

NIMROD'S TOWER

PROLOGUE

And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth – Genesis 11:4

THE GUNFIRE began at an army garrison near Seoul, South Korea, and ended at a naval air station on the coast of Iceland. In the seventeen hours between first and last, gunshots rang out on hundreds of military installations and naval vessels around the world. In every place, the ritual was the same – a single gun fired a single shot as the sun appeared over the horizon, fired again every half-hour, and loosed its last shot as darkness fell. Flags were lowered to half-staff. The formal mourning for the President of the United States of America had begun.

The president's casket lay on a high black catafalque in the center of the East Room. For twelve hours official Washington came to the White House, some to pay their respects, others to make sure he was dead. The first to arrive were Executive Branch officials, presidential appointees and White House staff. The Justices of the

Supreme Court, all of whom he had elevated to the Court, came next, followed by Members of the Senate and House of Representatives, then State and Territorial Governors. The Chiefs of Washington's 177 diplomatic missions were the last to view the body, following which the president was left with an honor guard – enlisted men and women in full dress uniforms from each branch of the Armed Services – whose members were changed out every hour in precise, choreographed symmetry.

Except for the president and his guardians, the room was empty, but they weren't alone. Three television cameras aimed at the catafalque, one from above and the others on either side, broadcast his repose unblinkingly to the nation and the world. It was one of the suggestions he'd made when queried after his election about a potential funeral. "The ratings will be huge," he said, perhaps jokingly. An impresario even in death, other changes to past practice included more television at the Capitol and Arlington, a greater than usual show of military might, and fireworks after the burial.

Early the next morning the queue for the procession to Capitol Hill began to form just outside the East Room. Thousands of troops lined both sides of the route the cortège would follow – North Portico Drive onto a remnant of Pennsylvania Avenue, down 15th Street to Pennsylvania again, then on to Constitution Avenue and the East Plaza of the Capitol. Television cameras were positioned along every block. The Goodyear blimp provided aerial coverage.

The procession began promptly at noon under leaden skies. In the lead was a squadron of mounted patrolmen from the District of Columbia Metropolitan Police followed by dignitaries in limousines. Next, where a military band might ordinarily be placed, there was only a corps of drummers with muffled instruments. Behind them were two more limousines carrying the president's honorary pallbearers, the nine Justices of the Supreme Court. Then came a special honor guard comprised of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and White House military aides, followed by a sailor carrying the flag of the United States, all on foot.

A caisson bearing the president's coffin – surrounded by eight military body bearers – came next, then a caparisoned horse and the president's flag. After that, in order, were immediate family and the new President of the United States in automobiles, and more policemen. Bringing up the rear were six march units representing each branch of the Armed Services.

The four-wheeled caisson was a wooden wagon originally used to transport cannon during World War I. It was drawn by three pairs of gray horses, all saddled though only those on the left bore riders, and the casket it carried was draped with an American flag. The caparisoned horse, riderless, was jet black. Led by a marine in full dress blues, the stallion wore a saddle blanket, saddle and bridle, all black, and carried a pair of boots turned backwards in the stirrups.

The pace was slow and measured, the only sound the muffled drums and the occasional word to the horses. As the skies opened, hundreds of thousands of

citizens stood behind the military cordons along the route, silent. Tens of millions of others, too far away to come to Washington on such short notice, watched on television. When the procession reached the intersection of Constitution Avenue and 4th Street, twenty-one fighter jets – one in the lead followed by five flights of four planes each – flew low over the crowds. As the last flight approached, its number three aircraft peeled away from the others and disappeared over the horizon.

At the Capitol, another military cordon lined the center steps at the east front. A joint band from the Army, Navy, Air Force and Coast Guard sounded four ruffles and flourishes and played “Hail to the Chief” at dirge adagio – eighty-six beats to the minute – followed by the Navy hymn, “Eternal Father, Strong to Save.” At the first note of the hymn, a battery from the Army’s 3rd Infantry, the “Old Guard,” fired a twenty-one gun salute with five-second intervals between rounds.

