

## **Introduction: The President Has Disappeared**

*Remember, democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There has never been a democracy yet that did not commit suicide.*

—John Adams

*The drift into authoritarianism doesn't always set off alarm bells. Citizens are often slow to realize that their democracy is being dismantled even as it happens before their eyes.*

—Steven Levitsky

“She’s gone,” said one of his assistants. “Like, she disappeared.”

“What does that mean?” Mic Medicine asked, truly perplexed. How does a president disappear?

He had not always been known as Mic Medicine. Born Mickey Medici and having received a PhD in biostatistics, he worked behind the scenes with Dr. Anthony Fauci both during and after the first state of emergency (SOE) caused by the COVID pandemic. When, three years later, a new set of bizarre mutant viruses struck the planet—a COVID variant married to monkeypox, or so it seemed, did the most damage—Mickey grabbed the helm, being the face and voice of the government’s response. With a compliant president in office and a CDC and FDA willing to do his bidding, a template with which to design containment and treatment policy, a well-entrenched pharmaceutical industry whose stock had risen during the first pandemic and that had a plethora of vaccines and drugs to sell, doctor groups that sought to elevate their own position and profit by being heroes, and a largely petrified and obsequious population willing to trade everything—their bodies, their rights, their democracy, and the rights and bodies of everyone else—for a promise of life and wellness, Mickey steered the nation toward some form of salvation.

“If Anthony Fauci and our nation’s medical community taught me anything,” he said to some of his closest colleagues in Congress, as well as to a band of “experts” who had been assembled to offer advice and counsel (many of whom were quite wealthy and connected and who had earned a fortune during the first pandemic), “it’s that you have to make this as sacred as religion to people. You have to frame it as good versus bad, right versus wrong and approach it with unassailable dogma, rituals, shaming of heretics, and a propaganda network willing to spit out whichever truth they are fed by the medical experts who we—and we alone—will choose, never expressing any doubt or uncertainty in our

response, never backpedaling, always truncating any whiff of nuance or opposition. That's how you do this." And he did just that, saving America from the threat of extinction. Mic certainly liked to pontificate!

CNN took the lead in saturating the airways with sufficient fearmongering and propaganda, something made all the more effective when the president shut down any other TV station or news media sources that veered from the one and only truth as outlined by the Committee of Experts (COE). Micky was on TV every night, only on CNN, typically with Jake Tapper, and then, when he retired, his understudy, who went by the name Jenn from CNN, took over. The two of them—Micky and Jenn—became a popular and effective team, slamming the nation with whatever information that he and his compadres deemed to be necessary to both perpetuate the biostate and realign the government to its needs. The states and Congress passed two amendments, giving the COE—Micky's creation—unlimited power during the SOE, which, by the time of the president's disappearance twenty-five years later, had been successfully steering the nation into a healthy and disease-free existence.

That was when Micky was given the name Mic Medicine (M&M), clearly the most popular and respected man in the nation, perhaps in the world. He led the COE and was the face of both the entrenched biostate and its primary architect.

But after a quarter-century-long SOE, some of its edges were becoming frayed, and the experts—most of whom were more concerned about their pecuniary interests than the health of the nation and their money flowing in like a raging river—simply sought to conduct business as usual. Then President Julie Scanlon stepped in, perhaps the most popular president in the nation's history since George Washington; she had received every single electoral vote during her first election and now, a year from her reelection campaign, was poised to do the same. She also roomed with Jenn from CNN, still as popular and influential as ever, and although the two were barely apart, their relationship was purely fraternal, even though neither was married nor even dating.

Most of America believed that Mic and Jenn were an item, and they didn't let the country down! Their googly eyes on CNN, the innuendos about late-night trysts, all of that excited a nation that had bought into the biostate and enjoyed its most prominent and lovable personalities.

And thus President Scanlon's disappearance was a mystery to Mic, one that hit him hard and nudged his brain into a tailspin. "Presidents don't just disappear," he said to the frantic caller. "Define 'disappear' to me just so I know we are on the same page."

"I don't know," the young kid said nervously. "Like, no one knows where she is. She was supposed to meet the Russian ambassador yesterday, and today she was supposed to be on the campaign trail, and she didn't show up to either."

"What about her chip?" he asked. "People in this day and age don't disappear. They have chips with GPS surveillance. Or is this a revelation to you? And when someone becomes president, they have additional detection devices installed, and the chip as you know, as well as the additional wires, can't be removed lest she die. So, son, please tell me, where is her chip?"

