

Make  
America  
Beautiful  
Again

A NOVEL

BO BANCROFT

Make America Beautiful Again  
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1.

**N**ot that he was a bad dad, he just knew his limitations and one more day visiting Disney World would not end happily ever after. Chuck had just ridden Dumbo for the third time, and standing in another long line listening to “It’s A Small World” was too much for his fragile sanity. His legs ached from dutifully hiking endless miles on hot Florida asphalt, and all he wanted was a comfy chair and a cold beer. From experience, he knew an outburst wouldn’t end well—the kids would cry, and Debbie would then lecture him on being a shitty ogre of an insensitive dad.

Before the cursed song made its fifth rotation on the sound loop, Chuck received a well-deserved break—a youngster directly in front of them threw up on his dad’s new Air Jordans. As the parents argued over whose brilliant idea it had been to give a 6-year-old a 16-ounce blueberry Slurpee before riding the Teacups, Debbie gagged, threw her hands over her mouth, and sprinted from the line. Chuck was not about to miss his opportunity.

“Let’s go, kids. We should probably check on Mom.”

Chuck Jr. and Connie plodded along after their father. He could tell his kids were spent from another breakneck day but were doing

a good job of wearing a happy face around their mother. Secretly, he was impressed with their stamina—not bad for a seven- and a nine-year-old.

They found Debbie sitting on a shaded bench outside the Taffy and Fudge Emporium. Chuck knew vomit was her kryptonite and she just needed some time to regroup before her cold, steely soul would return.

Keeping a safe distance from his wife, he calmly instructed their kids, “Why don’t you go keep your mom company on the bench?”

The kids took position next to their mother and began to fish around in her fanny back for their parents’ cell phones since being at Disney World wasn’t enough of a distraction.

Chuck turned his back on his family to watch the excited tourists scamper hither and yon. The sweet aroma from the Taffy and Fudge Emporium drifted out where it mixed with the offensive odors of the sweating masses. It reminded him of the average male teenager who thought a heavy dose of body spray was a reasonable substitute for a shower. The sights and smells made his head pound. He would not survive another day of this.

Chuck rarely felt moments of inspiration, but the sudden wave made him feel completely alone. He glanced back at his family on the bench as the plan bounced around in his head. It was a damn good option and just might work. But now was not the time to spring it. Better to wait until she’s tired and her defenses are weak.

Just before bedtime with the kids rapt in front of the TV, Chuck approached Debbie as she admired herself in the cramped hotel bathroom mirror while methodically brushing her teeth. Despite Debbie’s guaranteed cold shoulder treatment, he thought it was a reasonable compromise.

“What do mean you’re not going tomorrow? It’s our last day at Disney World!” she said, toothpaste drool oozing out of the corners of her mouth.

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He braced himself for battle. “Hear me out, honey. We’ve got at least a 16-hour drive back to Indy, and if we leave first thing Sunday, we won’t get home until after midnight. The kids will be zombies at school, and you know how hectic work is after vacation. Neither one of us can afford a bad day at work.”

“But Chuck, I don’t want to drive all night.”

“You won’t have to. You and the kids have a big Saturday at the park while I rest at the hotel. Right after the fireworks, we’ll head out, and I’ll do all the driving. You’ll be beat and sleep most of the way. We’ll avoid all the traffic on 75 and get home Sunday afternoon. Hell, you remember how Atlanta was a nightmare. It’ll be the middle of the night, and we’ll fly through.”

“I think it’s crazy and the kids will be disappointed. They’ll think you don’t want to spend time with them.”

Chuck thought, the kids are a blast, you’re the pain in the rear. He shut it out of his mind and responded, “They barely even knew I was there today. Besides, you’re the Disney freak, not me. Trust me, come Sunday evening you’ll thank me.”

“I doubt that. You tell the kids. I’m getting ready for bed.” The clock began ticking on the cold shoulder.

Now he was feeling rather smug as it was 4:00 a.m. on a starlit Sunday morning, and he’d already cleared the gauntlet of downtown Atlanta. He was making incredible time. The only deviation was an unplanned pee break just north of Valdosta, GA, the consequence of three afternoon poolside beers and the necessary rebound coffee. At this rate, he’d be home in time to unpack and park his butt in the Barcalounger before the Colts/Broncos kickoff. Chuck Jr. softly breathed beside him with occasional interruptions by Debbie’s snoring in the backseat where she slept with Connie. He glanced in the rearview mirror and cracked a thin smile at the sight of Debbie’s gaping mouth flashing in and out of the darkened shadows.

