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A PEACE CORPS MARTIAN  
IN THE WHITE HOUSE

*Action, Action, Action.*

—FROM THE CANON OF BANNON

*Look, I don't mean to sound arrogant or anything,  
but I am the greatest botanist on the planet.*

—ASTRONAUT MARK WATNEY, *THE MARTIAN*, 2015<sup>1</sup>

On Saturday, February 8, 2020, Dr. Rick Bright strode grimly into my office. Over the next thirty days, we would draft nearly a dozen guided missives to prod the White House Coronavirus Task Force and Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) into Action, Action, Pandemic Fighting Action.

Not unlike Mark Watney, I turned out to be the “best pandemic fighter in the White House.” That was because, at least early on, other than President Trump, I was the *only* pandemic fighter there.

With my doctorate in economics, I was certainly an unlikely candidate to help lead the pandemic fight. I had come to the White House from the Trump campaign with two

very clear, and clearly interrelated, missions: help POTUS put an end to China's economic aggression and rebuild America's manufacturing base.

On that note, this might be a good time to clear up a particularly pernicious Fake News myth about my role in the Trump campaign. That particular bad seed was planted by the leftist muckraker *Vanity Unfair*, which miswrote:

*When Trump wanted to speak more substantively about China, he gave [Jared] Kushner a summary of his views and then asked him to do some research. Kushner simply went on Amazon, where he was struck by the title of one book, Death by China, co-authored by Peter Navarro. He cold-called Navarro, a well-known trade-deficit hawk, who agreed to join the team as an economic adviser.<sup>2</sup>*

Now here's the Real News: I had been corresponding with DJT (as I knew him at the time) dating back to 2011. That correspondence began after I read an article in the *Los Angeles Times* in which Mr. Trump had ranked my book *The Coming China Wars* number six among his top twenty favorite tomes on China.<sup>3</sup>

I sent DJT a note at Trump Tower in New York, thanking him, and he quickly responded with one of his trademark handwritten notes in the margin via a letter from his assistant Rhona Graff. The Boss and I began exchanging correspondence thereafter, and when my *Death by China* film was getting ready to debut in 2012 in movie theaters and film festivals across the country, I asked him for a testimonial, which he readily provided. Said Trump about the film, "*Death by*

*China* is right on. This important documentary depicts our problem with China with facts, figures and insight. I urge you to see it.”

So it was that when DJT announced his candidacy, I was not only one of the first to predict that he would sweep the Republican field and likely win the presidency,<sup>4</sup> I also let him know that I would be happy to help in any way.

#### **A TIP OF THE BOSS'S MAGA SPEAR**

My office at the White House, the Office of Trade and Manufacturing Policy, was the tip of the spear of numerous policy actions over the first three years of the administration. A short list includes:

- Strengthening and expanding our “Buy American, Hire American” laws.
- Slapping stiff tariffs and other tough sanctions on Communist China.
- Establishing a tariff ring around our beleaguered steel and aluminum industries.
- Increasing arms sales to our allies to strengthen our alliances and create thousands of high-paying manufacturing jobs.
- Reviving our nation’s shipyards, strengthening our defense industrial base, and bolstering our merchant marine.
- Protecting our electricity grid from Communist Chinese cyberattacks.
- Freeing Maine lobster fishermen from the tyranny of European tariffs (for which I was dubbed “the Lobster King”).<sup>5</sup>

For me it had been a busy three years, and at least up until the point the Chinese Communist Party Virus arrived, the Trump administration's efforts to Make American Manufacturing Great Again had been quite successful.

During the 2020 campaign, I never got tired of saying that the Obama-Biden administration had lost more than three hundred thousand manufacturing jobs,<sup>6</sup> while President Trump had added nearly half a million.<sup>7</sup>

And by the way, Barack Obama himself once said that reshoring American manufacturing couldn't be done. During a PBS town hall on June 1, 2016, Obama, acting as a stalking horse for candidate Hillary Clinton, smugly proclaimed that Donald J. Trump would need a "magic wand" to bring manufacturing back to America.<sup>8</sup> With that kind of "let them eat arugula" attitude, no wonder Obama never got it done.

