

## HAIL TO *THE* CHIEF



2003–2004

**H**OW'S THAT AGAIN?"  
Silence.

"Would you mind repeating that?"

Silence and an up-and-down murmur on *the* phone.

"This is a bad line. I can't believe what I'm hearing! Go over that again."

*The* government official was rising slowly from his chair, *the* telephone crammed to his ear. He was staring out *the* window, then at *the* ceiling, and then at *the* walls. Slowly he sat down again.

"Now repeat that."

*The* phone made noises.

"Senator Hamfritt, you say? Just a moment. I'll call you right back."

The official hung up, turned in his chair, and stared out across the lawn at the White House.

Then he reached over and touched the intercom button.

When his secretary appeared at the door he said, "Sit down, you must hear this."

He picked up the phone, punched a number and the speakerphone.

When a voice came on he said, "This is Elliot. Did you call in the last few minutes? You did. Now, go over those details again. Senator Hamfritt, you say? An Indian casino? In North Dakota? Yes. How many senators? Thirteen? They were there last night? You sure of the facts? He wasn't drunk? He *was* drunk? Well, it's late, but I'll call the president."

The official put the phone down and slowly turned to his secretary.

"Do you know that idiot Hamfritt?"

She nodded.

"Do you know what that damn fool has done?"

"I can hardly wait."

"He went off a few hours ago to an Indian reservation in North Dakota with twelve senators. Said he was investigating affairs in the territory."

The secretary waited.

"He then engaged in a series of roulettes with the chief of

the largest tribe, Chief Iron Cloud. They put up New York City and lost that."

The secretary leaned forward.

"Then they started gambling with states—and lost! By two in the morning, drinking with the Indian chief, they managed to lose the entire United States of America."

"Holy shit," said the secretary.

"I might kill myself, but first, who's gonna call the White House and tell the president about this?"

"Not me," said the secretary.



THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES ran across the airport tarmac.

"Mr. President!" an attaché cried. "You're not dressed!"

The president glanced down at the pajamas under his overcoat.

"I'll change on the plane. Where the hell are we going?"

The attaché turned to the pilot. "Where the hell are we going?"

The pilot glanced at a transcript and said, "The Pocahontas Big Red Casino, Ojibway, North Dakota."

"Where in hell is that?"

"On the Canadian border," said the attaché. "It's safe. Only the caribou vote there. Last year, a landslide."

"Is the airport large enough for Air Force One?" said the president.

"Barely."

"What time is it?"

"Three a.m."

"My God, **the** things we do to run a country," said **the** president.

On board, **the** president sat while drinks were poured and said, "Give me **the** details."

"Well, here's how it is, Mr. President. There was a meeting of Democratic senators in North Dakota. Thirteen of them went to **the** Pocahontas Big Red Casino for a night of whoopee."

"You can say that again," said **the** president of **the** United States.

"Well, one thing led to another and they wound up giving away **the** whole damned country."

"In one roll of **the** dice?"

"No, as I heard it, one state at a time."

"My God."

"To be accurate, sir, they lost New York *City* first, but **the** first *state* to go was Florida."

"That figures."

"After that it was most of **the** southern states. Something to do with **the** Civil War."

"How's that?"

"I don't know. It's still all a little fuzzy. But **the** Civil War's never been completely forgotten, and it would be just like southern Democrats to deal it back to **the** reds."



"Then what?"

"Well, state by state, ending with Arizona, and the next thing you know, with a final toss, America the Beautiful, sea to shining sea, belonged to Iron Cloud."

"The Indian chief?"

"Yes. He runs the casino."

The president mused and then said, "If they can drink, so can I. Refill my glass."



THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES plunged into the Po-cahontas Big Red Casino and glared around.

"Where's the smoke-filled room?"

The attaché pointed.

"And where are those stupid rotten damn fool senators?"

"In that room, naturally."

The president slammed the door wide to startle the thirteen senators, who stood staring at the floor.

