

The Yankton Saga

The reason I am including this item, in my autobiography is because it illuminates how I think about things – even national security-political crises such as the Cuban Missile Crises of 1962. I started writing it as a play in my reaction while I was a mid-grade (US Army Major) student at the Command and General Staff College Fort Leavenworth when the crises played itself out.

While I was very interested in what brought about that Cold War confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States and how skillful behind the scenes negotiations resolved it – I was more interested in the What If – nuclear war, or at least nuclear exchanges had occurred. Without, at that time, 1962, I was not privy to any high level Washington/Pentagon maneuverings about nuclear war (I was later, when I was assigned to the Pentagon, and worked on the Test Ban Treaty) I ‘imagined’ what might happen. So wrote it down as a play. I only will summarize the core ‘plot’ which I had thought through to its conclusion, but only had the time to write the play in it entirely.

But you will get the idea of how I viewed then – and still do - national decision making in the context of our political values.

The setting is in the basement of the County Court House in Yankton, South Dakota, a Midwestern town of approximately 14,000. (I selected it as symbolic of middle America, with core American values) It is getting dark and someone fires up a Coleman lantern, well known to ranchers and farmers, which gives light in the room.

The play opens in that basement room with about 7 men in it. Light is provided by a Coleman Lantern since electrical power is obviously off. Flashes of light can be seen through the small narrow basement windows. It looks like a thunderstorm would, except those flashes are from nuclear explosions – all pretty distant – but unmistakable, for all those in the basement had been following the increasing crises in Washington as the Soviets and the US government on television, radio, and in the newspapers. And then the worst happened – nuclear war – starting with an exchange of nuclear missiles detonating over the US – and Russia – happened.

The 7 men who went to the basement knew from fragmentary radio and local television that happened, and they were aware that something big happened when repeated flashes in the night sky and more than natural thunder rumbled across the Plains from the north – specifically North Dakota where a large number of Nuclear Missile silos exist at Minot, North Dakota. Which the Soviets would wreak as much destruction as possible on, to prevent them all those American missiles being fired.

The men, fearing drifting southward radiation fallout went to the basement of the heavily constructed Court House as more protection. The office room in the basement has a water cooler, desks and a telephone.

One of the men is a Congressman from South Dakota, who happened to be in his home state and in Yankton when the war – and nuclear exchanges – started.

Then, in a bit of a stretch of credibility, but of possibility, the telephone rings. Someone picks it up. And answers that yes “Representative Smith is in Yankton, and in fact is here in the County

Courthouse now”

The caller identifies himself as the Commanding General of the Strategic Air Command, in Nebraska and wants to speak to the Representative.

He explains that Washington, the seat of government has been virtually obliterated by nuclear strikes, that it appears that the President and Vice President are dead – or at least totally unreachable. And sitting Congress was struck and most Senators and Congressmen are presumed dead.

That SAC with lists of all Congressmen and their districts have been trying to reach any of them by the only means – telephone – which works only in some places in the US as major cities have been also struck. And Congressman Smith is the only one they have been able to talk to so far.

That, under the Constitution, and the Succession of Government under US law, the line of Commander in Chief goes through the Speaker of the House down into House members in the event of the death or incapacitation of the President and Vice President. That since Representative Smith is the only elected Congressman they can reach – you are

the Commander in Chief, to whom I will advise and obey.

That the urgency of the matter is that SAC has received an Ultimatum from the Soviets via the Hot Line to Moscow that was shared in the White House, now gone. The Moscow end does not appear to have been destroyed totally. That in the current pause of nuclear exchange the Soviet government demand the surrender of the United States. That is that demand is not met within 8 hours, the nuclear firing on more American cities will continue.

As the General says these things, unheard by the other 6 or the audience, Representative Smith covers the mouth piece after each statement by the General, and he repeats the gist of his comments.

The SAC commander wants to know what the defacto Commander in Chief wants – surrender or continuation of the US firing on Soviet targets.

The rest of the play is the dialogue and debate between those men (and two women, one a school teacher) on what to do.

The Representative realizes the weight of such a decision, and first asks the SAC commander to tell what he can about just how much damage and death has been done in the US and in Russia, whether he can continue to attack and destroy Russia. And asks him to call back within an hour if he can.

The debate goes on he appears to be asking the others in the room what they would decide – collectively. And some ask, what would the Constitution say, but nobody has one with them.

Then the woman teacher says that upstairs in the County Courtroom, is a library of law books, and she knows because she took her 8th grade students there where they gave a copy of the Constitution and Declaration of Independence that is in their History book they gave the three justices, that it is on the shelf.

So she and one man with a flashlight take a deep breath and leave the room to go upstairs, while the remaining people discuss and then fall silent with not much left to say.

When the pair come back, with the 8th Grade History

Book, they turn to the Constitution pages in the back. Then someone says, why not read it aloud, and the Declaration of Independence too.

So they begin to read aloud both, passing the book between them. And at the end, someone speaks up and say that, they, the seven in room are like local communities – and survivors – everywhere in the nation. They make their decision whom to elect to represent them, and then they vote on issues.

And another says that Russia – and its Soviet Union form of government in Russia – is not that way. They are top down, and brittle, looking to Moscow to tell them what to do. And the generals are probably in charge. Now most of Moscow is probably dead. While we are being asked by the most senior general what WE – you Representative Smith we elected – decide.

What would every small town – which are probably surviving – decide. Lets take a vote.

And they vote on scraps of paper – secret ballot - 5 to 2 to continue the war

And when the General Calls back, Representative

Smith tells him – in an even more authoritative voice - the citizens of Yankton, South Dakota, vote to continue the war. And so his decision is for the US Military to tell the Soviets, America has not surrendered, that the Soviets must surrender or call for a cease fire, or else the US will continue destroying their cities.

And the curtain comes down.