My point here is that prior to January 2020, I stayed singularly focused at the White House on our two core trade and manufacturing policy missions. Which poses the question: Just how did I wind up as a key field commander in the pandemic fight?

The answer begins with the Peace Corps and ends with the key lesson of *The Martian*.

### **A GOOSE BUMPS DATE WITH FATE**

My Peace Corps adventure began in 1972. Fresh out of Tufts University with a bachelor of arts degree in English and a hankering to get the hell out of a country being torn apart by Vietnam, Watergate, and a depressive Woodstock–Altamont Speedway hangover, I headed out to Berkeley, California.

Berserk-ley, as it has often been called, was not my final destination but simply a pit stop on my way to Japan. My plan was to hang out on the Berkeley campus for a few months,

hire a tutor to teach me some Japanese, and then hop on a flight to Tokyo and pick up a job teaching English.

A funny and fortuitous thing happened, however, on my way to the Land of the Rising Sun. The more I read about the country and its culture—its black-suit-and-white-shirt, button-up and button-down salaryman culture—the less I wanted to go to the bland, workaholic Japan and the more I became intrigued with the vibrant colors of Thailand.

As I sat in the South/Southeast Asia Library at Berkeley, freeloading off its marvelous, musty collection, I became intrigued by the Thai culture and its credo of *sanuk*. Popularly translated as “fun” in the West, *sanuk* is much more than that. It is a Buddhist concept that simultaneously reminds you of “the impermanence of everything,” “the importance of living in the moment,” and the focus on achieving satisfaction in whatever you do.<sup>9</sup>

And speaking of living in the moment, one day coming out of that library on the Berkeley campus in the late afternoon, I had one of the few supernatural experiences of my life. My epiphany as I left the library was that I really wanted to go to Thailand, not Japan.

With that wonderfully pleasant thought swirling through my head, I headed across campus and home to Ward Street and my sweet love, Charlotte, one of only two women—the other was my college sweetheart, Annie—whom I never should’ve left behind. Youth is indeed wasted on the young and adventurous.

As I was transiting Sproul Plaza, readying to exit the campus, I heard in my right ear somebody ask, “Would you like to go to Thailand?”

The question stopped me in my tracks. Was somebody reading my mind? I got goose bumps.

As I turned to the person who had asked me that question, I saw that he was sitting at a table festooned with big Peace Corps posters and pamphlets. He was on campus to recruit a group of volunteers to teach English in Thailand.

I signed up on the spot. How could I not?

I won't bore you with the details of my next two years as a Peace Corps volunteer at the Sakon Nakhon Teachers' College—but here are a few quick high- and lowlights:

- A white-hot female scorpion sting as I was beating her mate to death with a propane canister in my kitchen (what goes around comes around).
- Nightly serenades *inside* my little house by lizards the size of poodles.
- A fight to the death with a six-foot-long python in my home that liked to eat said lizards.
- Transforming a spider-infested decaying language lab into a bustling virtual classroom that presaged later UC-Irvine innovations in online learning.
- Motorcycling through the Thai countryside with the blazing sun on my face and the humid air blowing through my hair while screaming out the lyrics to “We’re an American Band.”
- Building a tilapia fish pond the size of a football field in a dirt-poor village with the help of a bulldozer commandeered from a nearby Thai military base.<sup>10</sup>
- Playing rhythm guitar with the stunningly talented Teachers' College band while touring throughout the province.
- A CIA black ops in my little town that went terribly wrong, almost got me shot and put an end to my touring with the band.

- US jets out of the nearby Udon Thani Royal Thai Air Force Base screaming overhead and rattling the windows in my classroom on their way to bomb the bejesus out of Hanoi, a little over three hundred miles away.
- Traveling on holiday breaks to the incredibly crowded Hong Kong and Singapore, the ever-exotic Malaysia, the martial-spirited South Korea, the truly mysterious Burma, the jaw-droppingly beautiful Laos, and the indeed black-and-white Japan that I had imagined exactly right.

