, with any kidnapping come demands and threats. This is no different. What are our demands? The freedom of all Muslim fighters in Guantanamo – or Gitmo as you Americans say – and all other imprisonment camps in your and other countries.”

Again there were gasps and a few laughs and one voice in the studio saying, “As if that’s going to happen.”

“But, more importantly we require your she-whore president to resign from her office.”

On the set there was laughter and undercurrents of “He’s got to be kidding.”

“The announcement of her resignation is to be made by the president on national television.

“If any attempt is made to rescue our four visitors.... Well, first we had better show you who the visitors are.”

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The Terrorist waved to screen right and from that direction came two men bearing a chair sedan-chair style except that the chair was facing screen front rather than the direction of travel. The person in the chair was dressed just like The Terrorist but fastened securely to the chair with cable ties. Whoever it was struggled to get free, shaking any part of its body that it could. There was one difference between the headgears of the two. The Terrorist appeared to be wearing a balaclava like Jihad John but the new person was wearing a traditional keffiyeh or shemagh, a scarf wrapped to cover the hair and face with nothing showing but the person's eyes, which were covered with reflective sunglasses. The person was looking around wildly as though expecting to see someone there to set him/her free. The chair was set down screen center with the chair bearers standing on either side.

The Terrorist said, *"If you have any doubts, this is Nathan."* With that he nodded to the chair bearer on the right of the chair, who removed the sunglasses. The other man undid the lower part of the keffiyeh to reveal Nathan's face, a piece of duct tape serving as a gag. The camera zoomed in smoothly until his face filled the screen top to bottom. It paused for perhaps five seconds before pulling smoothly back.

Nathan nodded vigorously in confirmation but then once again began shaking his head wildly as the chair was picked up and carried screen left. The Terrorist waved again and a second sedan chair appeared from screen right with a person dressed and bound like Nathan had been.

"It's probably Natalie," Jerrad Watts said over the earpiece circuit. "She is the second oldest."

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The chair was carefully placed screen center, the chair bearers looking down as though trying to put it exactly where the previous chair had been. There was a slight pause as they appeared to be moving the chair back.

“This is Natalie,” intoned The Terrorist as the masking piece of the keffiyeh and sunglasses were removed to reveal Natalie’s face, tears running down her cheeks. Once again the camera zoomed in to show her full face but this time, both in and back, it was jerky, pausing and then continuing.

The chair was removed and with The Terrorist waving again was replaced by a third chair appearing from screen right bearing a person attired like the previous two and once again carefully placed center stage.

“Got to be James,” said Jerrad Watts over the circuit. *“He is the older of the twins.”*

However, when the sunglasses and lower part of the keffiyeh were removed, the face was obviously that of Jennifer who was just as obviously terrified indicated by the tears streaming down her face. The camera zoomed in smoothly this time and zoomed back the same way.

“Of course, this must be Jennifer,” The Terrorist explained.

That brought a sobbing that could almost be heard through the gag and the chair was borne off screen left. The Terrorist waved and once again from screen right came two men bearing yet another clone of The Terrorist and this person was struggling more violently than any of the other three.

“Got to be James,” Jerrad Watts almost whispered, sounding apologetic after his faux pas in the identification of the previous captive. When the chair reached the center

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of the screen, which was directly in front of The Terrorist, it was set down and the two bearers exited. The Terrorist stepped forward to a point just behind the chair.

“You have my demands. If any attempt is made to rescue our visitors...”

As the word “visitors” was uttered, in one swift motion The Terrorist pulled a sword from a scabbard which appeared to be attached to the back of the chair and in one continuous motion swung it and sharply – and daresay efficiently – detached the head of the person in the chair. There were definite cries of alarm and one of the women on the set fainted. However, the blow wasn’t clean enough and part of the keffiyeh remained attached either to the chair or the body and the severed head flew in the air to the right and came entirely free of its headdress and quickly disappeared. There was a brief spurt of arterial blood as the heart pumped its last. The Terrorist was forced to step back quickly to avoid being spattered.

The Terrorist said, *“If any rescue attempt is made and if our demands are not met, we shall repeat this process beginning with, hmmm, ... Jennifer. We are reasonable people and will give you forty-eight hours to accomplish our demands. Let’s say beginning at 2:00 p.m. Greenwich Mean Time today.”*

“The countdown has begun,” exclaimed The Terrorist who then threw a Nazi style salute and exclaimed *“Tahiat 'iilaa muhammad (salute to Muhammad).”*

The screen went black.