

Michael Shaara

Michael Shaara (1929-88) was one of the bright young SF writers of the early 1950s, who left the genre in 1957 after producing a number of fine short stories, and later wrote a boxing novel and the Pulitzer Prize-winning American Civil War novel, *The Killer Angels* (1974). Most of his short stories are collected in *Soldier Boy* (1982), along with an afterword reminiscing about his early days in science fiction, the excitement of selling to John W. Campbell's *Astounding*, the frustrations of dealing with genre markets. Algis Budrys remembers that Robert Sheckley, Michael Shaara and he were the hot new writers of 1952-53.

After the generally positive editorial reaction to *Soldier Boy*, Shaara completed an SF novel, *The Herald* (1981 - actually published before the collection, which was delayed, but not published as a genre novel, since Shaara had won the Pulitzer and his publisher was certain that a genre label would compromise his, and their, reputation). *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* praises his writing for its "quick, revelatory ironies about the human condition." I recall joking with him in 1982 that this, of all his stories, was predictive and that it had already come true. It is still coming true.

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2066: ELECTION DAY

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arly that afternoon Professor Larkin crossed the river into Washington, a thing he always did on Election day, and sat for a long while in the Polls. It was still called the Polls, in this year A.D. 2066, although what went on inside bore no relation at all to the elections of primitive American history. The Polls was now a single enormous building which rose out of the green fields where the ancient Pentagon had once stood. There was only one of its kind in Washington, only one Polling Place in each of the forty-eight states, but since few visited the Polls nowadays, no more were needed.

In the lobby of the building, a great hall was reserved for visitors. Here you could sit and watch the many-colored lights dancing and flickering on the huge

panels above, listen to the weird but strangely soothing hum and click of the vast central machine. Professor Larkin chose a deep soft chair near the long line of booths and sat down. He sat for a long while smoking his pipe, watching the people go in and out of the booths with strained, anxious looks on their faces.

Professor Larkin was a lean, boyish-faced man in his late forties. With the pipe in his hand he looked much more serious and sedate than he normally felt, and it often bothered him that people were able to guess his profession almost instantly. He had a vague idea that it was not becoming to look like a college professor, and he often tried to change his appearance - a loud tie here, a sport coat there - but it never seemed to make any difference. He remained what he was easily identifiable, Professor Harry L. (Lloyd) Larkin, Ph.D., Dean of the Political Science Department at a small but competent college just outside of Washington.

It was his interest in Political Science which drew him regularly to the Polls at every election. Here he could sit and feel the flow of American history in the making, and recognize, as he did now, perennial candidates for the presidency. Smiling, he watched a little old lady dressed in pink, very tiny and very fussy, flit doggedly from booth to booth. Evidently her test marks had not been very good. She was clutching her papers tightly in a black-gloved hand, and there was a look of prim irritation on her face. But *she* knew how to run this country, by George, and one of these days *she* would be President. Harry Larkin chuckled.

But it did prove one thing. The great American dream was still intact. The tests were open to all. And anyone could still grow up to be President of the United States.

Sitting back in his chair, Harry Larkin remembered his own childhood, how the great battle had started. There were examinations for everything in those days - you could not get a job streetcleaning without taking a civil-service examination - but public office needed no qualification at all. And first the psychologists, then the newspapers, had begun calling it a national disgrace. And, considering the caliber of some of the men who went into public office, it *was* a national disgrace. But then psychological testing came of age, really became an exact science, so that it was possible to test a man thoroughly - his knowledge, his potential, his personality. And from there it was a short but bitterly fought step to - SAM.

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SAM. UNCLE SAM, as he had been called originally, the last and greatest of all electronic brains. Harry Larkin peered up in unabashed awe at the vast battery of

lights which flickered above him. He knew that there was more to SAM than just this building, more than all the other forty-eight buildings put together, that SAM was actually an incredibly enormous network of electronic cells which had its heart in no one place, but its arms in all. It was an unbelievably complex analytical computer which judged a candidate far more harshly and thoroughly than the American public could ever have judged him. And crammed in its miles of memory banks lay almost every bit of knowledge mankind had yet discovered. It was frightening, many thought of it as a monster, but Harry Larkin was un-worried.

