

THE CANDIDATE

by Jack McDevitt

The high and low points of my career came on the same night: When we beat George Washington, and Peter Pollock returned to the White House for a second term.

Well, okay. It wasn't really Washington; it was an artificial intelligence programed to behave like Washington. But a lot of people got confused. When you've been in politics as long as I have, you know how easily people get confused. Fortunately.

The Washington campaign started as a gag, graduated into an experiment, caught fire, and became a full-fledged national effort. I can't explain it. I don't think anybody can. President Pollock's numbers were down, but the Democratic candidate was a non-stop talker who put everybody to sleep. So we knew it would be a close race.

Then Washington showed up. He was a software package developed at the University of Georgia to play the part of the first president in seminars. He was so believable, and so compelling, that somebody at the school put him on a local radio show, and the next thing we knew he was well on his way to becoming a national phenomenon. At first, no one took him seriously. But people were desperate for a candidate they could believe in. The bloggers got in line almost immediately. The General gave an interview to the Florida Times-Union, the wire services picked it up, and by God he did sound like George Washington.

Next thing we knew a Federalist Party had sprung into existence, donations started showing up, first in small amounts, and ultimately in a tidal wave.

I was running the president's campaign, and we all had a pretty good laugh when they tried to put him on the ballot in Georgia. The Democrats tried to block it. Candidates have to be born in the U.S., they pointed out. And they have to be at least thirty-five years old.

We could have stopped it then. But if Washington got into the general election, he'd pull votes from the Democrats, not from us. We knew our base wasn't going to support a candidate who wasn't even human. So I called in some favors and when the case went to the Supreme Court, they surprised the country: They examined the candidate and ruled they could find no reason to suppose he was not a Washington-equivalent --the first time that terminology was used. He was therefore clearly well past the minimum age limit. As to the requirement he be born in the United States, the software had been written in Georgia, and the meaning of 'born,' said the court, is not limited to biological events. It was a six-three decision.

Early on, Washington showed every sign of splitting the Democratic vote. I watched him a few times on cable, and he was persuasive. He didn't like the frivolous

spending. Didn't like the fact that people who'd worked their entire lives couldn't afford medications. Didn't like the corruption he saw in the capital. I thought he came across as wooden, and maybe a trifle stern. Americans, I thought, don't like being lectured.

They could have simply tied him into the programs, done the whole thing electronically, but somebody in his campaign was too smart for that. He was housed in a Coreolis 5000, and they dutifully set it on a table along with a screen. The screen provided an animated image from the Gilbert Stuart portrait, except they'd cut the general's hair and put him in a dark gray business suit.

By midsummer he was making the rounds of the network talk shows. And I watched his polls continue to rise. The week before he made his first appearance on Meet the Press, he passed the Democratic candidate and moved into the runner-up spot.

At that point, the National Conservative Union threw its weight behind him, as did the ACLU. The National Rifle Association, always a friend of Pollock's, announced it would sit the election out.

And I began to suspect I'd misjudged the voters. To start with, the liberal media was coming over to his side. After some hesitation, they'd decided the Democratic candidate was a lost cause. Russert, at first ill at ease talking to the Coreolis 5000, warmed to him. "Are you really George Washington?" he asked.

"The man's dead," said Washington, "Give him a break. But I'm everything he was."

Russert asked about the intervention, which had by then become another of those endless wars. "We intended the nation to lead by example," the General said. "We would not willingly have plunged into the affairs of others." The Washington-image stared out of the TV screen. "Keep your own house in order. It is enough. Take care of your own. Do it competently, and the world will follow."

We realized, belatedly, that we were in a race. After his appearance with Jon Stewart, there was no longer any doubt. "I would prefer," he told the vast audience watching that night --a fifty-two share, according to Nielson-- "that you not vote for me. And I'll tell you why, Jon. It sets a bad precedent. People should be governed by other people, not by software systems. If the voters insist on putting me in, I will do my best. But I fear the long-term potential." He thereby moved into virgin territory.

So we went after him. Used his own words. Doesn't want the job. And we looked at his record. Only officer to survive the Battle of the Wilderness. What did that tell you about him? And do we really want a former slave-owner in the White House?

We knew we couldn't touch him on national security, but we demanded to know where he stood on the issues. "What about Roe V. Wade?"

"Put it aside for now," he said. "At the moment, we have bigger problems." We got some of our base back on that one.

"Gay marriage?"

"I cannot see that anyone is harmed. We should be careful about codifying moral strictures. They change too easily."

We got some more of our people back. But there was something reassuring about him.

We talked about Orwell and Frankenstein. Don't ask me how that got in there, but it appealed to the voters so we kept hitting it. Vote for People, we said. We found a few physicists who were willing to say publicly that an artificial intelligence could develop a glitch. Could become very dangerous.

Would you trust the black box in the hands of a computer?

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We held on. We were still holding at 2:00 A.M. election night, when we went down to the last district in Indiana, but we took the state by a few hundred votes and that put us over the top.

Pollock went on TV after Washington conceded. He said how we'd saved the nation from a hardware conspiracy. (He tends to say things like that when he gets offscript.) He thanked the campaign workers. And everybody cheered.

When it was over, he took me into his quarters to express his appreciation. A Rainbow 360, the newest model, rested on the coffee table. "We saved the country, Will," he said. "We'll get legislation passed to bar the damned things from holding office. Otherwise, I guess, they'll trot out Abe Lincoln next time."

"Yes," I said. "And congratulations, Mr. President." It meant four more years for me too. As chief political advisor.

"No. It's not in the cards, Will." He looked almost genuinely pained. "We have to look to the future."

That was a shock. "What do you mean, sir?"

"It was a near thing, this election. We completely miscalculated our opponent's strength. I mean, incumbent president and all. It should have been easy."

"But--?"

"I need someone who won't be taken by surprise."

I was trying not to let my anger show. "Who did you have in mind, sir?"

He smiled at the Rainbow 360. "Will, meet Karl Rove."