

Safeguard

“What the hell happened?” The Senior Minister glared at the department ministers seated around the table. There was a long, uncomfortable silence while the ministers tried to avoid making eye contact.

“Well, the polls said it would be close,” the Environmental Minister timidly offered. He was the youngest minister, and definitely the most naive. The Minister of Science privately joked that the Environmental Minister actually believed the studies published by government research labs.

“I know what the polls said!” the Senior Minister barked. “They say whatever we want them to say.”

“I, I thought they were a statistically valid sampling of public opinion,” the Environmental Minister stammered.

The Minister for Public Information tried to defuse the situation with an explanation. He liked to think that his calm, logical presentations persuaded listeners he was correct. Whether it was because he persuaded opponents or because he gave them a boring period to calm down, he was generally effective at reducing conflict.

“The polling companies derive much of their revenue from the media,” he explained, “so it’s in their best interest to satisfy their customers. When there is uncertainty or conflict in the news, viewers and readers want to learn more, and they want to follow unfolding events. Consequently, the media wants polls to show a close race. The Senior Minister is quite correct in stating that we have good relations with the media and provide them with information they value, but they also genuinely feel that this government is doing what’s best for the country. For those reasons they want to see us leading in the polls. The polling companies do in fact use statistically valid criteria in their sampling, but that’s not an exact science. Differences in how their sampling weighs different demographics, the methods and time of day they conduct their sampling, the wording of the questions, and even the order in which they ask questions can affect the results. Polling companies that provide the media with results they like get hired to do subsequent polls. Polling companies that do not produce popular results tend to go out of business. So it’s not surprising that the polls indicated the race was close, but we held the advantage.”

“The fact that we haven’t lost an election in sixteen years probably influences things, too” the Senior Minister said sarcastically. “We want elections to be close because it shows they’re honest, but there’s no reason we should have lost this election. I repeat – what the hell happened?”

There was another prolonged silence. Finally the Minister of Education spoke up. “Well, there was a poor harvest this year. . .”

“That was entirely due to unseasonable weather!” the Minister of Agriculture interrupted. “Last year’s East Asian Wheat Mold reduced our stockpiles to critical levels, so of course this year’s drought caused local shortages. Don’t you educate voters about the fact that the government can’t control the weather?”

“Cut the crap!” the Senior Minister ordered. “None of the issues we debated during the campaign should have affected the voting. What happened to Safeguard?”

“Safeguard?” the Environmental Minister questioned.

The Senior Minister turned his chair sideways and stared at a corner of the ceiling. “Tell him about Safeguard, Lucas.”

“Sir, that’s highly classified” the Minister of Intelligence answered.

A wave of rage passed over the Senior Minister’s face, but he suppressed it and continued to stare at the ceiling. “He’s a *&#%ing cabinet level minister!” he said with barely controlled anger. “He’s cleared for classified material. Everyone in this room is cleared. Tell him about Safeguard!”

“Project Safeguard was instituted fifteen years ago to protect the integrity of the election process,” the Minister of Intelligence explained. “All voting machines are stand-alone computers, not connected to any electronic network, to protect them from interference by hostile forces. After voting is completed, the machines are connected by a secure network to regional computers which count the votes and forward the results to the Provincial election centers. Project Safeguard monitors this process to protect against voter fraud. In effect, it inserts itself into the secure electronic networks and intercepts the tallies sent to the regional computers. If the tallies are consistent with the results predicted by the election polls, no fraud is indicated and the tallies are forwarded to the regional computers. If the fraud detection software sees a significant variance from the predicted results, the tallies are corrected before being forwarded to the regional computers. The corrected tally is also fed back into the voting machine to prevent conflict with any recount. To prevent interference by hostile forces, the entire process is invisible to the election network. The voting machines “think” they’re talking to the regional computers and the regional computers “think” they’re receiving tallies directly from the voting machines. Only a very few people know that Project Safeguard exists.”

“So,” the Senior Minister said. “Since the polls showed we were ahead we should have won the election. Except we didn’t. I repeat, what the hell happened?”

Another long silence ensued. "Safeguard might have been hacked," the Minister of Science suggested.

"I thought it was invisible," the Senior Minister countered.

"It was designed to be invisible," the Minister of Intelligence answered, "but that was fifteen years ago. The technology to detect and interfere with computer systems has changed greatly since then."

"Who has such technology?" the Senior Minister demanded.

"Many countries do," the Minister of Intelligence replied. "China and Iran come immediately to mind, and of course the US. Believe it or not, North Korea also has a pretty sophisticated offensive computer capability. And of course, there are many private groups in Russia who offer such services for hire. Project Safeguard was actually modeled after a less sophisticated system developed by the North Koreans which we bought from a Russian source."

