

THE PRESIDENT

A POLITICAL NOVEL

JOHN STEWART

The President goes missing. Every corner of the White House has been searched and double-checked, without success. The Vice President is in Europe, so the decision of whether to go public or not falls upon the Chief of Staff. Just then the phone rings: a journalist has spotted the President sitting on a park bench near the Lincoln Memorial, his only disguise a baseball cap pulled well down over his eyes.

The Commander in Chief of the most powerful military force in the world has acted strangely and the media want explanations, but the President is far from apologetic. He has had an inspiration and it is he who is asking searching questions about the status quo.

This incident, which occurs about fifteen months from the end of the President's first term, provokes a change of attitude. This worries his campaign manager who fears he is throwing away his chances of re-election, but more sinisterly, it provokes the opposition of vested interests who fear their privileges are under threat.

But the President is convinced he has seen a way to make a real change, to cut through the tired arguments of both Left and Right and heal the rifts in society. In a carefully crafted dialogue, John Stewart spells out the implications and the reaction of press and public.

The interest in real change aroused by the US presidential primaries makes this book timely on both sides of the Atlantic. The reform the President seeks to introduce in the USA could be just as relevant for the UK.

John Alexander Stewart, the son of a farmer in Northern Ireland, moved to London in the 1950s. He is the author of three historical novels, *The Centurion*, translated into German, Italian and Spanish, *The Last Romans*, placed in the time of Justinian and Boethius, and *Marsilio*, centred on the early life of the Florentine philosopher-priest, Marsilio Ficino. He has written two biographies, *Standing for Justice*, on the life of Andrew MacLaren MP and *A Promise Kept*, on the work of a Christian trade unionist.

Of his first political novel, *Visitors*, a **Guardian online** reviewer commented: *'It is difficult to know where to look for comparisons: Graham Greene, for its exquisite prose, or [Arthur C. Clarke], for its deftly imagined other-world politics, and alien beings as thinly disguised representatives of what humankind might one day aspire to'*

and concluded:

'As Einstein observed, "The world cannot get out of the current state of crisis with the same thinking that got it there in the first place". John Stewart, his alien visitors and the people whose lives they touch, know this only too well. Rarely can such a profound message have been delivered in so stimulating and entertaining a fashion.'

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Prologue

The President was missing. Every corner of the White House had been checked and double-checked, but without success. The Vice-President was in Europe. He had not been called, for everyone expected the President suddenly to appear and of course an unnecessary fuss was the last thing that they wanted. The whole situation was most odd, for the President rarely had a moment to himself. Indeed, it seemed that every second of his day was monitored. Yet, after breakfast, he had simply disappeared.

The White House Chief of Staff was in a quandary but just when he had at last decided to go public, the phone rang. The President had been found sitting on a park bench near the Lincoln Memorial.

Chapter One

The limo drew to a sudden stop and the lean grey-haired figure of the White House Chief of Staff jumped out and hurried to where the President was sitting.

‘Mr President, are you OK?’ he called out anxiously.

‘Never better, Joss. Sit down for a moment.’

Joss Johnson obeyed reluctantly.

‘I’ve been watching the people visiting the Memorial. The young ones skip up and come down slowly, and the old crawl up and step out coming down.’

‘Well, there’s one oldie descending pretty slowly.’

‘Another theory in the garbage can!’

‘*Are you all right, Sir?* We’ve been looking for you all morning! In fact, we’re all in orbit at the cottage! What happened?’

‘It’s OK, Joss, I’m not crazy! It was, shall we say, an unusual morning. I had to escape. I’ll explain later, but meantime, duty calls. We’d better go back. Sorry to have raised your blood pressure!’

‘But, Sir, nobody saw you leave. How did you get out undetected?’

‘Joss, I walked out but no one seemed to see me. As I said, it was an unusual morning, but more later.’

John Duncan sprang lightly to his feet. He looked younger than his forty-nine years, though his hair was turning grey.

‘The Joint Chiefs have been waiting for some time,’ Johnson prompted.

‘They’re not waiting, Joss. They’re talking!’

‘You’re OK, Sir!’

