

ONE



For What It's Worth

Friday, August 23

DEPUTY SECRETARY OF HOMELAND SECURITY Charles “Chuck” Smyth sat behind his desk, skimming that morning’s edition of the *Washington Post*. The lead story, as it had been for the past four days, was about the Fish affair. While authorities stressed that the inquiry into his meeting with Canadian intelligence was still in its early stages, Fish was now officially under house arrest in his Manhattan apartment for “reasons of national security,” forbidden to leave the premises or have personal contact with anyone other than his wife, his top aide and his attorneys.

This latest development had brought the simmering political battle over Fish’s arraignment to a boil: The Democratic minorities in the House and Senate were charging that the Constitution was being subverted in order to steal the upcoming presidential election for the Republican candidate, sitting Vice President William Acton. Meanwhile, the Republicans had begun talking darkly of treason.

As usual, President Tom Ballinger was staying above the fray. “I’m just concentrating on completing my second term,” he was quoted as saying. “I have full confidence in the ability of our judicial branch to sort this matter out.”

I’m sure you do, thought Smyth. He had personal knowledge that

the decision to detain Fish and charge him had come straight from the White House—a fact that had been carefully kept from the media. He also knew that Homeland Security had been planning the operation for weeks. The day before the meeting, they'd sent a team posing as air conditioner repairmen into Fish's hotel room and bugged it with highly sensitive microphones.

The Republicans must be plenty worried to pull a stunt like this, he reflected. All summer long, Acton had held a solid 20-point lead in the polls over Fish, the Democrats' presumptive nominee. While Acton wasn't exactly charismatic, his fame as the man who uncovered the Boundary Waters nuclear terror plot had left him with an enduring reservoir of goodwill. That along with Ballinger's endorsement had combined to make him an overwhelming favorite in November's general election.

Recently, though, the tide had started to turn. A week earlier, Fish had accepted the nomination at the Democratic convention with a fiery televised speech that garnered the highest viewership of any political convention broadcast in history. Since then, the polls were indicating a larger than usual post-convention bounce that showed no signs of fading. The latest numbers had Fish within single digits of Acton, with favorability ratings approaching 70 percent among young adults and middle- to low-income voters of all ages.

The day's big news was that the Supreme Court had agreed to hear arguments surrounding Fish's legal challenge of his arrest as soon as possible. With the nine Justices just beginning their summer vacations, however, the scheduled court date was five weeks away—an eternity, as far as the final months of a presidential campaign were concerned. By then, even if Fish's detention was overturned, the damage would have been done: Tarr'd by scandal and unable to appear in public to defend himself or wage his campaign, the Democratic candidate would have seen his chances for the presidency melt away.

Smyth moved on to a story below the fold, about a Democratic Congressman whose teenage son had been arrested for distributing digital copies of Grateful Dead concert bootlegs. *Interesting*, he thought, *how the Dems' kids are the ones who always seem to get nabbed.*

His musings were interrupted by the buzzing intercom. "Courier

from Secretary Jackson's office," his assistant announced.

Smyth groaned. Just what he needed—another one of Jackson's pet projects to manage. "All right," he sighed. "Send him in."

The courier dropped a folder on his desk. "New file, sir. Music possession. It's flagged top priority."

"Why do these cases always end up on *my* desk?" Waving the courier out of the room, the Homeland Security official opened the folder and began reading. After making his way through the entire document, he leaned back in his chair and rubbed his eyes. He sat thinking for several minutes before picking up the phone.

"Perkins? Smyth here. I was just looking through the Hawkes file. Listen, is the Secretary absolutely certain about this? I mean, the kid's a real standout—science awards stretching back to junior high school, a former track star.... And his record's perfectly clean up until now. Plus, his father's retired Navy brass, as I'm sure you know. There's potential for serious blowback here."

He listened, frowning his brow. "I guess what I'm saying is that a more indirect approach might be preferable. If they simply gave his project a military classification, then he'd be required to proceed under DOD oversight—correct?"

He fell silent again, his eyes scanning the pages in front of him. Finally he whistled softly. "The warrant's already drawn up? Jackson isn't fooling around. Yeah, I agree, this invention could be a game-changer. And there's no question his psych profile makes him a risk. A march-to-his-own-drummer type, for sure—which could spell trouble on the arrest, by the way, if it's not handled properly."

Smyth listened intently for another minute. "Sure, I'll be glad to oversee the pickup. Tell the Secretary we'll keep it nice and low-key. That's a promise."