When my two-year tour ended, I wasn't quite ready to come home and The Peace Corps mothership down in Bangkok was looking for a volunteer who could both speak the Thai language and repair hospital equipment. As a practical matter, they had two options to fill the position: Either they could find an American biomedical equipment technician who could learn Thai. Or they could find a Thai speaker they could train to repair the medical equipment.

Option two was clearly faster and easier because Thai is an extremely difficult language to learn quickly; a single word can be spoken with five different tones and have five different meanings.

And that was how in 1975 I wound up at a military vocational training school in Aurora, Colorado, for a four-month intensive training gig to get my certificate as a biomedical equipment technician.<sup>11</sup> Yes, I have one of those certificates, along with my Harvard PhD in economics.

Now, here is why this little sentimental journey is important. At that young and tender point in my life, I was strictly a Liberal Arts creative type: touchy, feely, all abstraction. Just

not a fix-it, screwdriver kind of dude. But all that changed in the Denver suburb of Aurora.

Working side by side with my military counterparts—I was the only civilian—I had drilled into me the most valuable skill I have ever learned in my life: *how to quickly troubleshoot and fix problems.*

Every Friday, we had a combination test and race to see who could fix the fastest whatever broken machine they would throw at us the fastest: an autoclave, a dentist's drill, whatever. They put us on the clock, and God help us if we did not cut to the chase. Sir, yes, sir!

It was one of the greatest experiences of my life, and I can honestly say that what I learned in those four months of vocational training has been just as valuable in my career as what I learned in six years at Harvard.

*Without that Rocky Mountain High interlude, I don't think I would have been able to handle the complexity and intensity of the multiple pandemic-related problem sets that would come at the White House like a swarm of Chinese drones.*

Of course, the other debt I owe, at least when it comes to preparing me to fight the pandemic, is to Andy Weir's book and movie *The Martian*. Its central lesson, which was invaluable during the early pandemic days, is "work the problem." And in the face of mortal danger, it doesn't matter one whit what your expertise is. When your life depends on it—or in the CCP Virus case, when the lives of millions of Americans depend on it—you damn well better figure it out.

So that was what I tried to do. And starting on Saturday, February 8, 2020, I began to work the problem. I did so with particular urgency, because, as far back as my 2006 book, *The Coming China Wars*, I had foreseen a deadly Chinese virus



like this one coming at the United States like a Beijing-to-Shenzhen bullet train flying over the rails.

### THE BRIGHT AND THE DARK OF IT

One important strength in problem solving is to have a pretty clear idea about what you don't know. In this particular case, I knew that I knew virtually nothing about confronting a global pandemic. So, the first thing I had to do was to recruit my own team of advisers. And in doing so, I hit a jackpot of sorts in Dr. Rick Bright.

By way of further introducing the good Dr. Bright—who would wind up doing some very bad things to the Trump administration later in our relationship—it may be useful to play a little CCP Virus *Jeopardy*.

So suppose I were to ask you this question: “Which government agency is responsible for quickly mobilizing a coordinated national response to emergencies like a global pandemic?” As a *Jeopardy* contestant, you would correctly answer, “What is ASPR, the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response.”<sup>12</sup>

Suppose I were to ask you next, “Which government agency is responsible for securing our nation from the threats of emerging infectious diseases like the CCP Virus and also moving medical countermeasures like vaccines and therapeutics through research, development, approval by the Food and Drug Administration, and inclusion in the Strategic National Stockpile?”

You might start by saying, “That is way too long for a *Jeopardy* question.” And you'd be right. But to win your *Jeopardy* points, you would then have to ask, “What is BARDA, the Bio-medical Advanced Research and Development Authority?”

My point here is that if you wanted to quickly find the best experts in the vast Washington bureaucracy to help you fight a global pandemic, the first two places you'd likely start would be ASPR and BARDA. With Rick Bright, the head of BARDA and a deputy assistant secretary at ASPR, I downed the proverbial two birds with one phone call.