Both men laughed. Yet Johnson still had disturbing reservations. The US President had acted strangely and that was something he dared not ignore. He needed to know more. What exactly happened this morning? It was an urgent question not to be delayed.



By chance the BBC correspondent Sarah Crawford had witnessed the arrival of Joss Johnson and had seen his agitated conversation with the man on the bench who, to her amazement, turned out to be John Duncan. What was going on? There was something very odd about it all, for the tenant of the White House was always surrounded by a posse of thick-necked bodyguards; to be on his own was something very strange indeed. This was a scoop, to say the least, but she felt constrained. Firstly she was BBC and one of the old school and, secondly, she had dined with Joss Johnson and his wife on two occasions. 'Thus conscience doth make cowards of us all,' she muttered to herself. She had better speak to Joss. It was the decent thing.



After receiving Sarah Crawford's phone call, Johnson knew he had to act. Luckily he caught the President between meetings and was able to put his case immediately.

Duncan's response was instant and strangely casual. The expected concern about possible political damage was wholly absent.

'Invite her here to supper, tonight if she can make it, and maybe you and Joan could join us. Joss, this isn't an executive order. It doesn't have to be tonight.'

'We're OK, I think, and I know Sarah has been angling for a one-to-one for some time. So I think we've got a date.'

'Let's hope so, for these media people are usually pretty busy,' the President responded and again there was the same casual unconcerned air. This wasn't the usual Duncan.

Joss, though, was sure that Sarah Crawford wouldn't miss the opportunity. 'I'll tell her about your wine cellar!'

'Now I know the reason that you're the Chief of Staff!'

A gentle knock heralded the President's next appointment and Joss took his leave. As he walked to his office, Johnson was pensive. His boss was still quick and efficient but Joss had the strong impression that he didn't seem to care. It was as if nothing mattered. Yet Joss couldn't fault him, for he had dealt with the Crawford matter without the slightest hesitation. Tonight, perhaps, all would be revealed.



Thank God she did the decent thing, Sarah reflected. For so easily the journalistic instinct for a story could have won. Then, how

could she have looked Joss Johnson in the eye, or Duncan for that matter? Now she was having supper with the President and his Chief of Staff. Decency had paid her dividend.

What was she going to wear? She smiled at the rise of the familiar mantra for she knew exactly what dress would be appropriate. Then she laughed when she thought of all the innuendo and the clever sniping at her too-nice image. Her colleagues at the Beeb would have to think again, for dinner with the President was real 'hard copy'.



Sarah Crawford was not the only one who was observing at the Lincoln Memorial. Just before setting out for his White House dinner appointment, Joss received a call from a trusted press insider. A tabloid was running a story in their early edition, headed 'Duncan goes AWOL.' Johnson was livid and phoned the editor but, of course, it made no difference. The story was the thing and the people had the right to be informed.

'Hogwash!' Johnson grated as he slammed the phone down.



Chapter Two

'What elegance and dignity', the President called out graciously as his three guests arrived together. 'But, Joss, I sense a note of trouble.'

'A phone call just before we left – a tabloid's running a story in the morning edition.'

'Yes, the press boys told me. I've gone AWOL, I believe! Well, Joss, if the press play hard ball with Billy at tomorrow's briefing, I'll call by and do a little plain speaking. Sorry, ladies. I'm afraid talking 'shop' is the local hazard here! Well, what would you like to drink? The White House is well stocked with all sorts of goodies. Sarah?'

Johnson almost shook his head. This AWOL business could be very awkward, if not damaging, but his friend the President didn't seem to mind. Something had definitely happened in the morning after breakfast: an event strong enough to affect the thinking process of the President and Commander-in-Chief of the most awesome military force in the world. This was not something to dismiss in a dreamy glow of sentimental loyalty.

Sarah chose sherry, and the rest followed her example. Easy pleasantries flowed, but Duncan knew his guests were too polite to probe him on his 'disappearance'. He would have to bring the matter up, and he would, of course, but not quite yet.

Just when the cook indicated that the first course was due, an aide entered with a portable phone.

'Sorry to interrupt, Mr President: it's Secretary of State Anderson; he says it's urgent.'

'Excuse me, folks. It's the usual pre-dinner crisis. Sometimes I think there's someone up there playing tricks!'

