

Park Ranger Columbo

by E. Christian Kopff

The Vince Foster Affair

A scene from an unpublished tele-drama: *The Oval Office of the White House*. Behind the desk, the President of the United States. He speaks into an intercom.

Bill Clinton: Are there any more appointments today?

Voice from the intercom: There is just one more. The park ranger in charge of the investigation into poor Vince Foster's suicide would like to make his report to you.

BC, grimaces, but responds politely: Send him right in, please. *From a door, stage right, emerges a middle-aged man with slumping shoulders, wearing the uniform of a U.S. Park Ranger and a worn raincoat. He looks confused as he enters, then sees the President and brightens up.*

Park Ranger: Oh, Mr. President, there you are. So good of you to meet with me, Sir.

BC: Not at all, Park Ranger. I'm happy to see you.

PR, shaking hands: This is a real pleasure, Sir.

BC, looking at his watch: This will only take a few minutes, won't it, Park Ranger?

PR: Oh, yes. I think so, Sir.

BC, beckoning to a chair in front of his desk: Please make yourself comfortable.

PR, sitting down: Thank you, Mr. President. It's quite an honor to meet you, Sir. I am afraid I am very nervous, Sir. Could I ask you a favor? Would you mind if I smoked a cigar while we talked, Sir? It would help me concentrate.

BC: Well, technically the Oval Office is a "smoke-free zone," but I guess what the First Lady doesn't know won't hurt me. Will it, Park Ranger? *As they both laugh, the ranger takes out a cheap cigar and lights it.*

PR: No, Sir. I don't suppose it will. Although, to speak frankly, smoking lost me my last job. I used to work for the Los Angeles Police Department, for 20 years, Sir, but I was let go for violating the "smoke-free zones" too many times. So I am rather sensitive on the point. And you mentioned your wife, Sir. Be-

fore we begin, I want to say one thing. My wife thinks your wife is sensational. The First Lady can do no wrong in her eyes. She is going to be tickled pink that I got to meet you. *Suddenly looks embarrassed.* And you are no small potatoes yourself, Sir, if I may say so.

BC, smiling benevolently: Thank you, Ranger. Very kind of you. Eh, could we get down to business?

PR: Why, of course, Sir, I don't mean to take up much of your time. *Takes out a pocket notebook and stares at it, then looks up nervously.*

BC: Are there any problems, Ranger?

PR: Oh no, Sir. Nothing serious, that is. It's just that I have a mind that is bothered by little details, and I write them down in my notebook. If I could just go over a few of them with you, Sir?

BC: Certainly, Ranger.

PR: For instance, Mr. President, there is the matter of the fingerprints on the suicide note, the one Mr. Foster ripped up and threw away, Sir.

BC: What fingerprints?

PR: Exactly the point, Sir. I have tried again and again to rip up a piece of paper and leave no fingerprints on the pieces, but I just can't do it. Mr. Foster ripped up his suicide note into more than 20 pieces, and the FBI found no fingerprints on it. I just can't figure it out, Sir.

BC, smiling: I believe I can help you there, Park Ranger. I remember that back in Arkansas Vince often helped dry the dishes after he had finished working on the finances with the First Lady. My theory is that he had just finished drying the dishes when those awful *Wall Street Journal* editorials finally got to him and he wrote down his intentions and then ripped up the note, still wearing the rubber gloves he wore to do the dishes. That would explain the lack of fingerprints, wouldn't it, Ranger?

PR: Yes, it would, Sir. That would explain it well enough. Tell me, Sir, did you help with the dishes back in Arkansas?

BC, chuckling: To tell the truth, Ranger, I've never been very good with figures and my evenings were pretty busy, even back then.

PR: Of course, Sir. I understand.

BC: Is that all, Ranger?

PR: Yes, it is. I believe so, Sir. *Looks back at his notebook.* Oh, yes, Mr. President. There is one little matter. The powder burns, Sir.

BC: Powder burns, Ranger?

PR: Yes, Sir. There were no powder burns on Mr. Foster's face or clothing. I just can't figure out how he did it, Sir. A man committing suicide usually puts the gun right up to his face or even inside his mouth. Sir, I'm having a problem imagining how he did it. *Holds his hand at full length away from his face and wags his thumb vigorously.* You don't usually hold the gun so far away that there are no powder burns. In fact, I don't know how you can do it.

BC: What are you suggesting, Park Ranger?

PR, looking baffled: Suggesting, Sir? I'm not suggesting anything, Sir. I am just having some problems figuring out exactly how he did it.

BC, looking impatiently at some papers on his desk: Is there anything else, Park Ranger?

PR: Oh no, Sir. I don't believe so, Sir. *Pages through his notebook as he speaks.* Oh yes, Mr. President, there is one more thing. The position of the gun, Sir. When Mr. Foster was found, Sir, the gun was in his hand with his fingers tightly wrapped around the grip. Normally the force of the explosion will knock the gun right out of a suicide's hand. It's all very puzzling, Sir.

BC: Really, Park Ranger, I would like to hear more of your interesting speculations, but I am expecting an important phone call from, er, Boris Yeltsin. I hope that you will excuse me.

PR: Why, of course, Mr. President. I'm just grateful you could spare me this much time. *Gets up and walks to the door. As he reaches the door, the President speaks to him and he turns around.*

BC: Before you leave, Park Ranger, I have a little question for you.

PR: For me, Sir?

BC: Yes. What did you say your first name was?

PR: Oh, Sir, nobody calls me that but my wife, Sir. Just call me Park Ranger Columbo.

BC: Park Ranger Columbo, you mentioned that you used to work for the LAPD. I didn't realize that they had a Parks Division.