With only two sets of taillights in front of him, he reset the cruise control and shifted in the minivan's bucket seat, trying to find a more comfortable position. He stretched out his right leg, propped his left elbow on the door frame, and draped his right wrist over the steering wheel. The only thing missing was music, but there was no way he'd risk waking Debbie.

A flash off in the distance caught his attention. At first, he thought the sudden burst well above ground level might be a light from a landing plane, but this was a more like a camera flash. As he puzzled, he heard a muffled *boom* and it dawned on him—fireworks. But who shoots off fireworks at 4:00 in the morning?

The second flash and boom were nearly simultaneous and came from the other side of the freeway. Before he could flinch, his side window spider-webbed and a searing pain ripped through his left arm just below the shoulder. He cried out in pain, removing his hand from the wheel to clutch his wounded arm, and the minivan erupted to life.

“Dad, what’s wrong?” Chuck Jr. squealed.

“What are you doing, Chuck?” an angry Debbie yelled from the back. “Pay attention, dammit! We’re about to crash!”

The rudderless minivan was headed toward the concrete median wall, and Chuck looked up in time to see it looming only feet away.

“Aaaaaahhhhhh!!” the family screamed in unison.

He grabbed the steering wheel. His now bloody hand made a solid grip nearly impossible as he jerked the wheel to the right just before the front bumper grazed the median. The minivan began to violently shake back and forth from the overcorrection. Chuck prepared for the van to flip.

Clearly wide-awake, Debbie began to freak out. “Are you trying to kill us? Stop the van! Stop the van!”

Luckily for Chuck—though it’s hard to imagine a henpecked man with a hysterical wife and a bloody, wounded arm would

consider himself lucky—the van didn't flip, and the empty freeway gave him plenty of room to glide across the six lanes to the shoulder.

Before Chuck shifted to park, the doors flung open and the recently slumbering family scrambled to the safety of solid ground. Chuck remained in the driver's seat, staring straight ahead, stunned at the recent turn of events. The pain in his left arm beginning to throb.

Debbie's head poked in through the open passenger door, the interior dome light making her contorted face look even more menacing. "What did you do? I told you driving all night's a bad idea!"

Chuck gritted his teeth in pain and anger. "I didn't do anything! I was just driving along minding my own business." He twisted in his chair, showing off his blood-soaked arm. "Look! I think someone shot me!"

Debbie leaned in to study his arm, her expression barely changed. "You've never been shot. How would you know what it feels like?"

As she rubbed her index finger over the wound, Chuck recoiled in pain. "Ow! What'd you do that for?"

"It feels like something's stuck in your arm, but it doesn't look too bad. I think it's only a flesh wound, you big baby." She wiped her bloody finger on the right sleeve of his tropical Tommy Bahama vacation shirt.

"Don't do that! I love this shirt!" he whined.

"I don't. Besides, it's already ruined."

Chuck sat back in his seat and returned his gaze to the dark, empty highway. A passing semi rocked the minivan, and even the gentle movement sent a new round of pain up through his shoulder into his neck. He controlled his temper, giving Debbie a hard stare. "That's all you can say? Someone just about killed me and you call it a flesh wound? Can you show me some compassion just once?"

Chuck's scowl was a poor imitation of Debbie's perfected death stare. She pulled her cell phone out of the fanny pack still clipped

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on her waist and mockingly held it to her ear. “Hello? 911? My husband just about obliterated his family on the freeway and now complains about a boo-boo. What should I do?” Keeping her glare on Chuck, she motioned up the road. “The sign says there’s a hospital off this exit. If your legs still move, get out of the way, and I’ll drive you there.”



## 2.

The cell phone shocked Seamus from a deep sleep. He sat up completely disoriented, the pitch-dark room threw off his brain's ability to figure out where he was. Stunned, he groggily tried to focus on something, anything, to jog his memory. His gut told him it wasn't his old bedroom back in Lansing, but that didn't help him remember whose bed he was sleeping in.

He groped around the nightstand in search of the noise. The clock announced it was 5:05 a.m. It came to him—the ringtone was for work. He was in Atlanta. He coughed the sleepy gravel out of his throat as he lifted the phone. “O’Reilly here.”

“Inspector? Sterling speaking, sorry to call so early.”

O’Reilly’s feet immediately hit the floor upon hearing the director’s voice. “Morning, sir. Something big must be going on if you’re calling.” He hoped his bluntness didn’t come off as disrespectful.

“Yes, and we’re pulling together the team ASAP. There’s been a terrorist attack here in Georgia.”

