

CHAPTER ONE

The eyes of the world were on Washington, D.C. on January 20, 2009. On a cold and sunny day, and under a bright blue sky—a sky many hoped signified that change had arrived and brighter days were ahead—Barack Obama was sworn in as the 44th President of the United States. A generation after Dr. Martin Luther King’s historic “I Have a Dream” speech, and nearly 200 years after the birth of Abraham Lincoln, our nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal, was about to see the first African-American president in our nation’s history sworn into office.

What a day! The kind of day you want your kids to see. The kind of day, if you were there, you would one day tell your grandchildren about.

Everyone was there. From political leaders to Hollywood stars, from labor leaders to corporate CEOs. Aretha Franklin was there; she sang “My Country ‘Tis of Thee.” Oprah was there. And so were millions of ordinary citizens from all over America, making the trip to witness history and see President-elect Barack Obama.

I first met Barack Obama about 14 years ago. A mutual friend took me to the law firm he worked in. He was a young lawyer, a state senator, and a guy many saw as a rising star. I was a young lawyer, a state representative preparing to run for Congress, and also a guy many saw as a rising star. In fact, it was not long after that first meeting that he and I began our climb up the political ladder in Chicago that would one day make me governor of our state, and on this day, make him president of our country.

Washington, D.C. was indeed the place to be. But a number of miles away in Chicago, where it was cold and sunny too, the streets were empty. It seemed like everyone had gone to Washington; pilgrims making the journey to celebrate and indulge their pride in their hometown hero; to be there and be part of ushering in a new era in American history.

Everyone, that is, except me. Moments after the new president took his oath of office, I was at the federal courthouse in downtown Chicago getting fingerprinted by a deputy U.S. marshal.

On that day, the new president heard the sound of brass bands playing. He heard a twenty-one gun salute and “Hail to the Chief.” He heard the multitudes roar with approval at his historic speech. Everyone is with him.

No one is with me. I’m alone. I’m hearing the sound of a heavy metal iron door unbolting, opening the lockup, and then the sound of it closing. It’s a loud crashing sound—like a thunder clap—when you hear it and you’re in it—it shakes you. It’s a sound that says you are losing your freedom, and the world out there has now been closed off to you. It’s a terrifying sound; an ominous sound. A sound, I hope, I never have to hear again.

The Governor of Illinois, the fifth-largest state in the United States, the first governor in America to endorse Barack Obama for president—he’s there doing that, I’m here doing this. He’s now the President of the United States, like Zeus in Greek mythology, on top of Mt. Olympus. I’m Icarus, who flew too close to the Sun. And I crashed to the ground.

On that historic day, the whole world listened to the new president as he spoke to it. On that same day, that world was closed off to me. And it felt like it was closing in.

I was arrested in the early morning hours on Tuesday, December 9, 2008. I didn’t anticipate it or expect it. I had no idea it was coming. It came out of nowhere—a nightmare that was hard enough to live through as it happened and, quite frankly, is hard to relive now.

I went to bed the night before feeling good about things. I had just put in a long and productive day. Early Monday morning over the phone, I informed my chief of staff that I had selected my first choice to be the next U.S. Senator from Illinois, filling the vacancy left by President-elect Barack Obama. I directed him to reach out to the parties involved and see if we could work out the deal. A deal that, if it happened, would do great things for the people of Illinois.

That Monday morning started, as did most weekday mornings, with a call sometime between seven and eight in the morning to my personal assistant Mary Stewart to track down John Harris, my Chief of Staff. I’d routinely call him the first thing in the morning to talk about things and to give him direction. He would update me on things I was interested in and fill me in on what he was hearing.

Prior to joining me as my Chief of Staff at the end of my first term, John worked for Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley. He served in a lot of big roles for the City of Chicago, the Chicago Police Department, and O'Hare Airport. The son of Greek immigrants, and a product of Chicago public schools, he and I shared similar life experiences and similar values. Like my older brother Rob, John was an officer in the United States Army. He was a prosecutor in the Judge Advocate General's office. And his style and habits remind me of a disciplined, organized military man. An early riser, he was someone you could always find when the day started. Where most of my top staff called me Governor, or Rod, he addressed me as Sir. This is not to suggest that he was in any way obsequious or a sycophant. Just the opposite is true. As a contemporary, with years of experience in administering government including directing big government budgets, he oversaw the operations of state government. I had a great deal of respect for his experience, and I counted on him to make sure my administration operated effectively, honestly, and always within the rules. I relied on him to tell me what we could and couldn't do.

As I recall, that Monday morning I directed him to work out the details regarding my first choice for the next U.S. Senator from Illinois and see if we could get it done. He briefed me on some of the conversations he recently had with other involved parties. I explained my aim and how I preferred it done. We then had a game plan to appoint a United States Senator. And even though neither one of us liked my choice, he was going to work to execute it.

I went to bed that night sometime after 11 p.m. in good spirits. My plan was to get up the next morning at 6 a.m. and go for a morning run. Like a lot of long-distance runners who plan for an early morning run, especially in the cold and darkness of winter, it helps psychologically to lay out the running clothes you plan to wear the night before. Getting up and quickly getting into those winter running clothes is a good first step to get out the door, out on the street, and out on your run. I generally run 6 ½ miles to 8 ½ miles three to four times a week. But sometimes, when you're the Governor, things come up and the run suddenly has to take a backseat to more pressing business, or to the intervention of circumstances beyond your control that consequently require your immediate attention. My plan for December 9th was to run in the morning. As it turned out, I never got it in.