Conversation died as Duncan moved out of earshot.

'That's the Presidency!' Joss said knowingly. 'It's 24/7 and it's relentless.'

'I wonder what part of the world it is this time?' his wife questioned.

‘Joan, possibilities abound,’ her husband responded.

Sarah was fascinated. This was it, the high table, as it were, and her journalistic instincts were on fire.

‘That was Andy Anderson,’ the President said as he returned. ‘Some holy shrine has been stormed by an Islamist cult and the ruling potentate has imposed a news black out. In the absence of information we’re being blamed and our Embassy’s under attack. Sometimes I think we’re the world’s fall guy!’

‘Is the Embassy staff in danger?’ Sarah asked.

‘Luckily there’s a strong contingent of marines and tear-gas by the gallon. The rioters don’t play the Geneva tune but our fellas have body armour and they don’t take too many chances. Hopefully it’ll blow over soon. But no doubt we’ll be blamed for over-reaction. It’s the current mind-set.’

‘We have our mind-sets too, Sir. I know in Britain we have the ‘chattering class’ on one side and the ‘hard liners’ on the other and they’re both as blinkered as they come!’

‘Sarah, it’s a universal failing both individually and collectively. Too often we’re as blind as bats. Now to important matters: here comes the first course! We’d better take our seats.’

‘This is delicious!’ Sarah reacted after her first mouthful.

‘Jilly, my housekeeper, is a very good cook. If you could say a quiet word afterwards, it would be good. Such things make the world go round.’

All this was brilliant stuff for a profile, Sarah mused. Then she cringed. How mercenary! Profiting from the occasion seemed so self-serving. Still, it was her profession.

‘May I pursue this question of mind-sets?’

‘Of course!’

‘Well, Sir, if we are all imprisoned in our various mind-sets, it would seem we are all to some extent “seeing through a glass darkly” and certainly “not face to face.” So, in fact we are not seeing things as they truly are.’

‘I would agree with you, Sarah, but I fear the academics would shred us!’

‘How so, Sir?’

‘Well, to them “things as they truly are” would be a relative concept.’

‘I see their point, but I feel happier with *Corinthians!* That, of course, would be my mind-set.’

They all laughed.

‘This certainly is a new line in dinner conversation!’ Joss quipped.

‘There is one proof that the academics tend to dismiss,’ the President continued.

‘What is that, Sir?’ Sarah pressed.

‘Experience.’

‘But surely that is the most relative thing there is!’

‘Generally that is true, but I feel that most do experience a moment or moments of clarity and the strange thing is, we recognise that clarity.’

‘I know what you’re saying, Sir, but it’s still a relative world,’ Joss interjected.

‘It is, if you’re wedded to empirical proof. However, my proposition is that experience of clarity can be confirmed. Many have recorded their experiences and they all accord. They all say the same. Here I rest my case, for I see with blinding clarity that the second course is coming!’

‘To that I raise no objection!’

Again they laughed.

‘This is most enjoyable,’ the President said easily. ‘Sarah, Joss tells me that you would like a one-to-one.’

‘Yes, Mr President, that would be wonderful. In fact, landing such an interview might persuade the Beeb to keep me on their books!’

‘Surely you’ve no trouble in that quarter!’

‘I’m old-fashioned, they say, and I’m not aggressive enough. That’s the usual mantra.’

‘There you are, a typical mind-set. Well, this looks good. Jilly’s done us proud.’

‘And how!’ Joan Johnson echoed.

‘Hey, it’s time to freshen up your glasses. Let me get another bottle,’ he added, making to get up.

‘Allow me, Mr President.’ Joss cut in.

‘Sit down, Joss. I’m the host tonight!’

Both men burst out laughing.

‘I’m told you both were old school pals,’ Sarah ventured.

‘Indeed we were, and Joss still bosses me around!’ Duncan returned.

‘I’d be lucky!’ Joss flashed back.

There was more laughter and Sarah suddenly realized that she’d forgotten about the Lincoln Memorial business. Anyway,

she didn't feel it was her place to bring it up. Instead, she asked about the forthcoming election.

