

THE EMPIRE LIVE! (1/?)



The beginning of a new play by

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CHARACTERS

(1/?)

ACTORS 1–4: They're themselves. But kind of not? They're actors.

POTUS: The President of the United States. A lofty "progressive" who has been forced to compromise in power.

HAWK: The Chief of Staff to the POTUS. Behind the nerdy exterior is a machiavellian power broker.

BOYD / SPIDER: A promising young drone pilot / A representative from a developing country seeking help from the United States

FLOTUS / SPOOK / ANCHOR: The First Lady of the United States, xanned out. / A CIA liaison to the President / The host of a conservative news show

I. UNWRAP YOUR CANDY NOW!

The ACTORS prepare on stage, in view of the audience.

One ACTOR slowly, maybe agonizingly so, clicks the basic melody of “America the Beautiful” on a piano (if there is a piano—sometimes there are pianos).

Another ACTOR checks a microphone set up somewhere unseen. The microphone can be the mechanism for the [REDACTED] and the COMPUTERIZED VOICE (you’ll see it). You can think of something else, too. Whatever.

Eventually, ACTOR 1 gets us started:

ACTOR 1

I’m [ACTOR 1 NAME] and I’m [ACTOR 1 HEIGHT].

ACTOR 2

I’m [ACTOR 2 NAME] and I’m [ANSWER THAT ONE-UPS ACTOR 1].

ACTOR 3

I’m [ACTOR 3 NAME] and I’m [NON-SCIENTIFIC, EVEN VULGAR, DESCRIPTION OF HEIGHT].

ACTOR 4

I’m [ACTOR 4 NAME] and I’m [INSCRUTABLE, LIKELY WHIMSICAL, MEASUREMENT OF HEIGHT].

ACTOR 1

Thank you for coming tonight.

ACTOR 2

This is a play.

ACTOR 3

It’s going to be a play.

ACTOR 4

This is part of the play too.

ACTOR 1

We’re ourselves.

ACTOR 2

But we're still saying lines, written by a playwright.

ACTOR 3

He might be in the audience tonight so we can't say different lines.

ACTOR 1 waves at someone in the audience.

ACTOR 4

There are some dramaturgical questions.

ACTOR 1

Anyway.

Beat.

Please turn off your cell phones?

ACTOR 4

Yeah. Unwrap your candy, too. Are they allowed to / have candy?

ACTOR 2

/ Thank you for coming.

ACTOR 1

I said that.

ACTOR 3

This is a play about imperialism.

ACTOR 1

We shouldn't just say that outright.

ACTOR 2

People don't like to be lectured.

ACTOR 3

I think people want clarity.

ACTOR 4

I once met someone who said that *Apocalypse Now* made them want to join the army.
Some people are just fucked up.

Beat.

ACTOR 1

I'll be playing [PARTS].

ACTOR 2

I'll be playing [PARTS].

ACTOR 3

I'll be playing [PARTS].

ACTOR 4

And I will be playing [PARTS].

ACTOR 1

I don't think this helps

ACTOR 4

Ok. The real play begins.....

....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....*NOW!*

Lights out.

II. NOW IS THE TIME OF MONSTERS

Lights up.

HAWK

Early morning. The Situation Room.

POTUS

The White House.

HAWK

The Chief of Staff.

POTUS

The President of the United States.

HAWK

This is your moment. Our moment. Our country's moment. It's time to be a hero. We have him in our sights. We have the shot. Don't you want to be the one? The one who finally does it? America's savior. Our great revenger. That'll be you in the history books. The One Who Saved The World. Remember what those Republicans said about you? How you were weak. What do you think they're going to say tomorrow when they read the paper? When they see we wiped Global Enemy #1 off the map forever. Mosquito splat on the windshield, the world barrels into the future. We have the monster under the bed. We got him by the balls. All we need is your signature. Sign your name and we put this to rest.

POTUS

I need to talk to the pilot.

HAWK

We're running out of time.

POTUS

Then get him on the line.