The thirty years since the introduction of SAM had been thirty of America's happiest years. In a world torn by continual war and unrest, by dictators, puppet governments, the entire world had come to know and respect the American President for what he was: the best possible man for the job. And there was no doubt that he was the best. He had competed for the job in fair examination against the cream of the country. He had to be a truly remarkable man to come out on top.

The day was long since past when just any man could handle the presidency. A full century before men had begun dying in office, cut down in their prime by the enormous pressures of the job. And that was a hundred years ago. Now the job had become infinitely more complex, and even now President Creighton lay on his bed in the White House, recovering from a stroke, an old, old man after one term of office.

Harry Larkin shuddered to think what might have happened had America not adopted the system of "the best qualified man." All over the world this afternoon men waited for word from America, the calm and trustworthy words of the new President, for there had been no leader in America since President Creighton's stroke. His words would mean more to the people, embroiled as they were in another great crisis, than the words of their own leaders. The leaders of other countries fought for power, bought it, stole it, only rarely earned it. But the American President was known the world over for his honesty, his intelligence, his desire for peace. Had he not those qualities, "old UNCLE SAM" would never have elected him.

Eventually, the afternoon nearly over, Harry Larkin rose to leave. By this time the President was probably already elected. Tomorrow the world would return to peace. Harry Larkin paused in the door once before he left, listened to the reassuring hum from the great machine. Then he went quietly home, walking quickly and briskly toward the most enormous fate on Earth.

* * * *

“My name is Reddington. You know me?”

Harry Larkin smiled uncertainly into the phone.

“Why... yes, I believe so. You are, if I’m not mistaken, general director of the Bureau of Elections.”

“Correct,” the voice went on quickly, crackling in the receiver, “and you are supposed to be an authority on Political Science, right?”

“Supposed to be?” Larkin bridled. “Well, it’s distinctly possible that I - ”

“All right, all right,” Reddington blurted. “No time for politeness. Listen, Larkin, this is a matter of urgent national security. There will be a car at your door - probably be there when you put this phone down. I want you to get into it and hop on over here. I can’t explain further. I know your devotion to the country, and if it wasn’t for that I would not have called you. But don’t ask questions. Just come. No time. Good-bye.”

There was a click. Harry Larkin stood holding the phone for a long shocked moment, then he heard a pounding at the door. The housekeeper was out, but he waited automatically before going to answer it. He didn’t like to be rushed, and he was confused. Urgent national security? Now what in blazes -

The man at the door was an Army major. He was accompanied by two young but very large sergeants. They identified Larkin, then escorted him politely but firmly down the steps into a staff car. Larkin could not help feeling abducted, and a completely characteristic rage began to rise in him. But he remembered what Reddington had said about national security and so sat back quietly with nothing more than an occasional grumble.

He was driven back into Washington. They took him downtown to a small but expensive apartment house he could neither identify nor remember, and escorted him briskly into an elevator. When they reached the suite upstairs they opened the door and let him in, but did not follow him. They turned and went quickly away.

Somewhat ruffled, Larkin stood for a long moment in the hall by the hat table, regarding a large rubber plant. There was a long sliding door before him, closed, but he could hear an argument going on behind it. He heard the word “SAM” mentioned many times, and once he heard a clear sentence: “...

Government by machine. I will not tolerate it!" Before he had time to hear any more, the doors slid back. A small, square man with graying hair came out to meet him. He recognized the man instantly as Reddington.

"Larkin," the small man said, "glad you're here." The tension on his face showed also in his voice. "That makes all of us. Come in and sit down." He turned back into the large living room. Larkin followed.