'We're ahead of the Republican front-runner, Whiteside, at the moment,' the President began, 'but you never can be sure until you cross the line!'

'This front-runner, how popular is he?'

'Whiteside's a fair-haired all-American sort of fella with a pretty wife and one of each, in fact, the perfect candidate. I've met him once or twice. He has a pleasant easy nature.'

'Yeah,' Joss spat, 'but his campaign manager's a first-class bastard.'

'Campaign managers are rarely angels, Joss: except you, of course!'

'I'm glad you noticed, Sir!'

Duncan chuckled.

'Well, I've got news for you!' Joan Johnson quipped.

'Sarah,' the President began, 'I lost my wife three years ago and these good people practically carried me. Indeed, they spend more time here than their own home. So we're close and you, by your integrity this afternoon, are welcome to this band of trust.'

'I am honoured, Sir.'

'And so are we! Now, what happened this morning and why did I suddenly disappear? The simple answer is I felt it necessary to escape this gilded prison that is 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. But that's not the whole story, of course. This morning I had a touch of what Churchill called his 'black dog'. Now, I wouldn't claim to compete with the great man, but let's say it was pretty dark. All seemed so pointless, repetitive and mechanical. Then I thought of my late wife, which, as you can imagine, didn't help. For some time I sat locked in this arid world until I suddenly realized that the misery was being watched and that this watcher fella was on the side lines unaffected, just like a spectator at a ball game. It was like throwing a switch. Suddenly the world lit up. Everything seemed significant: chairs, table, and cups, even a piece of torn paper lying on the floor. I looked outside; it was a wonderland. So I went downstairs and out into the rose garden. For some strange reason, the usual 'Good morning, Mr President,' was absent. It was as if I'd slipped the net! Outside the wonder hadn't lessened. There was a gardener busy at his work. Normally I would have simply seen a gardener, but this time I saw care and dedication.

'Then I had a naughty-boy desire to roam outside the grounds.

Also I wanted to see the people without them staring at the usual bodyguard screen. It worked; the gods were on my side and there I was, free and fascinated by everything about me. I had had enough sense to grab a baseball cap before I left the Cottage and this I pulled well over my eyes. So I was camouflaged, as it were. Are you all asleep?’ Duncan suddenly asked.

‘I’m on the edge of my seat, Mr President,’ Sarah returned. ‘Please go on. What about the people that you met?’

‘I felt very much at one with them. We shared a common humanity. It was as if we knew the same secret. Only the mind-sets were different. These were obvious but they were accepted. There was no criticism, though it was hovering. In fact, the light was lessening; even so, I still felt a sense of freedom. We get so worked up about things, and it’s so unnecessary. But there are dark souls. I saw one. Such men can be dangerous. There you are, I’m still the same John Duncan but with my mind-set slightly modified. I’m sorry about the trouble that I caused, but I feel the President of the United States needed the experience.’

‘Well you’ve put *my* mind at rest,’ Joss responded. ‘It’s the Press Corps in the morning that concerns me. What should we tell them?’

‘Joss, what I did was something many leaders have done throughout the ages. I escaped the magic circle and saw the people face to face. I know it could be viewed as irresponsible. But I feel the American people would prefer their president to be modestly adventurous!’

‘That may be optimistic!’

‘Let’s not apologize too much. I wanted to escape the gilded cage, so I went for a walk! Ah, I see more trouble.’

They all could see the aide approaching with the portable. This time Duncan didn’t leave the table.

‘Ah, Jim. Good to hear from you... That’s a generous offer. I’ll pass it on to Andy right away. Hey, when are you coming over? I always value our pow-wows... Yeah, next month would be fine. Guess who is in my dining party this evening... All right, I’ll tell you. Sarah Crawford, a fellow Brit... I agree, the best of the best! Hey, the dessert is coming. Make yourself scarce, fella!’ The crackle of laughter was audible. ‘Next month, then... Good night, Prime Minister – hey, have you lost the art of sleeping. With you it’s the middle of the night... sleeping on a plane has never been an art I’ve mastered. Bye.’

‘Well, that was Sir James Babbington, your PM: he thinks I should run the risk of a one-to-one with a certain lady!’
Sarah beamed.

