

Air Force One

President James K. Walters paused for a moment in the doorway of Air Force One, waving to the press with one hand while holding his black cocker spaniel, Harry, under his other arm. He slowly descended the stairs of the airplane, waving and smiling, taking every opportunity for this photo op. Every time I walk down this ramp, he thought, I get more votes. He had just returned from his August working vacation at his ranch just outside Fort Collins, Colorado.

He saluted the Special Forces guards standing near the aircraft and walked across the tarmac to the waiting helicopter that would take him to the landing pad at the White House.

His press secretary, Stanley Thompson, greeted him, “Welcome back, Mr. President. I trust your vacation was restful. We have a lot of work to do in the coming weeks, and we will have to stay on top of everything. We have a meeting planned with the secretary of defense and the vice president this afternoon to go over the war plans.”

The president acknowledged this information with a nod and climbed into the waiting helicopter. He walked to the back of the aircraft to a special area where he seated himself in the large, oversized, tan leather chair provided for the leader of the most powerful nation in the world. He lowered Harry to the floor beside him. The ride to the White House would only take a few minutes, but James hated this part of the trip.

He had been afraid of helicopters ever since Marine One almost crashed six years ago when he and his father, then President James Walters, Sr., were landing at Edwards Air Force Base in a thunderstorm. The helicopter tilted to one side and nearly broke off one of

the rotors, and it scared the hell out of him. And he hated the way they took off. Instead of nose up, the nose stayed low as the rear of the machine led to pick up the elevation. It seemed unnatural to him.

No one spoke during the fifteen-minute flight. Upon landing, the circus began again. Reporters lined the path from the helipad on the south lawn of the White House. As soon as the rotors were still, James emerged from the aircraft, again with Harry under his arm. Only this time, as soon as he walked down the steps, he released the little dog and Harry scurried up the path ahead of him with the reporters snapping photos. It is important for the president to have a dog, James thought. It's good public relations. Millions of people own dogs in this country and they are all potential voters.

James saluted again and waved and smiled as more people gathered around the president. He continued walking up the path to the White House.

James had been in office for three and a half years, winning the election by a narrow vote. His roots were from a prominent ranching and land-baron family in Colorado. James' paternal uncle, Robert Walters, had been a U.S. senator in the fifties, and James' brother, George, was currently governor of Colorado. His mother, Claudine, from Corsicana, Texas, was from an old moneyed oil family that had started the Texaco Corporation and, with the merger of the Walters and Warner families, perpetuated a powerful dynasty.

James, a graduate of Harvard University with a degree in political science and then Harvard Law School, was destined for a career in politics with the dream of being president of the United States of America one day. And with hard work he had achieved his goal, but was it worth it? His normally dark-brown hair had turned almost all white in the first two years, and his amiable smiles turned to frowns, drawing deep lines of wisdom on his forehead above his dark, bushy eyebrows. But he was fit. At six feet plus, he was trim with very little body fat. He made sure that he worked out for at least

one hour every day. His routine consisted of thirty minutes of weight training with his personal trainer, a brisk 45-minute jog, and he sometimes finished this off with a twenty-minute swim in the White House swimming pool. Another daily ritual was the afternoon nap. Although he worked hard from eight in the morning to five at night, he always took a break for a nap around two in the afternoon.

“Refreshes the soul,” he would tell his staff members. It did prepare him for the evenings of dinners, parties and fundraisers he attended almost nightly. In this election year, James had been working extremely hard to raise enough money for the upcoming election and to counteract the assault of the Democratic Party. James was the first president to be elected on the Patriots ticket. The Patriots formed from the Republican Party after James’ father lost the election to Adam Johnson in a landslide almost twelve years ago. Their hawkish vision of America was very different from mainstream Republicans, embracing military buildup, a pre-emptive strategy in dealing with enemy countries or those perceived to be, an increase in the Pentagon and government agencies to support the military and a monstrous budget to fund it all. The differences were so great that the moderate Republicans, who supported smaller government and conservative spending, split, leaving this radical wing of the party hanging with seemingly nowhere to go. But they rallied quickly, gathering more of their kind from former right-wing Republican administrations, and created the Patriots Party. James had been honored when the Patriots Party made him their presidential nominee three plus years ago. And when he won the election, he was ecstatic, even though it was indeed a narrow victory, winning with a slim number of electoral votes. His opponent, Harrison Baker, vice president to Adam Johnson, captured the popular vote by half a million votes. This of course rankled the Democrats, many of whom cried foul saying that James had stolen the election with fraudulent voting practices in two states, Ohio and Michigan.

This meant that James had to work twice as hard now, and his

vacation had consisted of a series of fundraisers across the country from California, speaking at a Patriots dinner in Fresno designed to target Hispanic constituents, to a large affair in Detroit to reach the working-class members of the autoworkers. James was by far the most successful fundraiser in the history of politics, but his party would need every dollar they could get, as the state of the nation did not look good. Unemployment was at an all-time high of seven percent, and the leading indicators were driving down an already unsteady stock market.

The war in Iraq that he had started one and a half years ago was not going well, with body bags coming home every day now, and the Democrats and many others who had opposed the war were questioning the validity of attacking a small, sovereign nation even though Iraq's President Saddam Hussein was a tyrant. The Patriots had won five seats in the Senate and three in the House of Representatives in the mid-term elections, but the Republicans still maintained the majority in the House and the Senate. His ratings in the polls were plunging from the high of sixty percent after they had started the war to fifty-two percent today—still quite high but the trend was alarming.

James walked up the stairs to the family's private quarters with the Secret Service following close behind, as is standard operating procedure. He opened one of the French doors leading into the private apartment and walked down the hallway to the West Sitting Hall, which served as the family living room in the White House with its large Palladian window overlooking the Rose Garden. Marta, the second floor maid, had just finished dusting the Queen Anne tables as he walked in. Marta was one of some ninety staff members behind the scenes, working many times six days a week to help make the White House home for the First Family and host to a million and a half visitors and dignitaries each year. Before James and Carol, the first lady, had come to the White House, many of the maids and staff would become invisible as they entered a room, much

like they did in the early 1900s. But Carol treated them more like family and as equals than merely servants, much to James' chagrin.

"Hello, Marta. Everything shipshape, I hope."

"Mr. President. It is so good to see you. We have everything ready for you and the missus. We've been working all morning to make things nice for when you came back. Did you have a nice vacation?"

"Yes, Marta. I worked too hard but it was wonderful being back on the ranch again."

"Where is the missus? She is not with you?"

"No, Marta. She's still back in Colorado. She had some business to take care of, but she'll be joining us in a week or two."

"She be away that long, huh? She's kind of your rock, you know what I mean. You will miss her, huh?"

"Yes, I will miss her. Is there food in the refrigerator for lunch?"

"Yes, sir. There's cold sliced ham and cheese and lots of fruit. We bought everything this morning so it should be nice and fresh for you and the missus."

James rolled his eyes, "Thank you, Marta. That's all for now. I won't be needing you for anything the rest of the day."

"Yes, sir," and Marta quickly left the room.