"Sorry to be so abrupt," Reddington said, "but it was necessary. You will see. Here, let me introduce you around."

Larkin stopped in involuntary awe. He was used to the sight of important men, but not so many at one time, and never so close. There was Secretary Kell, of Agriculture; Wachsmuth, of Commerce; General Vines, Chief of Staff; and a battery of others so imposing that Larkin found his mouth hanging embarrassingly open. He closed it immediately.

Reddington introduced him. The men nodded one by one, but they were all deathly serious, their faces drawn, and there was now no conversation. Reddington waxed him to a chair. Most of the others were standing, but Larkin sat.

Reddington sat directly facing him. There was a long moment of silence during which Larkin realized that he was being searchingly examined. He flushed, but sat calmly with his hands folded in his lap. After a while Reddington took a deep breath.

"Dr. Larkin," he said slowly, "what I am about to say to you will die with you. There must be no question of that. We cannot afford to have any word of this meeting, any word at all, reach anyone not in this room. This includes your immediate relatives, your friends, anyone - anyone at all. Before we continue, let me impress you with that fact. This is a matter of the gravest national security. Will you keep what is said here in confidence?"

"If the national interests - " Larkin began, then he said abruptly, "of course."

Reddington smiled slightly.

"Good. I believe you. I might add that just the fact of your being here, Doctor, means that you have already passed the point of no return... well, no matter. There is no time. I'll get to the point."

He stopped, looking around the room. Some of the other men were standing and now began to move in closer. Larkin felt increasingly nervous, but the magnitude of the event was too great for him to feel any worry. He gazed intently at Reddington.

“The Polls close tonight at eight o’clock.” Reddington glanced at his watch. “It is now six-eighteen. I must be brief. Doctor, do you remember the prime directive that we gave to SAM when he was first built?”

“I think so,” said Larkin slowly.

“Good. You remember then that there was one main order. SAM was directed to elect, quote, *the best qualified man*. unquote. Regardless of any and all circumstances, religion, race, so on. The orders were clear - the best qualified man. The phrase has become world famous. But unfortunately” - he glanced up briefly at the men surrounding him - “the order was a mistake. Just whose mistake does not matter. I think perhaps the fault lies with all of us, but - it doesn’t matter. What matters is this: SAM will not elect a president.”

Larkin struggled to understand. Reddington leaned forward in his chair.

“Now follow me closely. We learned this only late this afternoon. We are always aware, as you no doubt know, of the relatively few people in this country who have a chance for the presidency. We know not only because they are studying for it, but because such men as these are marked from their childhood to be outstanding. We keep close watch on them, even to assigning the Secret Service to protect them from possible harm. There are only a very few. During this last election we could not find more than fifty. All of those people took the tests this morning. None of them passed.”

He paused, waiting for Larkin’s reaction. Larkin made no move.

“You begin to see what I’m getting at? *There is no qualified man.*”

Larkin’s eyes widened. He sat bolt upright.

“Now it hits you. If none of those people this morning passed, there is no chance at all for any of the others tonight. What is left now is simply crackpots and malcontents. They are privileged to take the tests, but it means nothing. SAM is not going to select anybody. Because sometime during the last four years the presidency passed the final limit, the ultimate end of man’s capabilities, and with scientific certainty we know that there is probably no man alive who is, according

to SAM's directive, qualified."

"But," Larkin interrupted, "I'm not quite sure I follow. Doesn't the phrase 'elect the best qualified man' mean that we can at least take the best we've got?"

Reddington smiled wanly and shook his head.

"No. And that was our mistake. It was quite probably a psychological block, but none of us ever considered the possibility of the job surpassing human ability. Not then, thirty years ago. And we also never seemed to remember that SAM is, after all, only a machine. He takes the words to mean exactly what they say: Elect the best, comma, *qualified*, comma, man. But do you see, if there is *no* qualified man, SAM cannot possibly elect the best. So SAM will elect no one at all. Tomorrow this country will be without a president. And the result of that, more than likely, will mean a general war."

