

THE TIME PATRIOT

Hail Mary Pass

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Dedication

This book (and the rest of this series) is dedicated to my soulmate wife Martha Rice Megahee. She's the wisest person and the best judge of character I know. When she offers advice, I listen. However, technology is not her friend.

Relevant Quotes

"A lady asked Dr. Franklin Well Doctor what have we got a republic or a monarchy – A republic replied the Doctor if you can keep it." — "The Lady here alluded to was Mrs. Powel of Philada." From the Journal of James McHenry - September 18th, 1787

"Our new Constitution is now established, everything seems to promise it will be durable; but, in this world, nothing is certain except death and taxes." Benjamin Franklin - 1789

CHAPTER ONE

Present Day - Thursday, February 5th, 2037 - 9:30 PM EST - The White House, Washington, DC

Marc McKnight sat outside the Oval Office, waiting for the President of the United States.

He checked his watch. He'd been there for over an hour.

There's got to be something productive I can do.

He drew his phone from his pocket again and typed in another idea on how to convince an eighteenth-century man you're from the future and you need his help.

McKnight was a colonel in the Army's 75th Regiment and the leader of the HERO Team. His team used a limited time travel technology to research historical events, investigate suspicious event changes, and set history back on its original path when necessary.

When time travel capability was developed by Doctor Robert Astalos, the government classified it and appointed retired General Mike Drake to direct the operations of the HERO Team. Drake offered the operational command to McKnight and helped pick a team of Rangers and talented civilians to do the work.

HERO was an acronym. It stood for "Historical Event Research Organization." McKnight thought the name was lame, but he was a rule-follower and soldier who obeyed orders. He was a West Point grad who hailed from eastern Oregon, where he grew up in the small town of Pendleton near the Umatilla Indian Reservation. His dark hair and brown eyes came from the one-quarter of his blood that claimed Native American ancestry. He was six feet tall with skin that turned bronze in the sun. McKnight's father and his father before him served in the military as officers. He was introverted and credited his team for successful missions.

A woman approached him. He'd seen her on the TEV and recognized her as one of President Harrison's advisors, but he couldn't remember her name.

"Colonel McKnight?" she said. "The President wants you to meet with him in his private study upstairs. If you'll follow me, please?"

McKnight stood, gathered his briefcase and White House visitor badge, and followed her.

In four days, the HERO Team would begin their most important and dangerous mission ever, and he presumed the President wanted to give him a pep talk. He brought his project documentation with him in case the President wanted to discuss the plans.

McKnight was not in favor of the mission. While its goals were admirable, the risk of affecting American history was significant. In his opinion, the risks were too great for the potential rewards.

He could have declined to take part. But, he reasoned, the mission would still be executed, even if he didn't accept the command. They'd give it to someone with less experience with time travel technology. It was a hard choice, but he swallowed his objections and accepted the command.

The woman led him up a flight of stairs and down a long hallway. She stopped before a door with a brass-plated 'Private' sign and knocked.

President Wade Harrison answered the door with a cell phone to his ear, beckoned McKnight to enter, and turned away. McKnight nodded to the woman and entered the room. She closed the door behind him.

In the middle of the room, there were two small sofas facing each other across a coffee table. A table and lamp stood at each end of the sofas. On the far side of the room was a floor-to-ceiling window that offered a view of the Washington Monument.

Except for the window and door, the room dedicated every inch of wall space to bookshelves. A table with a coffee service sat against the east wall and a stepladder to reach the top shelves leaned against the west wall.

Harrison walked to the window, listening to his phone. His coat and tie were off, and his sleeves were rolled up to the elbows.

“Right,” President Harrison said into his phone. “But that’s your job, right? Why else would we be talking about this?”

He looked at McKnight and pointed to the sofa that faced the window.

McKnight moved to the sofa and stood beside it.

I can’t sit while the President is standing.

“I don’t care,” Harrison said. “Coming up with a solution is your job, and then we can discuss it.”

Harrison looked again at McKnight, then pointed emphatically at the sofa.

McKnight sat but stayed on the edge of the seat. If it was possible to stand at attention while sitting, he was doing it.

“Right. The monkey is still on your back. Call me back when you have solutions to discuss. Good night.”

Harrison disconnected the call and turned back to McKnight.

President Wade Harrison carried himself like the Chief Executive he was. He wore his dark hair short, with a whisper of gray at his temples. He had an athletic build. His eyes were blue and constantly moved to watch every person in the room. McKnight knew those eyes missed very little.

“I’m sorry for the late meeting, Colonel. This has been a helluva day, but I wanted to talk to you before your mission begins next week.”

“No problem, Mister President. Late meetings are part of the job.”

“Yes, they are,” Harrison said, as he sat on the opposite sofa. “At ease, Marc. Relax. There’s no decorum or formality in this room. Do you have everything you need? For the mission, I mean?”