I could see immediately upon meeting Rick at the White House on the afternoon of February 8 that he was intense. I also sensed a genuine anguish in him brought about by the glacially slow pandemic response of both the Coronavirus Task Force and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

In truth, Bright and I were kindred spirits. He was a lone voice in the HHS wilderness warning about the urgency of pandemic preparedness. He didn't suffer fools gladly, and he spoke freely—whether given permission to or not.

Though my relationship with Bright began like a beautiful comet blazing through the sky, it would end some months later, after he allowed himself to become a Democrat Party pawn with whom I would not wish to share a foxhole.

I put the blame squarely on HHS secretary Alex Azar for the defection of Rick Bright to the dark Democrat side. On a scale of 1 to 10, Azar committed an unforced error equal to an 11. Here's the quick story behind that story.

In early April, I got a very distraught call from Rick. He had just been told by one of Azar's henchmen that he was being moved over to the National Institutes of Health under the supervision of NIH director Francis Collins to help lead the testing effort.

To be crystal clear, Rick said he had absolutely no problem with that—that he was a good soldier. And I believed him.

What Rick feared, however, was that once his special assignment was over, his old job back at BARDA, which he loved, would not be waiting for him. He asked me to call Azar and ask for his assurance that his job would be waiting for him when his testing mission was accomplished.

Knowing Azar, I thought Rick's concern was well placed. So I promised to get ahold of Azar quickly and firmly make the case on his behalf.

Quite by happenstance, I was able to keep that promise in less than an hour. Shortly after ending my call with Rick, I had thrown on my suit jacket and blue security badge and hoofed it over to the West Wing for a scheduled meeting in the Roosevelt Room. As I entered the lobby, I saw none other than Azar himself sitting on the couch, waiting to see the Boss.

I made a beeline for that couch and took a knee in front of him. It was not in supplication but rather to get close enough to him that I would not be overheard. I looked him straight in the eye and told him in no uncertain terms that he needed to handle the Rick Bright situation *immediately*. Said I, "I get that you and Collins want to move Rick over to NIH for testing, and he's fully on board with that. But—and this is a *big* but—Rick needs to hear from you directly that his job at BARDA will be waiting for him when his mission at NIH is over."

Then I doubled down, saying, "Alex, you really need to do this and you need to do it quickly. Otherwise, this is going to blow up in everybody's face, including the president's. I'm not sure how it will blow up, but I am sure it will."

Regrettably, Azar just blew me off. And blow up it did.

On May 5, Rick's attorney filed a whistleblower complaint that dumped a long litany of mismanagement foibles and follies all over Azar and HHS. Of course, the Democrats,

in all their nationally televised public hearing glory, would have a field day using the now-not-so-good Dr. Bright as a star witness to reinforce the partisan messaging that President Trump was mismanaging the pandemic.

### **THE ITALIAN SWAB JOB AND FEDEX DELIVERS**

Now, here's what was really uncomfortably weird for me: Rick Bright's whistleblower complaint would position me as hero to the Trump and Azar villains—not a good position to be in with the Boss.

In particular, the whistleblower complaint laudably noted my “sense of urgency” and that I was “deeply engaged in the issues confronting the United States in responding to the rapidly approaching pandemic.” The complaint further noted that “Mr. Navarro was extremely concerned about HHS's laxity in addressing the pandemic.”<sup>13</sup>

On the positive side, the whistleblower complaint provided a lengthy reference to one of the coolest capers ever pulled off by my crack White House team of twentysomethings in the persons of Chris Abbott, Joanna Miller, Hannah Robertson, and Garrett Ziegler.

That caper—which I dubbed the “Italian Swab Job”—started on March 14, 2020, as Rick Bright was struggling with a looming testing swab shortage. Here's the problem he brought to me:

Italy had become the epicenter of a particularly deadly outbreak of the virus. With Italian airspace locked down to commercial flights, it was impossible to liberate close to a million testing swabs from a factory in the particularly hard-hit Lombardy region.