He paused. "Well, sir, that's just it," he said. "At first, her chip was mute; we couldn't pick it up. Jenn alerted us she hadn't arrived in Memphis for the rally, and that's when we looked. But when I put it through the FBI-CIA, they claimed to have found it. But we're not sure if it's right; we don't know."

"Found it where?" a calm Mic Medicine pushed him. "This part of the story is important. In case you didn't know, this is what you should have told me first."

"Well, sir," he said with a stutter, "it shows she's at the bottom of the Chesapeake Bay."

"The Bay?" he shot back, laughing uncomfortably. "She's under the Bay? Are you sure?"

"Well, that's where the signal is," he said. "We haven't found her yet, or even looked. We were waiting for you to let us know what to do. The COE doesn't even know. I mean, other than Dr. X from the CDC-FDA. She's the one who told us to only tell you. The FBI apparently only told her."

"Wonderful," he said. "So, Dr. X and Jolly Jenn from CNN both know, my two favorite people. Who's the contact at the FBI-CIA who found the chip? I need them to talk only to me moving forward. Do you understand? No one else. Can you make that happen? And I want a call from whoever over there oversees this. What about the vice president? Does he know?"

"No, not yet. Like I said, we were waiting for you."

"Good," said Mic. "He's an ass. I don't want anyone to know. I don't even want you to know. Promise me that you'll get good and drunk and forget this whole thing!"

"That's a promise I can surely make!" the nervous boy said as he hung up the phone.

Mic had only recently spoken with the president, more of a private chat than anything of substance. She certainly hadn't seemed depressed or expressed any doubt about wanting a second term. The most

popular president in two-hundred and fifty years, young and healthy, having no enemies, and always under surveillance—how could she disappear, and what was she doing at the bottom of the Bay?

He paced, as was his wont. His mind bounced from one thought to another, one scenario to the next, as he thought about possible ways to address this strange and potentially destabilizing chunk of unexpected insanity without instigating a national panic. One thing Anthony Fauci had always said about Mic, and one of the reasons nearly everyone in the COE, the CDC-FDA, and the Doctor Oversight Entity (DOE) respected him so much, was that he never reacted without careful consideration of every possibility. Contemplative and brilliant, personable and able to persuade even his most venomous critics, Mic thought a problem through more thoroughly than any man in the government, seeing it through sundry gazes, carrying each potential act to its natural conclusion, and then reaching a decision that enabled him to choose a course most efficacious to whatever problem he was solving. He had created and then solidified the biostate through his ability to figure stuff out, and the president's disappearance had to be considered through the same lens.

After a lot of pacing and mental dancing, he told Jerry Landrew from the FBI-CIA, "I don't want her dug out of the Bay just yet. We need more time. For now, she's not missing; she's just taking a bit of a break. I'll come up with something. I'll tell Jenn, and we'll broadcast it on CNN. No one will question us. If Dr. X gives you any pushback, you tell her to get in touch with me. This is not CDC-FDA material; it's yours and mine, and since you listen to me, well, then it's mine."

"I understand."

But beyond his temporary fix, which simply was a stick-your-head-in-the-sand cop-out, Mic had no other ideas about how to handle this. Last week, the president had approached him out of desperation; he had given her a ray of hope, and then he cut her off. Was that her reason for her death at this most inopportune of times? Or was it all a ruse and she was alive and well on some island away from the insanity of American politics? Her disappearance was but one bullet flying into the biostate, and Mic knew that he and only he could repair the frayed edges and sick core of his creation, but he needed time to think and act.

In one of his favorite books, *Foundation* by Isaac Asimov, the great Hari Seldon created a planet called the Foundation as the empire fell apart all around it. Using science as religion, the Foundation sought to provide stability to a Universe that had lapsed into chaos and a central government that had become feckless and even toxic. That was the world twenty-five years ago before Mic elevated the biostate from

a powerful background player in national affairs to the nation itself. And the results were more than amazing, even if the reality of his creation veered far from its public perception. Still, he knew that he couldn't let the biostate die, and thus he couldn't let the president die. In this time of crisis, nothing could go wrong. Nothing ever could go wrong in so perfect a society as this one.

When the Foundation ran into similar roadblocks, what they called crises, Harry Seldon, or perhaps his virtual image, came back to tell them what to do and to right the ship of state. Mic saw himself as a modern-day Harry Seldon, and this was the biostate's first real crisis. He knew that he and he alone could fix the mess. And so he did. But what transpired transcended anything he could have envisioned and altered the nation and his own place in it forever.