BOYD appears, in a swivel chair with big headphones, deep in a bag of Dorito's.

BOYD

'Sup, dude?

HAWK

Boyd, this is the President of the United States. Madam President, this is Boyd, our top drone pilot. You better be wiping down that keyboard, son. It costs more than your degree.

POTUS

Hello, Boyd.

BOYD

'Sup, dude?

POTUS

How are you feeling?

BOYD

This is pretty crazy, huh?

POTUS

It is. "Pretty crazy." Are you nervous?

BOYD

Not really.

POTUS

Can I ask...what all this is on the screen?

BOYD

Oh. Yeah. So, they let us add mods.

POTUS

Mods?

BOYD

Like skins.

POTUS

Skins?

BOYD

Do you game?

POTUS

My daughters do.

BOYD

Oh, word. I just added some flare to the interface. I grew up with consoles so I've patched it through a controller. Pull back to raise altitude. Forward to go down. Left trigger is accelerator. Right trigger is the, uh, trigger. If you press this button while you're in boost you do a—

An intense COMPUTERIZED VOICE startles them.

COMPUTERIZED VOICE

BARREL ROLL!

POTUS

What on earth?

BOYD

That's a barrel roll. Can come in real handy in a dogfight.

POTUS

A dogfight?

BOYD

Oh, and if you press *this* button it makes a red light appear on your head—the drone's head.

POTUS

What does that do?

BOYD

I dunno. It seems to scare them?

HAWK

Locals refer to it as a demon with an all-seeing eye. It keeps innocents indoors.

POTUS

And that...works?

HAWK

Drones only kill enemy combatants.

POTUS

This won't be distracting for the mission?

HAWK

Letting the pilots customize their interfaces has reduced drone pilot suicides by 18%.

POTUS

18%? That's pretty good.

BOYD

One girl on the team came up with a points system, that got us going for a while.

POTUS

So, Boyd...I don't mean to put pressure on you, but this is a big moment. I hope you appreciate that. And I want you to know, everybody here is behind you, all the way.

BOYD

Thanks dude. You know, you seem pretty cool. Maybe everybody's wrong about you.

HAWK

That will be all, soldier. Are you satisfied, Sir?

Pause.

POTUS

We're sure it's him?

HAWK

It's him.

POTUS

We're sure?

HAWK

We're sure.

POTUS

No collateral damage?

HAWK

Low collateral damage.

POTUS

Ok.

Beat.

Wait. Did you say "no" or "low"?

HAWK

What?

Beat.

POTUS

Give me the pen.

HAWK hands POTUS the clipboard and pen. POTUS takes her last possible moment:

We've been doing this a long time. He changed the face of our country, our world, forever.
A new era. And now, with one concluding act of violence, we can usher in a new era.

One of Peace, Freedom, and Democracy. With the United States of America leading us to the horizon. It will all begin here. On this night. In this room. With this pen.

POTUS signs and hands it back. HAWK immediately crumples up the paper and eats it.

Let's do it.

HAWK

We're a go. Let's get the bad guys and get the hell out before [REDACTED] can prove we were in their airspace.

BOYD

Moving in.

POTUS

Ok, everybody good? This has to be quick. In and out. Stealth. We got this.

BOYD

It's done. We're bouncing.

POTUS

Huh? Oh. Really?

HAWK

Missile inbound. And there—!

COMPUTERIZED VOICE

ANNIHILATED!!!

BOYD

Oh shit, sorry, I was supposed to take that one out. The flashing should stop in a few seconds.

Pause.

POTUS

Confirmation?

HAWK

It's done, Sir.

POTUS

It's done.

HAWK

We did good today. Let's get some rest. On to the next crisis.

HAWK exits.

BOYD

Till next time?

POTUS

Huh?

BOYD

I mean...there usually is, right? You ok, dude?

POTUS

Yes. I'm "ok." Thank you, Boyd.

BOYD

You're good, dude. I mean, Ma'am.

