

AT RISK OF WINNING

Mark E. Becker

For eight hours after Bill Staffman's impromptu appearance, the press churned and edited. Any reportable audio and video news is broadcast by satellite to the central office. After viewing by junior editors, the information is dissected and quickly forwarded to copywriters, who view each clip and write voice-overs. Any editorially relevant information is funneled through the information pipeline to the appropriate news desk, and the slant begins.

In Max's case, the lack of reportable information caused the press to use what they had, and the only bites worth reporting on the Masterson campaign had so far come from Bill. They had the promise of more tantalizing news from the candidate himself, and they weren't going anywhere until they had it in the can. Each news team stood huddled over monitors in their satellite trucks while the camera crews stood like sentries waiting for Max to emerge from the front door of his campaign headquarters. As their eyes tried to discern any movement inside the building, Max quietly took his place on the podium.

The stealth appearance of the subject of their surveillance caused several moments of controlled panic. Max stood at the podium before the microphone, dressed in his running outfit and looking composed as shouts of "There he is!", "Get the lights on!", "Where in the hell did he come from?," and "Did you leave the sound feed on?" ricocheted across the playground. He waited until they were in place, a process that seemed too long, but was really nothing more than an about-face.

"I'm Max Masterson, and I'm going to be your next president of the United States. I'll be appearing here and in other locations to present regular reports of my thoughts on issues that are important to Americans. Today, my thoughts are about war."

He paused, and then continued. “There will always be a big push for a president to go to war for the wrong reasons. The defense contractors always want war, and politicians who never went to war will be more likely to push for it. Never take advice on this subject from someone who has never been shot at. A president who goes to war, without being attacked by an enemy who isn’t intent on harming the United States, commits his nation to failure. Either the voters will kick the scoundrel out or public opinion will sink him. Wars of occupation always lose.

“Our Founding Fathers would be considered revolutionaries in today’s world. George Washington’s army fought the battles, mostly as guerilla fighters. Thomas Jefferson wrote the messages of liberty from foreign control. Nathan Hale spoke against the occupation and was executed for the words he spoke against the occupiers. By night, Paul Revere delivered the message to resist, and by day, he was a successful businessman. These were people who were defending their homes against an occupying army. Every time we go into another country, we become the bad guys. Let’s bargain with them instead. We are better bargainers than warriors any day, and sovereign countries need to maintain their independence free from occupation by foreigners.”

They waited for more, accustomed to hour-long ramblings, but Max was done. He turned and vaulted off the front of the stage, then ran to the end of the street, turned toward the well-worn running path on the banks of the Potomac, and was gone before anyone had the presence of mind to turn off the cameras.

“I fooled them all this time, but I’m going to have to change my exit strategy every time. This place will be crawling with film crews in track suits within the hour,” he thought. His speed had steadily increased over the mile from the stage to his car, but he estimated that he was running at a sub six-minute mile pace. The reporters were far behind, and his course through the

park prevented pursuit by car. They weren't beyond pursuing him by helicopter if they had thought of it, but his unorthodox departure had prevented preparation in advance.

Max ran across the park toward a blue Jaguar parked behind a row of trees. As he crested the hill, he felt a sting at the base of his neck. "Damn wasps," he reasoned. He slapped his skin but didn't feel anything other than tingling at the bump caused by the stinger. "I'll have to put something on it as soon as I get on the plane."

Out of his line of sight, a man dressed in black disassembled a small caliber rifle, designed not to kill but to accurately place an electronic monitor under the skin of its target. The dart shot into Max's neck was so small that it resembled a black wasp, and when it hit Max's neck, it embedded an electronic surveillance device so small that after 24 hours, no evidence of its presence beneath the skin could be detected.

Max slowed when he could make out the lights lining the road at the bottom of the hill. One more turn, and his escape was assured. In the distance, the shining wax finish made the car look like a large sleek beetle. Its aerodynamic shape reminded him of his childhood. Rachel was sitting behind the wheel of the senator's XKR. As he approached the Jaguar, he smiled. "She must like this car," he thought. "I'll have to leave it to her in my will." He leaped into the passenger seat, not bothering to open the door. He had been doing that since he was 14, and old habits are hard to break. "To my chariot, Jeeves, I haven't a moment to waste," he joked in his best English accent, as Rachel slipped it into first gear and squealed away from their prearranged rendezvous point.

From behind a huge walnut tree, the man in black watched their departure through highly amplified night vision goggles. He was code-named Darkhorse, and his vocation as a mercenary allowed him to continue his passion for killing. "If they wanted me to snuff him, and the girl,

too,” he thought, “I’d do her for free, just like his daddy’s girlfriend.”