PR: Oh no, Sir, they don't. I used to work in Homicide, Sir. I was a lieutenant in the Homicide Division. Well, I'll just leave you alone now, Mr. President. And thank you again for your time. *Exits stage right through the door by which he entered. When Columbo is gone, the President stares after him, and what he has heard begins to sink in. He presses the*

buzzer on his desk.

BC: Get Hillary, Janet, and George in here on the double.

Voice from the intercom: Is there a problem, Mr. President?

BC: I have just been talking to a very depressed man. I have a horrible premonition that a valued member of the United States Parks Service is on the verge of suicide. *The President sits back pensively in his chair.*

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Perception and Truth

by Robert C. Whitten

The Tailhook Debacle

The September 1991 Tailhook scandal has done more damage to the United States Navy than Admiral Sergei Gorshkov and his Soviet fleet had ever hoped to do. Although military law appears to have been violated, the escapade itself was worse than criminal—it was stupid! In this day of radical feminism, the senior officers of the service at the very least should have been aware of the risks in “letting boys be boys.” The charges began with one female lieutenant, Paula Coughlin, and escalated until the government claimed to have found 97 “victims of assault,” including seven males. Following dissatisfaction with the Navy’s careful and constitutional rights-respecting investigations, the Department of Defense Inspector General (DODIG) took over. Much of the Tailhook story revolves around the investigators’ methods, the preliminary results of which are summarized in a government report entitled *Tailhook ’91: Part 2: Events at the Annual Tailhook Symposium*.

Let it be clear at the outset that, for a government report, *Tailhook ’91: Part 2* is an uncommonly readable, clear, and well-organized publication. Indeed, one wonders if the obviously considerable cost of producing such a physically and linguistically high-quality report is justified in this day of drastically declining

defense expenditures. It is divided into 11 chapters and seven appendices. The “Part 2” refers to a revision and not a continuation of a previous report. The chapters describe the scope and methodology of the investigation and provide background on the “Tailhook Association,” witnesses, Navy cooperation, squadron hospitality suites, assaults, “indecent exposure,” and other improper activity as well as security and leadership issues. On the face of it, the report appears exhaustive. But does it provide an accurate picture of what really went on at Tailhook ’91? The answer seems to be both “yes” and “no.” In other words, it appears to tell a considerable amount of truth but not the whole truth that was in the possession of the investigators. Moreover, parts of it are misleading. The writing is also marred by confusion on the part of the authors concerning rank structure in the Navy. The authors repeatedly refer to “field officers,” presumably meaning “command rank,” since the designation appears to refer to (Navy) captains and commanders. Command rank is not completely comparable to field rank in the other services. Moreover, students at the U.S. Naval Academy are *midshipmen*, not *cadets*.

The culture of naval aviation is quite different from the cultures of surface sailors and submariners. Aviators, primarily carrier aviators, have been a pampered lot almost from the beginning of fleet aviation. As far back as 1928, when the old U.S.S. *Saratoga* (CV 3) was in overhaul at Bremerton, Washington, a group of officers threw a party ending in such debauchery with local debutantes that the latter’s fathers complained to the CO, Captain (later Fleet Admiral) E.J. King. King refused to do anything about it. One of the aviators of those years, Frank Tinker, who later flew for both the Loyalists and Franco during the Spanish Civil War, was such a hellraiser that even the Navy could not put up with his antics and threw him out. Flight operations on a carrier are, of course, much trickier than on land. The heaving deck, especially at night, makes landing a literal nightmare. These difficulties and dangers have been cited as a partial (but far from satisfactory) explanation for the lack of discipline among naval aviators when ashore. A faint odor of the antics of the carrier aviators comes through in the Officers’ Club scenes in the movie *Top Gun*.

The Tailhook Association was launched about 1962 as a combination professional society and social club for carrier aviators. The professional aspect of the association grew over the years. But so did the rowdiness. Destruction of hotel property at one symposium even led to the expulsion of the association from Mexico (Rosarita Beach). In recent years, at least one flag aviator, Vice Admiral James Service, reportedly tried, if unsuccessfully, to tone down the rowdiness. The symposium at the Las Vegas Hilton in September 1991 featured some 31 regular Navy flag officers, three reserve flag officers, and one Marine general officer in addition to representatives of aircraft and weapons companies like McDonnell Douglas. According to the program published in *Tailhook ’91*, the symposium was as professionally solid as one in any engineering society—in the daytime. Nights were a different story.

The “whistleblowing” on Tailhook ’91 began with the charge from helicopter pilot Lieutenant Paula Coughlin, a participant in at least one previous “Tailhook,” that she had been assaulted in the “gauntlet” area on the third floor. With coaching from the Department of Defense Inspector General (DODIG) staff, she eventually identified Captain Gregory Bonam, USMC, as her assailant. The gauntlet was a corridor area on the third floor where women were allegedly grabbed, pinched, or fondled on the breasts and crotch as they passed through. In fact, some claimed to have been bodily raised into the air and carried some distance. Most of this activity appears to have been consensual, although some was not. Lieutenant Coughlin’s complaint, first reported in the press by a young reporter for the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, Greg Vistica, found its way to sympathetic hands in one of the offices of the Secretary of Defense. When Coughlin (on the basis of a photograph) “identified” her assailant, it quickly became apparent to her DOD backers that she had erred. They warned her of the error, despite the inadmissibility of such action. In a second attempt, she fixed on Bonam, and he was charged.

According to then-Assistant Secretary of the Navy (Manpower and Reserve Affairs) Barbara Pope, at least one flag officer, Assistant Chief of Naval Operations (Air Warfare) Vice Admiral Richard Dunleavy, may have had knowledge of the “gauntlet.” According to