"Sit down!" cried the president. "No, stand while I hit you! Now hear this. Are you all sober?"

They nodded.

"Then we *all* need a drink!"

Smith, the attaché, hurried out of the room. In moments, vodka was brought in.

"Okay, drink up and let's solve this mess."

He scowled at them and said, "My God, you make the Rolling Stones look like the Last Supper."

There was a long silence.

"Who's responsible? Senator Hamfat?"

"Hamfritt," murmured one of the senators.

"Hamfritt. Hold on. Smith, do the news media know about this?"

"Not yet, sir."

"My God, if the networks ever found out we'd be road-kill."

"There was a call from CNN an hour ago, wondering what's going on. . . ."

"Send someone to shoot them."

"We can't do that, Mr. President."

"Try."

The president turned back to the thirteen senators. "All right, tell me just how you managed to give away our purple mountain majesties and fruited plains."

"Not outright, the whole kit and caboodle," said one senator. "It happened piecemeal."

"Piecemeal!" shouted the president.

"We started slow and gained speed. We played poker at first, but got excited and moved on to blackjack, but then roulette seemed best."

"Roulette, sure. That way you lose everything fast."

"Fast," the senators agreed, nodding.

"Anyway, you know how it is when you're losing, you double your bets. So we doubled up and offered the Indians North and South Carolina, and by God, we lost them too.

Then we drank some more and got excited and offered them North and South Dakota, and lost!”

“Go on,” said the president.

“Then we bet California.”

“That was a *double* bet?”

“Yes, sir, California is really four states: north and south, Hollywood and L.A.”

“Oh,” said the president.

“Anyway, in a few hours we lost about everything and someone had the idea that maybe we should call Washington, DC.”

“I’m glad you thought of that,” said the president. “Smith, is any of this crud legally binding?”

“Only if you consider the reactions of France, Germany, Russia, Japan, and China, Mr. President.”

“Okay. Are there any lawyers in this damn casino?”

“Sure,” said the attaché. “Two hundred of ’em at poker upstairs. Shall I get one?”

“Are you nuts!?” said the president. “Within hours we’d be up to our chins.”

The President sat for a long moment, his eyes closed, gripping his knees, white-knuckled, as if he were running blind into a mountain.

He wet his lips half a dozen times, but only when he clenched his knees tighter did the steam come out of his mouth in a hiss and sputter. “Of all the stupid, dim-bulb, half-wit, half-ass, crazy—”

"Yes, sir," one of the senators said.

"I'm not done!" the president cried.

"Yes, sir."

"Of all the damned silly, blind—"

The president stopped.

"Dim-bulb bastards," someone suggested.

"Rum-headed, bastard idiots!"

Everyone nodded.

"Maniac, lunatic, mindless, stupid jerks! Jesus God, God almighty!"

The president opened his eyes. "Do you realize that, in comparison, this will make the United Nations look like a gathering of angels? A congress of Einsteins! A full house of Fathers, Sons, and Holy Ghosts!"

Silence.

"Mr. President, sir, your face is very red."

"I thought," said the president, "it would be purple. Is there anything in the Constitution that would let the president beat up, kill, massacre, hang, electrocute, or draw and quarter these dumb-cluck senators?"

"Nothing in the Constitution, Mr. President," Smith said.

"At the next session of Congress, put it in."

At last he ceased and let his fists fall open. He stared at each empty paw to see if some answer lay there. Tears fell from his eyelashes.

"What're we gonna do?" he bleated. "What're we gonna do?"

"Mr. President."



"What're we gonna do?" he cried again, quietly.

"Sir."

The president looked up.

A Native American gentleman in a tall hat stood there. He was very short and resembled a squaw.

The short Native American gentleman said, "May I make a suggestion, sir? The Chief of the Iroquois Waukesha Chippewa Council and owner of this casino and now proprietor of the United States of America wonders if you would want an audience with him."

The president of the United States tried to rise.