POTUS

You can...you can call me dude. Haha.

BOYD

Uh. Sure. Dude. Ha.

POTUS

Good work today.

BOYD

You too.

POTUS

Goodnight.

BOYD

Goodnight.

Beat.

POTUS

See you later.

BOYD

See ya.

Beat.

BOYD exits.

Beat.

POTUS turns to us. Straightens up.

POTUS

Tonight, I can report to the American people and to the world that the United States has carried out an operation resulting in the death of [REDACTED]. A man who declared war on America, on the American people, and the values we all share. A man who envied our freedom, who coveted our way of life so much that he would rather destroy us than see anyone else have it. A man responsible for the deaths of thousands: men, women, children. We all remember the day our country was attacked. That image is seared into our memories. We said "Never forget" but we never needed to. For those who lost, it was the living after that was the most difficult. The empty chair at the dinner table. The empty side of the bed. The missing laughter. The advice you never got. The thanks you never gave. No one death could erase that, but I hope that this moment we can feel, even for a second, the soothing embrace of justice. God bless us, and God bless the people of the United States of America.

ANCHOR

A bombshell announcement from the President. Over a decade past, two foreign wars in full swing, countless covert operations. Finally, the United States has taken down the man responsible for it all. A major moment in American history. Let's talk to Anthony Hawk, Chief of Staff to the President. Mr. Hawk, thank you for joining us.

HAWK

It's great to be here.

ANCHOR

Well, I thought we'd start off with a comment. How does it feel?

HAWK

Let me start by saying what a historic moment this is, and how good this is for the country. I'd say most Americans will get a good night's sleep. And let me say, this was also a big night for the President. Our Republican colleagues have been ruthlessly attacking her, a woman who has already overcome so many, from the campaign trail to this very morning, calling her "soft" on foreign policy. Well don't they have egg on their face now. The President demonstrated strength, competence, grace under pressure, and no Republican can deny that.

ANCHOR

Now some might say none of this would have been possible without the hard work of her predecessor. She's come in at the end of a long process. Standing on his shoulders.

HAWK

She spent a year fixing the mistakes and mismanagement of the previous President. This only shows how much better equipped she is for this moment. Imagine if we had elected a Democrat nine years ago. That's what voters need to think about in the midterms.

ANCHOR

What happened to being anti-war? Bringing the troops home and pow-wowing with our adversaries?

HAWK

No justice, no peace. While [REDACTED] was alive, there was no possibility of peace. Now we can bring the troops home from [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. And we never said anything about "pow-wowing" with adversaries, which, by the way, is appropriation of Native culture.

ANCHOR

Here comes the thought police! Haha.

HAWK

Let me just ask this: in this time of division, can we come together to appreciate the death of one of our enemies?

ANCHOR

Today is a great day for America. No matter which team you're on.

III. GOODNIGHT, MADAM PRESIDENT

POTUS

The President's Bedroom.

FLOTUS

The First Lady sleeps.

POTUS

Does she tell her now?

FLOTUS stirs.

FLOTUS

Is something happening?

POTUS

No, no. Everything's fine. You can go back to sleep.

FLOTUS

You can have a Klonopin.

POTUS

It's ok, thank you. I need to be alert tomorrow. I'll just pace a little bit.

FLOTUS

It's in the top drawer if you need it.

POTUS

I'll be back.

BOYD appears, still in the gaming chair.

BOYD

Oh, hey. 'Sup?

POTUS

I'm sorry to wake you.

BOYD

Oh, you're good. I'm not sleeping.

POTUS

It's late.

BOYD

Peak gaming hours.

POTUS

What are you playing?

BOYD

It's like a puzzle game, I guess. You roll a big ball around and it attracts objects and gets bigger and bigger.

POTUS

I was expecting something more violent.

BOYD

Nah, this is furthest thing from work. I can just roll and roll and the ball gets bigger and bigger. Calms me down.

POTUS

Are you feeling ok?

BOYD

Oh yeah. Always got nervous energy after a mission.