A perfect silence greeted the final volley, broken by gruff commands from the chief of the body bearers. They lifted the coffin from the caisson and carried it up the steps, pausing as each foot gained the next tread. The former First Lady and the president’s children, joined by the honor guard, honorary pall bearers and the new president, followed the casket into the Capitol Rotunda. Rumors that the rotunda, under the joint control of the Senate and House of Representatives, might not be made available for the ceremony proved groundless.

The body bearers raised the coffin to the Lincoln catafalque and opened the head panel, another request from the dead president. The catafalque, a wooden trapezoid draped in black fabric, was situated in the center of the room. Members of Congress entered the rotunda from their respective sides of the Capitol and listened to a brief eulogy delivered by the Chief Justice. Thereafter, heads of foreign states, former presidents, the Cabinet, the Dean of the diplomatic corps and the president's personal staff shuffled past the catafalque. Thirty minutes later, everyone was gone, leaving him again with his honor guard and three television cameras.

And then the doors were opened to the people. As they entered the rotunda, wet and still silent, they were divided into two lines that passed on either side of the catafalque. Thirty-five hundred mourners an hour, twenty-four hours a day, said goodbye. Though the president had directed that his body lie in state as long as anyone wished to see him, the powers-that-be deemed that "impossible" and "unprecedented" and, with no end in sight, closed the rotunda after five days and banished him to his grave at Arlington National Cemetery. After a tense confrontation with Capitol Police the people, sullen, melted away.

A cortège similar to the one that took him to the Capitol carried him down the National Mall, past the charred stump of the Washington Monument, around the Lincoln Memorial and across the Potomac to Arlington. It was an Indian summer afternoon, blue skies and bright sunshine, and the people again lined the

route beneath elm trees just beginning to turn yellow. Instead of the muffled drums, a fife and drum corps marked the cadence.

As the mourners gathered in ranks around the grave, a roar began to build in the west. Military airplanes in vee formations – thousands, of every description – approached. Each wave flew straight and true, directly over the cemetery. After the last one had faded into the distance, it was quiet for a moment, and then a single aircraft, a blue and white Boeing 747 with an American flag on its tail, flew close to the ground and dipped its wings.

The reluctant tribute below continued. As the caisson approached, the Marine Band played ruffles and flourishes and “Hail to the Chief.” A wizened old man in a black robe, the pastor from the president’s sometime church at the winter White House, waited by the gravesite. The body bearers raised the casket from the caisson for the final time and set it beneath a black canopy emblazoned with the presidential seal. A great horned owl, perched in a nearby oak tree, looked on solemnly.

He’d never served a day in the military, and his detractors, who had likewise refused military service, sniffed at all the spit and polish. They deemed burial at Arlington a bridge too far, but no one said so publicly. Some of his more perceptive enemies suspected that he was mocking them one last time.

The preacher spoke a few words. Because he did not wear a microphone or because it didn’t work, they were mostly lost to the world’s television audience. The

combined Glee Clubs from the United States Naval Academy rendered the first and last verses of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” a cappella, the benediction was given, and a three-volley salute from seven rifles – once invoked to clear battlefield casualties and re-start the hostilities – was executed.

The pace of the ceremony picked up as if the participants were impatient to have it over. The flag that draped the coffin was folded twelve times by the body bearers and presented to the widow. A lone bugler played *Taps*, and the twenty-one gun salute was rendered again by the Old Guard. As the people turned away, four Special Forces troops, unbidden, stationed themselves at the corners of the president’s grave. His fireworks could be seen and heard over the Mall.

The gunshots that began the world-wide mourning six days earlier sounded again, this time simultaneously. As flags were lowered at military bases and aboard Navy ships, fifty more shots were fired, one for each State in the Union. The forty-fifth President of the United States of America went out as he came in, not with a whimper but a bang, and the cadre he derided as “the Swamp,” having afforded him these laurels through gritted teeth, prepared for a return to business as usual. The citizens, more rooted in the reality of the nation, braced for something more.