Larkin understood. He sat frozen in his chair.

"So you see our position," Reddington went on wearily. "There's nothing we can do. Reelecting President Creighton is out of the question. His stroke was permanent, he may not last the week. And there is no possibility of tampering with SAM, to change the directive. Because, as you know, SAM is foolproof, had to be. The circuits extend through all forty-eight states. To alter the machine at all requires clearing through all forty-eight entrances. We can't do that. For one thing, we haven't time. For another, we can't risk letting the world know there is no qualified man.

"For a while this afternoon, you can understand, we were stumped. What could we do? There was only one answer, we may come back to it yet. Give the presidency itself to SAM - "

A man from across the room, whom Larkin did not recognize, broke in angrily.

"Now Reddington, I told you, that is government by machine! And I will not stand - "

"What else can you *do*!" Reddington whirled, his eyes flashing, his tension exploding now into rage. "Who else knows all the answers? Who else can compute in two seconds the tax rate for Mississippi, the parity levels for wheat, the probable odds on a military engagement? Who else but SAM! And why didn't we do it long ago, just feed the problems to *him*, SAM, and not go on killing man

after man, great men, *decent* men like poor Jim Creighton, who's on his back now and dying because people like you - " He broke off suddenly and bowed his head. The room was still. No one looked at Reddington. After a moment he shook his head. His voice, when he spoke, was husky.

"Gentlemen, I'm sorry. This leads nowhere." He turned back to Larkin.

Larkin had begun to feel the pressure. But the presence of these men, of Reddington's obvious profound sincerity, reassured him. Creighton had been a great president; he had surrounded himself with some of the finest men in the country. Larkin felt a surge of hope that such men as these were available for one of the most critical hours in American history. For critical it was, and Larkin knew as clearly as anyone there what the absence of a president in the morning - no deep reassurance, no words of hope - would mean, he sat waiting for Reddington to continue.

"Well, we have a plan. It may work, it may not. We may all be shot. But this is where you come in. I hope for all our sakes you're up to it."

Larkin waited.

"The plan," Reddington went on, slowly, carefully, "is this. SAM has one defect. We can't tamper with it. But we *can* fool it. Because when the brain tests a man, it does not at the same time identify him. We do the identifying ourselves. So if a man named Joe Smith takes the personality tests and another man also named Joe Smith takes the Political Science tests, the machine has no way of telling them apart. Unless our guards supply the difference, SAM will mark up the results of both tests to one Joe Smith. We can clear the guards, no problem there. The first problem was to find the eight men to take the eight tests."

Larkin understood. He nodded.

"Exactly. Eight specialists," Reddington said. "General Vines will take the Military; Burden, Psychology; Wachsmuth, Economics; and so on. You, of course, will take the Political Science. We can only hope that each man will come out with a high enough score in his own field so that the combined scores of our mythical 'candidate' will be enough to qualify him. Do you follow me?"

Larkin nodded dazedly. "I think so. But - "

"It should work. It has to work."

“Yes,” Larkin murmured, “I can see that. But who, who will actually wind up - ”

“As president?” Reddington smiled very slightly and stood up.

“That was the most difficult question of all. At first we thought there was no solution. Because a president must be so many things - consider. A president blossoms instantaneously, from nonentity, into the most important job on earth. Every magazine, every newspaper in the country immediately goes to work on his background, digs out his life story, anecdotes, savings, and so on. Even a very strong fraud would never survive it. So the first problem was believability. The new president must be absolutely believable. He must be a man of obvious character, of obvious intelligence, but more than that, his former life must fit the facts: he must have had both the time and the personality to prepare himself for the office.

“And you see immediately what all that means. Most businessmen are out. Their lives have been too social, they wouldn’t have had the time. For the same reason all government and military personnel are also out, and we need hardly say that anyone from the Bureau of Elections would be immediately suspect. No. You see the problem. For a while we thought that the time was too short, the risk too great. But then the only solution, the only possible chance, finally occurred to us.