POTUS

Do you feel...?

BOYD

Huh?

POTUS

I was going to ask a really personal question.

BOYD

I mean, that's cool.

POTUS

Do you feel...I don't know, guilt?

BOYD

I dunno. They're the enemy, right? I'm keeping my country safe.

POTUS

Right. That's what you're doing.

BOYD

It is kinda like a game, you know? You have a task, you gotta complete it. They're trying to kill us. If we just sit there we're gonna die. Right?

Beat.

POTUS

How'd you get into this anyway? Sorry, you're playing.

BOYD

I can talk while I game.

POTUS

I should get some rest, anyway.

BOYD

You should try this game sometime. We can play together online.

POTUS

Play together?

BOYD

Yeah, I'm sure you could get a console. You're the President, right? We can talk and roll. See who's ball's bigger.

POTUS

I'd...like that. I think.

Beat.

Hey Boyd?

BOYD

Yeah?

POTUS

Do you think...?

BOYD

What?

POTUS

Did we really get him?

Beat.

BOYD

We got him, dude.

POTUS

You're right. You're right, Boyd. Always calm and collected. Thanks again.

BOYD

Anytime.

Beat.

Killing's a trip, right? But it gets easier. Kinda.

Beat.

POTUS

Goodnight, Boyd.

III. THE PITCH

HAWK

A smoke-filled room.

SPOOK

Two old friends have a drink.

HAWK

The Hawk and the Spook.

SPOOK

To Freedom and Democracy.

HAWK

To a stable oil market.

SPOOK feigns shock, then smiles. They clink glasses.

That'll shut 'em up for a while.

SPOOK

I'm sure you're wondering what's up for next season?

HAWK

I was going to dance around a bit more, but yes, I am curious.

SPOOK

Well, we'll buy some time with Threat Level Orange. It's reasonable to expect retaliation. Then, you'll want to let them enjoy a little bit of peace. Keep it fleeting, though. You don't want them to forget. Then, a new Guy will enter the scene, and we'll be right back to it.

HAWK

Any good candidates?

SPOOK unfolds a map.

SPOOK

Let's see...I was betting on [REDACTED] but the guys we hired went a little too hard. We said scorched earth, but these guys we found are *bloodthirsty*. It might take a while before we can pull things together there.

HAWK

(pointing on map)

Anything from this region?

SPOOK

Africa's out right now. Can't get one of those to stick these days. We're sending our two cents a day.

HAWK

How about over here?

SPOOK

It's not the Cold War anymore. Well, not officially. But maybe there's something there. We need them to make the move, though.

HAWK

This one then, I'm sure.

SPOOK

Asia's the big thing right now, but that's gonna need some time, too. Direct conflict is out. We might be able to get a proxy war going, but we still need to prime the public a bit more. Haven't been happy with the Narrative team. They've been cutting corners.

HAWK

What do you propose?

SPOOK

I think the Middle East still has more to offer.

HAWK

You think so?

SPOOK

Oh yeah. I think we're right before the point of over-saturation. Give em a last hurrah to ring it out on. Catharsis! One more time, for old time's sake.

HAWK

But where?

SPOOK

You think I'd come to you empty-handed? Now, it's not a sure thing. Just hear 'em out, and if you're not happy we'll start pulling mugshots.

HAWK

You're too good to me.

SPOOK

We need each other, Hawk. That's how the world turns.

SPOOK turns to SPIDER, who has just entered.

Please, have a seat.

SPIDER sits across from HAWK.

SPIDER

Thank you for meeting with me. It's true what they say about America. You are generous people.

SPOOK

He comes from [REDACTED]. He's concerned about the future of his people.

HAWK

No kidding?

SPIDER

I am a humble middle class business owner. The [REDACTED] regime has decimated our economy. Our people are repressed, surveilled, kidnapped. The people suffer while the Dictator and his sadistic family live in a palace of gold. I love my land, my people. We look to the United States as a beacon of hope. A shining city on a hill. We've seen you put yourself at risk to help people all around the world. Please help us overthrow this unjust ruler, so that we can be free and shape our own destiny.