Rick had spent the better part of forty-eight hours trying to commandeer an emergency military airlift through the

Pentagon's Defense Threat Reduction Agency. The agency had previously helped Rick move vaccine supplies from Germany to the United States during the Ebola epidemic, but for whatever reason, Rick was hitting a brick wall for his swab job.

In desperation, Rick called me, and here is how his whistleblower complaint described what happened next:

Mr. Navarro's office worked quickly and secured Secretary [of Defense] Esper's approval in a matter of hours. Approximately two hours later, Maj. Froude confirmed that [the Pentagon] was working to have a flight in the air as soon as tomorrow night.

Later that evening, Dr. Bright emailed Mr. Navarro, "You did something miraculous tonight to break through the wall and bureaucratic barrier that was stalling shipment from Italy to US. Four days of bureaucracy that you broke down in 5 minutes."<sup>14</sup>

Yet the Italian Swab Job got even better. I realized early Sunday morning that I had one more problem to solve. The swab crates were coming to the United States in a single military aircraft, but I would have to disperse them to six different American cities. Channeling my inner "work the problem" Martian, I immediately called the Situation Room and had it run down the chief executive officer of Federal Express, Fred Smith.

By the way, one of the things I miss about working at the White House is the ability to call the Sit Room and run to ground just about anyone on the planet within five minutes. It's a beautiful thing, and it never failed to put a smile on my face when my person of interest came on the line.

With Fred Smith on the line, I described my logistics problem and said, “Fred, how about I have the Pentagon plane divert to Memphis. Then six FedEx planes can meet that bird on the tarmac. We’ll get the right quantities loaded and shipped off to the right cities. It’ll be perfect.”

I should say parenthetically that Fred Smith was hardly my best buddy. With his big FedEx exposure in Communist China, Fred, like many multinational corporation CEOs, was strongly opposed to our tariff policies, and we had gone head-to-head in the Oval Office on more than one occasion.

Yet Fred is also a true patriot, and he immediately called his son Richard, who heads up operations at FedEx. Within two In Trump Time hours, we had the whole plan set up.

To make sure it all worked perfectly, I dispatched Garrett Ziegler to manage the boots-on-the-ground operation. Sans suitcase, with just the suit on his back, Garrett scooted over to Joint Base Andrews and hitched a ride on another Pentagon bird headed to the rendezvous point in Memphis; maybe Mark Wahlberg will play the Mighty Ziegler in the Italian Swab Job movie.

So it was that within a mere seventy-two hours of my receiving Rick Bright’s SOS, Italian-made swabs were delivered to US soil and to exactly where they were needed. Shortage averted!

If there is a better example of moving in Trump Time, I don’t know what it is.

But wait! Upon second thought, I actually do have an even faster example. Why don’t I just let reporter Ebony Bowden of the *New York Post* tell it:

White House officials sprung into action on Monday [March 30] after receiving an “SOS” email from the

NYPD begging for protective equipment—delivering the frontline gear just 16 hours later. . . .

In a mission dubbed “Operation Blue Bloods,” President Donald Trump’s equipment czar Peter Navarro, Assistant to the President for Trade and Manufacturing Policy, cobbled together a rapid-response team including company executives who flew thousands of full-body suits on a private plane the next day.

. . . With a mounting number of bodies left in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak, reports have emerged of homicide detectives being forced to make house calls without the correct protective equipment—potentially exposing them to the virus.

A desperate email from NYPD Chief of Department Terence Monahan asking for gear to protect Big Apple’s Finest—of whom more than 1,400 have tested positive for COVID-19—landed in Navarro’s inbox on Monday. . . .

With a severe shortage of PPE confronting frontline workers across the nation, the supplies—“described as a game changer” by the NYPD—began arriving within just 16 hours of Monahan’s email plea.