“Yes, sir, I believe so. I mean, there’s always something that pops up, but the team is on board with the objective and they’re the most inventive and creative people I know. I’m confident we have everything we need and can improvise if necessary.”

“Good. I see you brought a briefcase. Project plans and stuff?”

“Yes, sir.”

Harrison smiled. “You won’t be needing them. I just wanted to talk to you in private.” He rose and walked to the bookshelves on the east wall near the door.

McKnight placed his briefcase on the floor and leaned back on the sofa. It felt weird, sitting casually with the President like this. He twisted his body to the left so he could see Harrison.

“I want you to understand what’s at stake here,” Harrison said.

He pushed on a book, and the shelf retracted back into the wall and up, disappearing behind the shelves above. Another shelf with chrome sides slid up and forward to take its place, revealing several bottles and glasses.

“I heard you were a Jack Daniels and water guy, Marc. Is that right?”

“Yes, sir.”

Harrison poured ice into two glasses and added the whiskey. He followed it with a dash of water.

“Me, too,” he said. “Ever since my college days. Find something you like that’s dependable and stick with it.”

He handed McKnight one glass, lifted the other, and said, “Cheers.”

McKnight stood, raised his glass to the President. “Cheers.”

Harrison sat and directed McKnight to do the same.

“Marc, I want you to understand where I’m coming from, but I didn’t want to do it in public. You have the unique experience of seeing me in a different light than anyone else.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Sometimes I feel like politics is all we do. I get so frustrated with all the arguments and the pushback and what do the pundits think, et-cetera. It gets hard to even breathe sometimes.”

“Yes, sir. It’s not in my experience, but I can imagine. I’m glad this is your job and not mine... No offense intended, sir.”

“Ha! None taken.”

Harrison took a long sip from his drink and set the glass on the coffee table. “I’m sure you’ve heard it said that the government is so big it

can't move fast. Members of the legislature and my administration say that all the time. But it isn't true."

McKnight raised an eyebrow. "Sir?"

Harrison chuckled. "Well, it takes time to filter through the levels of government, but the real time-killer is the politicians dragging their feet while they decide what changes will hurt them, what modifications they can profit from, and what revisions they can use to hammer the opposition. They could move a lot faster if they wanted to."

He paused, then waved it off.

"But the bottom line is they don't have incentive to solve any problem unless a huge block of the population jumps up and down. Both sides are guilty of this. If they solved a problem, what would they blame the opposition for? It's easier to beat up the opposition with the same old problems than to work at finding new ones."

"Yes, sir."

"But I guess it's always been that way. Ever wonder why Presidents come into office all excited and vigorous, then leave with much more gray hair and lines on their faces? In my opinion, it's the constant pounding of politics from every direction."

Harrison picked up his glass and sipped. Then he shrugged.

"But I'm getting off topic here. I didn't invite you here to complain about politics. I have more important things to say."

He set the glass back on the coffee table.

"It's no secret to anyone that our government is off track. Wanda Taylor and I have talked about this for years."

McKnight nodded. Former President Taylor endorsed Harrison for President and Harrison had been a frequent guest at her White House. They were more than friendly politicians and allies. They were friends.

"The American people are suspicious of their government. After two hotly contested elections and rumors of cheating on both sides, it's no wonder they don't trust us. Every time you turn around, there are reports of politicians taking money for favors and providing cover for people who should be in jail. Again, on *both* sides of the aisle."

“Yes, sir.”

I can't argue with that.

“And now there's a genuine threat of civil war bubbling up in the Midwest. There's nothing I can say to relieve the situation because there's no excuse for all this... crap. They're upset and frustrated, and demanding change and I can't reason them out of it because, hell, I agree with them. They're *right*.”

McKnight could sense the President's anger rising.

Be careful what you say. Presidents make big mistakes when they get pissed off.

Harrison seemed to sense his thoughts. He smiled, and said, “Don't worry, Marc. I won't drag you into the politics around this. Your focus is on the mission, and that's how it should be.

“When I became President, I made a conscious decision to move to the center. I want to be a President for all the people. The people get it, but it outrages both parties in Congress.”

He chuckled. “My party calls me a traitor, and the other party suspects my actions. Both are threatening to start an impeachment movement and they could get it done with some strategic horse trading across parties. They're convinced they'd do better with my Vice President.”

He drained his glass.

“So, I have one good shot at this. The idea is simple — I want to put the one man who has any chance of credibility with the American people in front of them to share what he and the other Founding Fathers were trying to do with the American Constitution. We have the technology to do this, but I agree it's risky.”

McKnight nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Harrison leaned forward and looked McKnight in the eye.

“General Drake tells me you don't approve of the mission. I think I understand why, but I want to hear it from you. Why do you object to it, Marc?”

“Yes, sir.” McKnight paused to gather his thoughts. Then he slapped his thighs with both hands and moved forward on the sofa to match the President’s posture. “Sir, I’m okay with the goal of the mission. People would listen to what he has to say. But the chances of success are low, and the risks are off the scale. What if something happens to him and he doesn’t make it back to the Constitutional Convention? What if he visits our time and is so discouraged by what he finds, he chooses not to take part in politics anymore? For God’s sake, what if someone *shoots* him?”