“The only believable person would be - a professor. Someone whose life has been serious but unhurried, devoted to learning but at the same time isolated. The only really believable person. And not a scientist, you understand, for a man like that would be much too overbalanced in one direction for our purpose. No, simply a professor, preferably in a field like Political Science, a man whose sole job for many years has been teaching, who can claim to have studied in his spare time, his summers - never really expected to pass the tests and all that, a humble man, you see - ”

“Political Science,” Larkin said.

Reddington watched him. The other men began to close in on him.

“Yes,” Reddington said gently. “Now do you see? It is our only hope. Your name was suggested by several sources, you are young enough, your reputation is well known. We think that you would be believable. And now that I’ve seen you” - he looked around slowly - “I for one am willing to risk it. Gentlemen, what do you say?”

Larkin, speechless, sat listening in mounting shock while the men agreed solemnly, one by one. In the enormity of the moment he could not think at all. Dimly, he heard Reddington.

“I know. But, Doctor, there is no time. The Polls close at eight. It is now almost seven.”

Larkin closed his eyes and rested his head on his hands. Above him, Reddington went on inevitably.

“All right. You are thinking of what happens after. Even if we pull this off and you are accepted without question, what then? Well, it will simply be the old system all over again. You will be at least no worse off than presidents before SAM. Better even, because if worse comes to worst, there is always SAM. You can feed all the bad ones to him. You will have the advice of the cabinet, of the military staff. We will help you in every way we can, some of us will sit with you on all conferences. And you know more about this than most of us, you have studied government all your life.

“But all this, what comes later, is not important. Not now. If we can get through tomorrow, the next few days, all the rest will work itself out. Eventually we can get around to altering SAM. But we must have a president in the morning. You are our only hope. You can do it. We all know you can do it. At any rate there is no other way, no time. Doctor,” he reached out and laid his hand on Larkin’s shoulder, “shall we go to the Polls?”

It passed, as most great moments in a man’s life do, with Larkin not fully understanding what was happening to him. Later he would look back to this night and realize the enormity of the decision he had made, the doubts, the sleeplessness, the responsibility and agony toward which he moved. But in that moment he thought nothing at all. Except that it was Larkin’s country, Larkin’s America. And Reddington was right. There was nothing else to do. He stood up.

They went to the Polls.

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At 9:30 that evening, sitting alone with Reddington back at the apartment, Larkin looked at the face of the announcer on the television screen, and heard himself pronounced President-elect of the United States.

Reddington wilted in front of the screen. For a while neither man moved. They had come home alone, just as they had gone into the Polls one by one in the hope of arousing no comment. Now they sat in silence until Reddington turned off the set. He stood up and straightened his shoulders before turning to Larkin. He stretched out his hand.

“Well, may God help us,” he breathed, “we did it.”

Larkin took his hand. He felt suddenly weak. He sat down again, but already he could hear the phone ringing in the outer hall. Reddington smiled.

“Only a few of my closest friends are supposed to know about that phone. But every time anything big comes up - ” He shrugged. “Well,” he said, still smiling, “let’s see how it works.”

He picked up the phone and with it an entirely different manner. He became amazingly light and cheerful, as if he was feeling nothing more than the normal political goodwill.

“Know him? Of course I know him. Had my eye on the guy for months. Really nice guy, wait’ll you meet him... yup, college professor, Political Science, written a couple of books... must know a hell of a lot more than Poli Sci, though. Probably been knocking himself out in his spare time. But those teachers, you know how it is, they don’t get any pay, but all the spare time in the world... Married? No, not that I know of - ”

Larkin noticed with wry admiration how carefully Reddington had slipped in that bit about spare time, without seeming to be making an explanation. He thought wearily to himself, I hope that I don’t have to do am’ talking myself. I’ll have to do a lot of listening before I can chance any talking.