More than 1,750 crime scene Tyvek suits arrived on [a] private Raytheon plane on Tuesday afternoon, while another 2,125 arrived in the early hours of Wednesday—a total of 4,275.

Some 120,000 pairs of gloves from General Dynamics arrived in New York Wednesday, as did the 111 barrels of hand sanitizer donated by Pernod Ricard.

Detectives responding to house calls will now be provided with a kit including a Tyvek suit, gloves, a

face shield, N95 mask, shoe covers and disinfectant wipes.<sup>15</sup>

Yep, I just love that story, and I would be remiss here not to offer my thanks to then Raytheon CEO Tom Kennedy and one of my all-time favorites, Phebe Novakovic, the CEO of General Dynamics. It was a good day during a very bad time.

What was not a good day, however, was the day I had to take on my once brother in pandemic arms Rick Bright. But after Brother Bright filed his whistleblower complaint, duty called. Or, more accurately, the Boss called.

It was just after noon on May 6, and, to shake off some stress, I had hopped onto my trusty Trek road bike to burn twenty-five miles on my favorite loop. It starts at the Potomac River's edge in Georgetown, runs up the Crescent Trail to Bethesda, and then loops back through Rock Creek Park down to Connecticut Avenue and finally to the White House.

As I was pumping up a Rock Creek Park hill, my cell phone rang, and it was none other than the Boss himself. He was appropriately angry at Bright and gave me the green light to counter Bright's hypocrisy. A few days later, when I appeared on ABC's Sunday news show *This Week with George Stephanopoulos*, this is how the discussion went:

**STEPHANOPOULOS:** According to all accounts, you were working quite hard during the month of February [with Rick Bright] on all the issues you just mentioned. He said you and he were allies on trying to break through road blocks coming from HHS and other parts of the government.

Yet now you call him a deserter in the war against the virus, why?



NAVARRO: . . . Here's what happened with Rick Bright, and it's an American tragedy, George. This guy is quite talented, but he was asked to be the field commander over at NIH to storm the testing hill with a billion dollars behind him. Instead of accepting that mission, he deserted. He went into a fox hole, wrote up the complaint. And now he's part of a Capitol Hill partisan circus where he's just become another pawn in the game.

And the tragedy, George, is that this man has talent. He's a smart man. We could have used him on the battlefield. He's not there now. And it was because of the decisions that he made. And it is a shame, George. . . .

STEPHANOPOULOS: [Bright's] expertise is vaccines. He wants to work in vaccine development. They're putting him in diagnostic testing.

Why shouldn't a vaccine expert be working on vaccines?

NAVARRO: So, here's the thing, George. . . . I've been with the President since the campaign, right? I came here to do trade policy, right? What am I now? A conscript in the war on the China Virus. I'm like a quartermaster and a shipping clerk half the time.

Do I complain? No. That's my mission for this President, for this country. We do what we have to do when we have to do it for this country.

And Rick Bright, he made a choice. He could have been making a tremendous contribution over at NIH to testing and you and others have been complaining about testing. He could have

been the field general. And now, he's off the battlefield and it was by his own choice, sir.<sup>16</sup>

My only real regret in this whole matter—and it is a *huge* regret—is that Secretary Alex Azar refused to heed my urgent call to help Rick Bright. It was an unforgivable gaffe committed by a charter member of the administration's cadre of bad personnel that would lead to bad politics and yet another wounding of POTUS on the pandemic front.

Here's what too many high-ranking officials in the Trump administration, including Azar, Mnuchin, and Kudlow, never seemed to realize: when bad personnel screwed up, *it was POTUS who suffered the consequences*.

In the Rick Bright case, it was much more of a deep arterial cut than a slight shaving nick, and we would all bleed. But for at least one glorious month, Rick and I did beautiful work together moving the aircraft carrier of the HHS bureaucracy out of the dock and onto the high seas at full throttle.

The fuel that we used to move that carrier was a collection of Action, Action, Action memos I began sending the Task Force on February 9—memos that would dramatically up our pandemic-fighting game and help save hundreds of thousands of American lives.