The Senior Minister thought about this information. "We'll need to conduct a thorough investigation to find out what went wrong with Safeguard and ensure that it never happens again," he said. "A more immediate question is what do we do now? How do we undo the hacking and correct the vote count in this unfortunate election?"

"You could demand a recount," the Minister of Information suggested. "The results were close enough that you would be within your rights to do so."

"I'm not certain that would make any difference," the Minister of Intelligence said. "If the Safeguard system has indeed been hacked, a recount would give the same results. We'll need time to analyze the software, find out what went wrong, and correct the code. We'll also need time to determine how an outsider broke into the system in the first place to prevent that from happening again. Perhaps if you announced that this election was fatally flawed and scheduled a new election in, say, six months we would be able to correct Safeguard."

"There will be rioting in the streets if you invalidate this election," the Minister of Defense predicted. "Did you see the celebrations when the election results were announced?"

"Why were those flawed results ever announced?" the Minister of Intelligence asked.

"It didn't come from anyone in my department!" the Minister of Information insisted. "The media claims we sent out a press release, but I've checked thoroughly and it never came from us."

The Minister of Science interceded. "I suspect that anyone with the capability of hacking the Safeguard system would also be capable of impersonating a Department of Information computer to send out a press release."

"I'm sure that's possible," the Senior Minister said. "In any event, it's out there and we can't pull it back." He looked directly at the Minister of Defense. "You say there will be rioting in the streets. Surely you can contain that."

The Minister of Defense hesitated before he spoke. "I'm not certain I can guarantee that, Senior Minister. Shortly after you took power you nationalized the local police forces and made them a branch of the National Defense Force. That gave you direct control over local policing. It also brought the police, who are in daily contact with the public, into daily contact with the army. The ongoing civil war increased that contact, as police and army units worked together to fight the rebels, and they worked hand in hand with local groups to get information about the rebels. Unfortunately, those local groups sympathized with many of the issues which drove the rebels, and some of that sympathy infected the police and the army as well. I suspect that many of the people we saw dancing in the streets when the election results were announced were off duty soldiers and policemen."

"I should have ended that war years ago," the Senior Minister said bitterly. "I didn't start it, it had been going on for years when I was elected. The generals kept promising that victory was just around the corner, that if I'd just give them more men and more weapons they could win it. They predicted dire consequences if we agreed to any of the rebels demands, but they never gave me a realistic strategy for winning."

He turned and glared at the Minister of Information. "And your folks weren't any better," he said. "Always begging for more men, more money, and more authority to spy on the rebels. Always sharing the latest rumors about which outside countries were funding the rebels, how the rebel morale was falling, and how close they were to collapsing. Your folks were quick to tell me how terrible it would be if we gave in now, and how we'd lose status in the eyes of the world. But they never gave me information that was any damned good about how we could destroy the rebels!"

He paused to collect his thoughts, and to set his bitterness aside. Then he straightened up and continued. "But I'm ending this war. I announced weeks ago that we were negotiating with the rebels, and we will soon come to an agreement. Surely the soldiers and the policemen will support that?"

"Actually, sir, that's part of the problem." The Minister of Defense tried to choose his words carefully. "The rank and file will be glad to see the end of the war, but they think it should have ended years ago. They won't trust your talk of negotiations until it's a done deal,

and they certainly won't take up arms against friends and family who riot if you refuse to accept the election. The senior leaders don't want the war to end. The war gives the generals and civilian bureaucrats power, status, and influence with arms contractors. If you end the war the army will become a backwater, and there will no longer be high paying jobs with defense contractors when they retire."

"The situation is similar in my department," said the Minister of Intelligence. Before the war we were a minor agency that mostly monitored the foreign press. Now we're a huge operation, with a huge budget. Media spokesmen hound my senior leaders for interviews, quotes, and leaks. There is also a vast network of consulting agencies that want to hire my leaders, and they earn money writing books and serving as media "talking heads" when they leave government service. If you end the war they will go back to being minor bureaucrats reading foreign magazines, and they don't like that idea one bit."

The Senior Minister sat deep in thought, assimilating this information.

Emboldened by the fact that his words hadn't provoked a rage, the Minister of Intelligence continued. "To be perfectly honest, Project Safeguard may not have been hacked by a foreign power. If someone entered the incorrect poll numbers, Safeguard would have ensured the results matched the prediction. Any number of people in my department might have done that once you began negotiating with the rebels. Or they could have simply disconnected Safeguard and let the uncorrected votes be counted."

Finally the Senior Minister spoke. "So what should I do?" he asked.

"Concede the election," said the Minister of Defense. "Sometimes the deep state wins."