“What?” The disbelief was clear in his voice. As a researcher for the Georgia Bureau of Investigation’s Antiterrorism Team, Seamus, nor anyone else for that matter, had detected any imminent threat

to the state. His mind raced with possibilities as he sprang out of bed only to stumble in the darkness, nearly falling flat on his face. Still gripping his cell phone, he reached to turn on the bedside lamp but knocked it off the table onto the bed. At last, he corralled the lamp and light filled his apartment's bedroom. Being able to see his surroundings had a calming effect. He took a deep breath and fetched his pants off the floor.

Sterling paused a beat to piece together what he knew so far. "Details are sketchy, but a little after 4:00 a.m. this morning, there were multiple explosions in every portion of the state. They were coordinated within several minutes of each other and appear to be centered around the interstate system."

Great, just what Atlanta needs, major interstate disruption. He wasn't living here when the section of I-85 collapsed but heard the cases of road rage went through the roof during the two months it was shut down. O'Reilly took another deep breath and tried to sound intelligent. "What were the targets? Bridges? Overpasses?"

"We're still getting info, but right now it appears the actual infrastructure was not targeted. All reports have been roadside bombs at or near billboard locations. It appears some have been heavily damaged."

O'Reilly stopped struggling with his hastily pulled up pants. "Billboards? Seriously? Terrorists are now targeting billboards?"

"It's damn serious!" Sterling burst. "We don't know the extent or the actual targets. We have one known casualty, but who knows how many more may be injured. We also don't know if there are more bombs out there. I've already talked to the governor, and he's declared a state of emergency. Good thing it's Sunday, so it won't be as hard to keep people off the streets."

"Sorry for my tone, sir. I'll get to the office right away."

"We need you in the field first. How quickly can you get to Kennestone Hospital?"

“I’m almost dressed and should be able to get there in less than an hour.”

“Good. The one known casualty is at Kennestone getting treated as we speak. He’s also the only current witness we have. I need you to get over there and interview him.”

Seamus tried to ignore the bulging knot in his stomach. “Sir, you do realize I’m not really a field inspector. I have some experience from my Michigan State Police days, but my interview skill is limited.”

“Inspector, this is an emergency, and all of us need to step up. Now get on it. Time’s a wasting!”

Seamus sat back down on the edge of the bed wondering what he had just gotten himself into. He joined law enforcement completely by accident; his favorite professor at Western Michigan knew a young Black man from Detroit, with a history degree and no family connections, didn’t have many job prospects even if the country wasn’t mired in a recession. He made a couple of calls on Seamus’s behalf, and within three weeks of graduating, Seamus was sitting in a cubicle at MSP headquarters doing research. He never really felt like a cop, just a guy who looked up details on scumbags, murderers, and embezzlers.

His only field experience came when an enterprising consulting company suggested that all employees were to be cross-trained. He was issued and learned how to use a firearm. Then, he was teamed with various street-smart agents who could grill a perp but wrote reports in crayon. He picked up basic interview tips, but unfortunately, none of Seamus’s research or writing ability was transferred to his erstwhile partners as they suddenly disappeared to the break room when it came time to document the details.

One of the appealing aspects of the GBI Antiterrorism gig was the return to pure research. Sure, the badge and Ford Interceptor were perks—his dad was particularly impressed with the car—but

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nothing compared to safely being out of harm's way behind a computer or in the bureau's library digging through old cases.

Until today. Now he was thrust into the field, completely alone and unprepared to face terrorists in Georgia.

### 3.

C lad in his white, bulldog-adorned summer shorty pajamas, the cold marble floor on Governor Skip Murray's pudgy bare feet invigorated his body as he nervously circled the massive kitchen island. By his count, in the 20 minutes since receiving the shocking 4:50 a.m. wake-up call from his GBI Director, he'd slowly shuffled around the island 25 times.

As if terrorists attacking his state wasn't bad enough, he desperately needed a cup of coffee, and the Governor's Mansion still used an old-time percolator. Who knows how to work one of those damn things? It would be a good hour before the domestic help showed up, and he'd die before then. How he longed for his trusty little machine back at the farm. What he'd give to pop one of those magical little plastic cups in the holder and get a steaming cup in less than a minute. And it was the fall when they had the pumpkin spice flavor! The entire situation was intolerable. Pacing was his only option as he pondered his predicament.

Pete Sterling had been his friend since college, and tapping him as GBI Director was one of Skip's better appointments. Both were North Georgia boys, having grown up within 25 miles of each

other, but they didn't become friends until their junior year at UGA. After graduation, Pete did a stint with the Sheriff's department, then went back to UGA for his law degree and quickly became the county DA. With the legal chops and enough managerial skill not to screw things up, he won the backing of most in the law enforcement community and was embraced as a solid choice to lead the GBI.