McKnight paused.

Is he with me?

Harrison said nothing.

“Sir, if any of that occurs, America as we know it would never exist. Everything we’ve built here... the freedoms, the industries, the food production, the military might... Everything would change. Sure, some good ideas would catch on, but the best scenario — continuing with the Articles of Confederation and trying to tweak them — would leave us a bunch of squabbling states. Just like Europe was in the same time period.”

“Yes,” Harrison said, “I see that risk. And what else?”

McKnight blinked.

Isn’t that enough?

“Okay, sir. Let’s just look at where the man himself is, along with the technology limitations. We can only travel to years that are a multiple of twenty-five years from the current time. Because of the travel limitations, now is the best time to go. From now, in February 2037 to February 1787. That’s two months before the Constitutional Convention. And it’s two years before he takes office, and ten years before he has the experience of leaving the office.”

“Yes, and we can’t afford to wait. Please go on.”

He wants me to get all my objections on the table. Okay, here goes.

“Yes, sir, and we haven’t considered what to do if he comes back with us and doesn’t want to cooperate, or if he flat out refuses to come

to 2037. How do you convince an eighteenth-century man, even a forward-thinking one like Washington, that you came from 250 years in the future, but you need his help? I mean, we have a planned approach, but what if he doesn't buy it? Sir, all these outcomes point to dismal failure."

"What's your bottom line, Marc?"

"We're much more likely to fail than succeed... Sorry, sir."

His glass in hand, the President stood, and McKnight stood as well.

Harrison shook his head and said, "No, don't stand. Sit. Relax. I'm just letting your words sink in."

McKnight lowered himself back onto the sofa.

"I think we agree, Marc," Harrison said. "The mission is a Hail Mary pass. We're down four points in the fourth quarter with three seconds left on the clock. All the things you brought up are risks we cannot control or mitigate. Would you like another drink?"

"No, sir, I'm fine."

Harrison set his glass back on the bottle shelf and returned to his sofa.

"So, here's where we are, Marc. If we go into civil war, we lose power and we embolden our enemies. Who'd move in first? China? Russia? North Korea? India? All the above? At minimum, they'd make territorial conquests elsewhere in the world that we'd never permit if we were stronger."

He paused, and McKnight nodded.

He's right.

"Can you imagine this world without freedom?" Harrison said. "We can't afford a civil war. The *world* can't afford it. For 250 years, the United States has been a beacon of freedom and opportunity in the world. That's why people are trying to get into our country and not out of it. If the United States fails, the world descends into darkness. The United States has been the greatest experiment in government of all time and, until recently, has been overwhelmingly successful. And now? We haven't failed, but we've stumbled badly. If we don't get back

up and past this, we'll slide further from freedom, with more fighting in the streets and more deaths of innocents. What happens next depends on whether we Americans can find our vision again."

"Yes, sir."

"Marc, you've seen me as President, but you and your team also found me on another timeline as a poor public servant, struggling to make a difference."

"Yes, sir."

He means where we found him before we set history back on its original track.

"You see, Marc? I have to try. I can't stand by and watch us go down if I can prevent it. I will not shy away from action — it's my duty as President. Does that make sense to you?"

"Yes, sir."

"From my point of view, the biggest driver behind all the fighting and insurrection is politics. Do you agree?"

"You could make that case, sir. People follow their favorite politicians, sometimes without question."

"Right. And the politicians of both parties keep their gravy train going by staying in power, so they take every opportunity to whip up angry emotions against the opposition and portray themselves as benevolent saviors. And the media falls right in with them — sensationalizing every event on the nightly news. We need to turn it around."

"Sir?"

"I mean to shine a bright light on the process. Expose the politician's racket to everyday Americans — the hardworking people who are too busy making a living to educate themselves on the issues —"

"The politician's racket, sir?"

"Yes, you know what I mean — the system where a person can make a career of 'public service' and get wealthy. That's what I want the American people to see. If they ever understand it, they'll insist we fix it. America needs citizen legislators, not career politicians. We want

people in Congress who are motivated by the problems they can solve, not the wealth they can generate.”

McKnight nodded.

Unless I'm reading him totally wrong, he's serious. He wants to make things better.

“If anyone can explain where the Founders were coming from, it would be Washington, wouldn't it?” Harrison said. “We have to try, and I need you to be on board with that. But we can't manipulate him to our side. We need to hear from the real guy — the one who put his life on the line during the fight for independence and dragged us, kicking and screaming, into a democratic republic. Can you support that, Marc? Are you with me?”

“Yes, sir. I can do that.”

As he left the White House and drove home, McKnight replayed their discussion in his head.

A masterful performance? Maybe. But he's right. It's a Hail Mary pass and we have to go for it.

End of Sample Chapter