In a few moments Reddington put down the phone and came back. He had on his hat and coat.

“Had to answer a few,” he said briefly, “make it seem natural. But you better get dressed.”

“Dressed? Why?”

“Have you forgotten?” Reddington smiled patiently. “You’re due at the White House. The Secret Service is already tearing the town apart looking for you. We were supposed to alert them. Oh, by the saints, I hope that wasn’t too bad a

slip.”

He pursed his mouth worriedly while Larkin, still dazed, got into his coat. It was beginning now. It had already begun. He was tired but it did not matter. That he was tired would probably never matter again. Fie took a deep breath. Like Reddington, he straightened his shoulders.

The Secret Service picked them up halfway across town. That they knew where he was, who he was, amazed him and worried Reddington. They went through the gates of the White House and drove up before the door. It was opened for him as he put out his hand, he stepped back in a reflex action, from the sudden blinding flares of the photographer’s flashbulbs. Reddington behind him took him firmly by the arm. Larkin went with him gratefully, unable to see, unable to hear anything but the roar of the crowd from behind the gates and the shouted questions of the reporters.

Inside the great front doors it was suddenly peaceful again, very quiet and pleasantly dark. He took off his hat instinctively. Luckily he had been here before, he recognized the lovely hall and felt not awed but at home. He was introduced quickly to several people whose names made no impression on him. A woman smiled. He made an effort to smile back. Reddington took him by the arm again and led him away. There were people all around him, but they were quiet and hung back. He saw the respect on their faces. It sobered him, quickened his mind.

“The President’s in the Lincoln Room,” Reddington whispered. “He wants to see you. How do you feel?”

“All right.”

“Listen.”

“Yes.”

“You’ll be fine. You’re doing beautifully. Keep just that look on your face.”

“I’m not trying to keep it there.”

“You aren’t?” Reddington looked at him. “Good. Very good.” He paused and looked again at Larkin. Then he smiled.

“It’s done it. I thought it would but I wasn’t sure. But it does it every time. A man comes in here, no matter what he was before, no matter what he is when he

goes out, but he feels it. Don't you feel it?"

"Yes. It's like - "

"What?"

"It's like... when you're in here... you're *responsible*."

Reddington said nothing. But Larkin felt a warm pressure on his arm.

They paused at the door of the Lincoln Room. Two Secret Service men, standing by the door, opened it respectfully. They went on in, leaving the others outside.

Larkin looked across the room to the great, immortal bed. He felt suddenly very small, very tender. He crossed the soft carpet and looked down at the old man.

"Hi," the old man said. Larkin was startled, but he looked down at the broad weakly smiling face, saw the famous white hair and the still-twinkling eyes, and found himself smiling in return.

"Mr. President," Larkin said.

"I hear your name is Larkin." The old man's voice was surprisingly strong, but as he spoke now Larkin could see that the left side of his face was paralyzed. "Good name for a president. Indicates a certain sense of humor. Need a sense of humor. Reddington, how'd it go?"

"Good as can be expected, sir." He glanced briefly at Larkin. "The President knows. Wouldn't have done it without his okay. Now that I think of it, it was probably he who put the Secret Service on us."

"You're doggone right," the old man said. "They may bother the by-jingo out of you, but those boys are necessary. And also, if I hadn't let them know we knew Larkin was material - " He stopped abruptly and closed his eyes, took a deep breath. After a moment he said: "Mr. Larkin?"

"Yes, sir."

"I have one or two comments. You mind?"

“Of course not, sir.”

“I couldn’t solve it. I just... didn’t have time. There were so many other things to do.” He stopped and again closed his eyes. “But it will be up to you, son. The presidency... must be preserved. What they’ll start telling you now is that there’s only one way out, let SAM handle it. Reddington, too,” the old man opened his eyes and gazed sadly at Reddington, “he’ll tell you the same thing, but don’t you believe it.