Sterling's early morning phone call was the last thing Murray expected on what had been planned as a lazy Sunday. His immediate reaction was concern over possible lives lost, and he was proud of himself for the brief display of sincere compassion. Once he found out the initial reports were suggesting minimal damage and casualties, he began to view the attack as any good politician would—an excellent chance to boost his reelection chances. Granted he was only ten months into a four-year term, but he viewed proper positioning for the next election as his most important day-to-day task. Skip Murray understood being governor was the apex of his career, and he was not about to squander an opportunity.

He won the tightest governor's election in Georgia's history and knew the state's changing demographics made his term tenuous at best. Once in office, he decided to tone down the rhetoric, even proposing policies that would have been considered heresy two short years ago. It had not gone well. Rabid purists were incensed, his detractors skeptical, and those in his party who understood what was at stake were few and terrified to speak.

Now his state had experienced a terrorist attack which, if played properly, could be the seminal point of his legacy. If he projected strength and leadership, he could unify the state and squash the competitors already lining up to challenge him. This could be his moment to shine.

Which was one of the reasons why he was pacing the kitchen island in the Governor's Mansion. After speaking with Pete, he began to work the phone contacting the key allies needed for the

crisis. The pacing helped him focus and burn off the anxiety building from his fruitless efforts.

His first call had been to the president. Skip helped him campaign in Georgia and was rewarded with the “special” number to call if he needed anything. He didn’t even get a live person, just a computerized voice mail message where he attempted not to sound too panicked. Within five minutes, he received a return call from a monotone female aide asking for details so she could prep the president.

“Are you serious? Woman, this is a national emergency. Please wake him up immediately. We’re under attack. Every minute counts.”

“I appreciate your concern, Governor, but right now it doesn’t sound like a national emergency to me. You’ve had some explosions, no reports of fatalities, no building collapses, structural damage, or other apparent criminal activity. Use your resources to find out more details, and I’ll make sure the president calls after he’s had his breakfast. It will only be another hour or so.”

The line was dead before he could further plead his case.

His second call was to his Homeland Security contact. With a coastal boundary, the Port of Savannah, and Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, Georgia was considered high risk that merited a direct line. Again, he was greeted by an aide of some sort, no one of real authority. At least this guy pretended to be concerned but also lost interest when told of minimal bloodshed. He assured Governor Murray he’d get the information to his boss ASAP. Fortunately for both of them, he was in Florida scheduled to play golf with the president that very morning. Stifling his exasperation, the governor provided his contact information and a further plea for urgency.

His next call was to General Harper of the Georgia National Guard. General Harper was a typical political appointee with enough related experience to look good in a press release but without the

ability to manage a fruit stand. He had strong support from the political base in South Georgia, so he became one of the token appointees for big donors. While impressive in dress uniform, with a striking, authoritative camera presence, he was cursed with a gerbil-like intelligence and the voice to match. Aides always represented the general during press conferences and senate committee testimony. Hearing his voice further amplified Skip's anxiety sweats.

"Good God, Governor, that's shocking. What can we do to help?" Harper's voice hit another octave with the question, a clear sign he asked only out of obligation.

"General, I was hoping you had some ideas. Don't you guys train for just this type of situation? Don't you have a plan for terrorists' attacks?"

Attempting to sound confident, which is impossible for pet rodents, the general tried to reassure the governor. "Of course we do, but since I'm relatively new to the post, I don't know the procedures off the top of my head."

Unbelievable. Skip was grateful for Pete's earlier guidance. "GBI Director Sterling suggested we should mobilize your troops as fast as possible to seal off every interstate entrance to Georgia. He'll coordinate with local law enforcement jurisdictions to block off entrance ramps in the state and try to get people already on the highways to exit. With it being early on Sunday, we have a good chance to shut everything down within several hours. Got it?"

"Yes, sir! My only concern is manpower. Sealing off all the roads into Georgia is quite a task."

"Manpower? Not all the roads, just the interstates, the main highways...the ones with the blue signs! You should be able to do that with a battalion or two!"

"Roger that, Governor. Blue signs. We'll get on it right away."

"Good, and keep your phone handy as I'll be requesting regular troops from the president once we have a chance to talk. Between



Benning, Stewart, and Gordon, we'll have plenty of reinforcements to secure each corner of the state."

"Reinforcements would be great, Governor." The relief in Harper's voice almost made him sound normal.

"One more thing I need from you, General," Skip said, suddenly feeling confident enough to share his own idea. "Get the Air Guard up in helicopters to fly along the interstates and relay traffic information back to the ground team. Can you do that?"

"Yes, sir. We're on it. Do we have a name for this mission?"

"Damn it all, Hank! Call it whatever the hell you want to call it. Just get on it!"