HAWK

I'm very sorry to hear about what's happening in your country. I can tell you that the President and our entire administration is watching the situation in your country very closely.

SPIDER

I appreciate this. Please. We need money, and weapons. I have made many connections, and there are people who are ready to fight, and I am forming the infrastructure for what comes next. Including the oil reserves. Perhaps we can discuss an opening for American business.

HAWK

Thank you, Sir, for this very useful insight.

SPOOK

A drink?

SPIDER

Oh. I don't drink. Or smoke. Religious reasons.

SPOOK

Well that's a shame, isn't it?

An awkward beat as SPOOK and HAWK move to commence their drinking and smoking.

SPIDER

Well. Goodnight, Gentlemen.

SPIDER exits.

SPOOK and HAWK take their vices to the balcony. A silent moment, pregnant with anticipation.

SPOOK

What do you think?

HAWK

There might be something there.

SPOOK raises their glass.

SPOOK

To a beautiful friendship.

HAWK

A beautiful friendship.

They clink glasses.

Still, it's hard not to feel a little blue.

SPOOK

We invest a lot into these things.

HAWK

Last one felt like it might go on forever.

SPOOK

You can never count on that. That's why I always have a bunch of things going on at once. There's no time to feel down, you have all these plates spinning.

HAWK

Used to be easier.

SPOOK

I can't complain. I believe in the work.

HAWK

You don't believe in anything.

SPOOK

I believe in cause and effect. I believe in ripples and dominos and butterfly wings.

SPOOK

A puff of their cigars.

HAWK

The smoke obscures every reflection.

They exit, laughing, leaving the stage is bare for a moment.

SPIDER re-enters, and addresses us.

SPIDER

I think they bought it. What do you think? Americans are an easy instrument to play. Americans love stories. Simple stories. Black and White. You need a Hero and a Villain. The Hero is always the United States. The Villain? Whoever they need to be the Villain. The Villain can be Communists. The Villain can be Islamic Terrorists. The Villain can be a Dictator, even one that the Americans previously installed. Allies can become Mortal Enemies at a moment's notice. What matters is the resource—for extraction. You see, that disgusting man leading my country? He was once your ally. The United States helped him get to power. But, eventually, these Dictators get confident. They might do something like, say, nationalize the oil industry, which would go against the whole point of putting him there in the first place. So the machine's gears turn. All the parts move into place, and we're on the road to regime change. Intelligence releases the dirt we've ignored for decades—what was once a necessary evil becomes the evil that must be destroyed. Because that is America's role. The protector of goodness. The Hero. The rest of us, we know better. At least, I know better. My family was far from middle class. We were in fact a powerful and well-connected family. Respected and, yes, sometimes feared. Until [REDACTED] came to power. Oh, yes, these types love to rail against corruption, they find the scapegoat, and then they install their own corruption. The circle of nationhood. Now is my time to strike. With the help of the United States military and NATO, we will quickly topple this regime, and I will be there. I will reclaim my country, my family's birthright. All it will take is a little performance. "Oh, thank you, big strong Americans for saving my poor developing country." It's going to be, what do some of you like to say? "A piece of cake." I know how you Americans love your treats.

SPIDER exits, laughing.

IV. TRASH PLANET

POTUS

The President of the United States plays video games. She didn't before. But now she does. She's rigged the Presidential limo to work the console.

BOYD

She plays with Boyd.

POTUS

They talk through the controller. It's the middle of the night.

BOYD

Your ball is so huge now, dude.

POTUS

The ball is huge now. And it will only get bigger. The little man rolls the ball, sucking up the refuse of the world. How big can the ball get? A small planet on a larger one? What sort of life might arise on this planet? This planet of colorful trash? Or would it just float silently, endlessly in orbit?

BOYD

Hey, you ok, dude?

POTUS

I don't create anything.