“Sure, SAM knows all the answers. Ask him a question on anything, on levels of parity tax rates, on anything. And right quick SAM will compute you out an answer. So that’s what they’ll try to do, they’ll tell you to take it easy and let SAM do it.

“Well, all right, up to a certain point. But, Mr. Larkin, understand this. SAM is like a book. Like a book, he knows the answers. But *only those answers we’ve already found out*. We gave SAM those answers. A machine is not creative, neither is a book. Both are only the product of creative minds. Sure, SAM could hold the country together. But growth, man, there’d be no more growth! No new ideas, new solutions, change, progress, development! And America *must* grow, must progress - ”

He stopped, exhausted. Reddington bowed his head. Larkin remained idly calm. He felt a remarkable clarity in his head.

“But, Mr. President,” he said slowly, “if the office is too much for one man, then all we can do is cut down on his powers - ”

“Ah,” the old man said faintly, “there’s the rub. Cut down on what? If I sign a tax bill, I must know enough about taxes to be certain that the bill is the right one. If I endorse a police action, I must be certain that the strategy involved is militarily sound. If I consider farm prices... you see, you see, what will you cut? The office is responsible for its acts. It must remain responsible. You cannot take just someone else’s word for things like that, you must make your own decisions. Already we sign things we know nothing about, bills for this, bills for that, on somebody’s word.”

“What do you suggest?”

The old man cocked an eye toward Larkin, smiled once more with half his mouth, anciently worn, only hours from death, an old, old man with his work not done, never to be done.

“Son, come here. Take my hand. Can’t lift it myself.”

Larkin came forward, knelt by the side of the bed. He took the cold hand, now gaunt and almost translucent, and held it gently.

“Mr. Larkin,” the President said. “God be with you, boy. Do what you can. Delegate authority. Maybe cut the term in half. But keep us human, please, keep us growing, keep us alive.” His voice faltered, his eyes closed. “I’m very tired. God be with you.”

Larkin laid the hand gently on the bed cover. He stood for a long moment looking down. Then he turned with Reddington and left the room.

Outside, he waited until they were past the Secret Service men and then turned to Reddington.

“Your plans for SAM. What do you think now?”

Reddington winced.

“I couldn’t see any way out.”

“But what about now? I have to know.”

“I don’t know. I really don’t know. But... let me tell you something.”

“Yes.”

“Whatever I say to you from now on is only advice. You don’t have to take it. Because understand this: however you came in here tonight, you’re going out the president. You were elected. Not by the people maybe, not even by SAM. But you’re President by the grace of God and that’s enough for me. From this moment on you’ll be President to everybody in the world. We’ve all agreed. Never think that you’re only a fraud, because you aren’t. You heard what the President said. You take it from here.”

Larkin looked at him for a long while. Then he nodded once, briefly.

“All right,” he said.

“One more thing.”

“Yes?”

“I’ve got to say this, tonight, this afternoon, I didn’t really know what I was doing to you. I thought... well... the crisis came. But you had no time to think. That wasn’t right. A man shouldn’t be pushed into a thing like this without time to think. The old man just taught me something about making your own decisions. I should have let you make yours.”

“It’s all right.”

“No, it isn’t. You remember him in there. Well. That’s you four years from tonight. If you live that long.”

Now it was Larkin who reached out and patted Reddington on the shoulder.

“That’s all right, too,” he said.

Reddington said nothing. When he spoke again, Larkin realized he was moved.

“We have the greatest luck, this country,” he said tightly. “At all the worst times we always seem to find all the best people.”

“Well,” Larkin said hurriedly, “we’d better get to work. There’s a speech due in the morning. And the problem of SAM. And... oh, I’ve got to be sworn in.”

He turned and went off down the hall. Reddington paused a moment before following him. He was thinking that he could be watching the last human President the United States would ever have. But - once more he straightened his shoulders.

“Yes, sir,” he said softly, “Mr. President.”