"Don't get up." The short man in the tall black hat turned and opened the door and a great iron-eyed solemn shadow glided through.

This man drifted in on soft wild bobcat feet, a tall shadow within a shadow. He was not quite seven feet tall, and the look on his serene face was the look of Eternity; the stare of dead presidents and lost Indian braves now come alive in the precipice face of this new visitor.

Someone, perhaps the small squawlike pathfinder, seemed to be humming a celebratory tune under his breath, something about a chief, something about hailing.

A great voice of muted storms spoke on high from this owner of many casinos.

The small squawlike servant below translated.

"He asks, what seems to be the trouble here?"

At this there was a collective impulse in the senators to hurl

themselves at the exit, but something froze them in place: the small sounds of veins popping in the brow of the president of the United States.

He massaged his head to calm his raging veins and gasped: "You have stolen our country."

The voice spoke above and was translated below.

"Just one state at a time."

From that great height, a murmur fell upon the small Indian, who nodded several times.

"He now proposes," said the small Indian, "one last game. The chief is willing to gamble like a good sport and maybe lose the country."

A trembling, as of a great earthquake, shook the senators. Smiles trembled on their lips. The president felt the need to faint but did not.

"One last game?" he moaned. "And if we lose again? What do we even have to offer?"

The small Indian chatted up along the length of great redwood flesh and an utterance responded.

"You give us France and Germany."

"We couldn't do that!" cried the president.

"Oh no?" said the great storm voice.

The president shrank two sizes within his suit.

"Also," the shadow moved like winter above.

"Also?" piped the suddenly former president of the United States.

"The rules," recited the small interpreter below. "If you

lose, we keep the United States and you build casinos in all fifty states plus grade schools, high schools, and colleges throughout the Indian territories. Yes?"

The president of the United States nodded.

"And if you win," the little man went on, "you get the states back, but the same things must happen: You build schools and casinos in all territories, even though you have won."

"Incredible!" the president cried. "You can't apply the same rules win or lose!"

Shadows whispered.

"That's the way the cookie crumbles."

The president swallowed and at last said, "Let's begin."

The great steam-shovel-size fingers of the owner of all fifty states' Big Red Casinos moved out on the air. There was a deck of cards vised in the thick fingers.

"Deal," a voice echoed in up-country.

The president found all of his limbs inert.

"Blackjack," whispered the small assistant Indian. "Two cards each."

At last, slowly, the president of the United States laid out the cards, facedown.

A voice rumbled above.

The little man said, "You first."

The president picked up the cards, and a great smile widened on his face. He tried in vain to control his smile but was unable to do so.



He looked up at the huge Indian chief and said, "Now yours."

Thunder sounded above.

The interpreter said, "First, let's see your hand."

The president of the United States turned his cards over. They totaled nineteen.

"Now you," whispered the president.

Thunder rolled again and the small Indian said, "You win."

"How can you tell?" said the president, "if you don't turn your cards over? Perhaps you have twenty, or twenty-one."

The weather changed high in the room and the little Indian said, "You win. The country is yours. But, one last small item."

He handed the president a piece of paper.

The paper was inscribed: *Twenty-six dollars and ninety cents.*

"That," said the small Indian, "is the same amount of money paid for Manhattan many moons ago."

The president took out his billfold.

A voice rumbled from on high.

"He says, small bills only," said the interpreter.

The president handed over the money and the redwood's huge hand reached out and took it.

Up toward the ceiling the voice rumbled again.

"What now?" asked the president.

The interpreter translated. "He says he hopes you will build many ships and he will come to the harbor to bid you farewell on your journey back to wherever you came from."



"He said that, did he?"

The president of the United States stared at the cards, still untouched, on the table.

"Don't I get to see, to make sure I haven't gypped you?"

The small Indian shook his head.

The president went to the door, turned, and said, "What's this about sailing? I'm not going anywhere."

A voice whispered from above.

"Oh no?"

And the president of the United States snuck out, followed by his senators.