BOYD

What?

POTUS

I destroy things. I take promises and I water them down until they're meaningless. I erode trust. I blow things up. I kill.

BOYD

But, like...that's your job. If it's your job, you have to do it. Right?

Beat.

POTUS

Is it my job?

BOYD

I dunno. Wasn't there training? I bet you still got the handbook somewhere.

POTUS

My handbook is the Constitution.

BOYD

Based.

POTUS

I try to do something good, I get roadblocks. Republicans hate it. Moderates gut it. Congress stalls. The media rubs my nose in it. Every day is clawing desperately at compromises and cut-outs. But then you get into the Situation Room, and all the rules are different. You're the Commander-in-Chief. You make the final decisions. I felt a thrill, this morning. I felt a lot of things, but I also felt a *thrill*. I signed a paper, and we defeated a Villain. I went out to do something, and I did it. It felt...incredible.

BOYD

It doesn't look like it.

POTUS

That's the thing, Boyd. I hate that. I hate that I felt it. That's what this feeling is. I hate myself. I told myself that whatever I had to do, whatever values I had to compromise, I was moving us, all of us, on the path to progress. To a better country that lived up to its stated ideals. But no, I've just been a pawn. I've been infected by the rot that's in everything. Have you felt your soul die? Really felt it?

BOYD

Once, when I was on shrooms. But then I came back.

POTUS

I need to change. I need to show courage. What if I could actually, little-by-little, decision-by-decision, remake this global order? Into something more egalitarian, more open, more compassionate? Where we're not the world's police. We're not their feudal lord or prison guard. We let other countries govern themselves. We give more aid, with no strings attached. We close all those military bases, we depose our surrogate rulers. We create a world that is truly safe and free.

BOYD

Your ball is, like, so huge right now.

POTUS

Boyd. Thank you for listening to me.

BOYD

Anytime, dude.

POTUS

I should go. Get some rest. And watch the news.

BOYD

You got it, dude.

BOYD exits.

HAWK enters with a flashlight.

HAWK

Where've you been?

POTUS

Hawk? Is something wrong?

HAWK

You didn't tell me you'd be taking the limo.

POTUS

Am I supposed to tell you?

HAWK

You're the President of the United States, not a suburban teen.

POTUS

Think I'm running around with another Chief of Staff?

HAWK

I was worried.

POTUS

I needed a drive to clear my head.

HAWK

What's in your head?

POTUS

A lot of things.

HAWK

What do you need?

POTUS

I'm fine, now.

HAWK

You're fine, now. That's good to hear.

HAWK prepares the flashlight.

POTUS

Is that all you came for? Or is there a middle-of-the-night crisis?

HAWK

Come closer.

POTUS

Why?

HAWK

We need to keep it down.

POTUS gets closer. HAWK shines the light in her eyes.

The rooster crows, and a blueberry pie cools on grandma's windowsill.

POTUS

What?

POTUS faints.

HAWK helps her down gently.

HAWK

You've earned a rest.

V. ANOTHER DAY, ANOTHER THREAT

FLOTUS

The next morning.

FLOTUS drapes a blanket over POTUS.

HAWK

Hawk and the First Lady watch her.

FLOTUS

You're awake.

HAWK

Good morning, Madam President.

POTUS

I had the strangest dream.

FLOTUS

You can tell me all about it at dinner, sweetheart.

HAWK

We have a briefing in the Situation Room.

POTUS

What's wrong?

HAWK

We'll talk on the way. Come on. Let's get dressed. Another day, another threat. That's the life.

POTUS's arm rises like a puppet on a string.

POTUS

We have to make tough decisions to keep this country safe.

HAWK

You're exactly right, Madam President.

POTUS's other arm follows.

POTUS

It's a complicated, dangerous world. Enemies everywhere.

HAWK

Well put, Madam President.

Beat.

Beat.

POTUS

I just need a shower.

FLOTUS turns to the audience.

FLOTUS

End of Episode 1.

Blackout.