The general's ineptitude magnified the importance of getting the Feds involved, even at the risk of usurping leadership, yet his attempts of reaching anyone of importance had failed. He had no choice but to call an inside man.

James "Bubba" Baker had represented Middle Georgia in the US Congress for years. His district number had changed whenever he felt redistricting would improve his majority. His success at gerrymandering was admirable: 14 years in Congress, and he consistently was reelected with over 60% of the vote. At first, he hid his true self, but as the years passed and his district boundaries became even more convoluted, he became less guarded about sharing his own warped opinions. The governor truly respected Baker's aides as they were prompt and creative when clarifying his most outrageous statements.

Of course, the new president loved him. Whenever he visited the state, he'd hold a rally in Bubba's district. He was a frequent golfing partner of the president, and even Skip shuddered when thinking of their bourbon-induced, post-round trash talk. Realizing he had the president's ear, colleagues were quick to give him plum committee assignments. Bubba had been an early supporter of the governor's campaign, but the infatuation was short lived since

Bubba was the leader of the rabid contingency who looked upon Skip's first 10 months with scorn.

Defeated and resigned, the governor called Bubba for help. His prompt answer and confident drawl was the first sign Bubba was a step ahead.

"Damn, Skipper, are the Muslims attacking us?"

The governor hated being called Skipper. His political life would have been so much easier if his family had given him a normal name like George. At least he didn't call him Skipper.

"You know what's going on?"

"Yeah, the president's office gave me a call and filled me in. Why do you think the Muslims are bombing Georgia?"

Amazing and disturbing. "Hold on, Bubba. Don't jump to conclusions. We only have sketchy information so far, limited info on targets and damage. We have no idea who's doing this."

"If it ain't the Muslims, then it must be some of Jones's Black Panther friends. He still can't believe he lost the governorship to you. No luck in court either, so it was time to pull out the big guns. Those commies love to blow shit up."

"Stop it, Bubba. If terrorists are really attacking us, we need to circle *all* the wagons to protect the state. Figuring out who did it and getting retribution will have to wait."

"I swear, you took that oath and turned into a pansy. Just think about dropping a hint to the press about Jones, would you?"

"Bubba..." The governor took a deep breath to regroup. "I called because I need your help. Sometime this morning I'll need to address the citizens, and I want to say I've spoken with the president and he's agreed to help us out. Will you get him to call me as soon as possible?"

The governor could visualize Bubba's doofus grin, the grin knowing the political favor pendulum had just swung in his direction. "Absolutely, Skipper. Anything for the great state of Georgia."

The call with Congressman Baker kicked his anxiety sweats to a new level. Skip's temples glistened with perspiration, and the shorty pajama top stuck to his back and chest. He set the phone down on the island and stared blankly at the stainless-steel refrigerator, his vision of heroically leading Georgia through the crisis and skating to a second term was as hazy as the distorted reflection looking back at him.

His phone began to bark with, finally, someone calling him back! The caller ID gave him hope. "Jose, thank God it's you."

"I called as soon as I received your message, Governor. Sorry it took so long."

Jose Perez was an appointment many criticized as a token diversity attempt. No doubt, he checked multiple boxes necessary for a politician trying to broaden his base—immigrant parents, military veteran, and opposing party member, but Skip had known Jose since his state representative days and trusted him implicitly. Other staff members were quick to calculate the political angle of every decision in terms of pundit reaction. Jose was different; he'd consider the human impact first, then assess the politics and the necessary positioning.

"That's okay, I'm dying here and relieved to hear your voice," Skip sighed. His nerves calmed, the governor took a seat at the kitchen table and filled in Jose on the morning's activity.

"Like you, I'm not thrilled with having to bring Bubba in, but it was the right thing to do," Jose counseled. "But you can't stay holed up in the mansion waiting for those guys to call back. The people don't want their leader hiding during crisis. You need to either go to the office or get over to GBI headquarters. I'd suggest the GBI. Has more of a frontline feel."

"You're right. I'll go stir crazy waiting it out here. Plus, it'll be ten times worse once Hannah wakes up and hears the news. This might just push her over the edge. I've been tiptoeing around the house, not wanting to risk having to tell her."

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“Don’t worry about it. I’ll come over as quick as I can with a security team to make her feel safe. I just need you to be ready when I get there. I’ll have your ride to GBI all set up,” Jose said.

“Thanks, Jose. Maybe we have a shot of salvaging something out of this after all.”

Skip hung up the phone and silently cursed at the cold, metal percolator. Terrorists, incompetence, Bubba Baker, and no coffee. Maybe being governor wasn’t such a great idea.