

**Ali DUBYIAH  
and the Forty Thieves**





## One.

**L**ong ago and far away, in a vast continental land called America, the capricious ruler of a hinterland province many days' travel from the capital plotted with his most trusted courtiers to take control of the entire hemispheric kingdom. This tribal ruler's name was George W. Fratbush, son of Wimpbush, a previous monarch. The younger Bush and a brother, Jeb Ambush, had always vied for the favor of their elders, but in starkly different ways. Jeb was agreeable, compliant, ingratiating; he yearned to please. George, the eldest of four sons, was stubborn, devious, self-indulgent, and irresponsible; he had no more conscience than a fish has feathers, and his character was as thin and pliable as a Pinocchio puppet.

In his youth (which stretched beyond the normal

two decades to three or more), young George busily cultivated his chosen self-image as an irreverent playboy, a reckless thrill-seeker, a rake and a rogue who always got his way. Being born to privilege and possessing unlimited resources had done nothing to inspire in him a sense of gratitude. On the contrary, he was contemptuous of his parents' generosity, disdainful of his given name (which was the same as that of his father), and thoughtlessly rude to his elders, always confident of their boundless capacity to forgive and forget.

George was the prodigal son. His loyalty, such as it was, he bestowed only upon his closest friends, the young men with whom he spent so much time in drunken celebration of their manhood, their vanity and venality, and their occasional sexual conquests. He reacted proudly when hailed by his middle initial, W, which he and his companions pronounced "Dub'-yuh"—and when his disapproving parents told him it was undignified, the irreverent manchild flaunted it, like a coxcomb or a clown's cap.

In the fullness of time, both George and Jeb used their wealth and visibility to gain power as tribal

warlords in two large and widely separated regions far from the national throne. The ineffectual king, Wimpbush, had hoped and expected that Ambush would succeed him as the continental sovereign, but Wimpbush himself was unexpectedly overthrown by a boisterous retinue of latter-day huns who formed a temporary army of convenience behind a new ruler, King Zip (himself a former regional chieftain known as Willie Bubba), who talked glibly but eloquently of progressive reforms. Their bitterly contentious rival parties—King Wimpbush’s Publicans and King Zip’s Sinners—hid their unprincipled thirst for power behind sober masks of decorum and propriety, even as they plotted continuously to conquer all rivals and rule with overwhelming force.

King Zip was eventually disabled by a scandal of complex dimensions that the Scribes and Pharisees summarized into a one-word headline: Zippergate. The scheming Publicans seized upon this opportunity to regain the throne, but to the surprise of everyone—especially old King Wimpbush—it was not Jeb Ambush or any of the other pretenders who ascended, but the amiably self-righteous jester, the

slacker son and brother from the tribal outback in the far southwest.

The decisive battle for dominion over the vast continental kingdom came down to a dramatic clash between the cocksure but vacuous Dubyiah and his nemesis, the prevailing candidate of the Sinners, a densely brilliant tactician called Prince Al Bore. The campaign devolved into a supreme test of endurance, as bewildering as it was bloody, and the outcome remained in doubt for weeks. In the end, the kingdom's high court of judicial sages, headed by Sir William Inquest, ruled by a margin of just one vote that Fratbush would wear the crown. And so it came to pass that, at the dawning of the twenty-first century, the reign of Ali Dubyiah commenced—and when it did, America's slow and agonizing yet painfully precipitous descent into darkness, its long day's journey into night, began to gather speed, like a loose boulder that presages an avalanche.

**T**he Fall of the American Empire began innocently enough, with Ali Dubyiah offering little in the way of new and different ideas (although he

did swiftly grant large tax reductions to his wealthiest subjects). Months passed without a clear sign of his intentions. Some of his fellow Publicans, privately concerned about his capacity for leadership, were content to have him take long vacations at his estate in the hinterlands. The opposition Sinners complained loudly of his performance—but secretly, they were just as happy to have him engaged in a bit of manual labor, even as he took pains to explain to the Scribes that it was “hard work.” Better he should be outdoors doing harmlessly destructive things, like clearing underbrush, they whispered, than in the throne room doing catastrophically destructive things, like saber-rattling and carving on social programs.

Dubyah liked to think of himself as a decisive leader, but in truth he was an unnervingly erratic gambler who made big decisions impulsively, without a moment’s hesitation or the slightest trace of doubt, no matter how serious the problem at hand. The notion that acts had consequences simply eluded him; he could not entertain the thought that he might ever be wrong, and even when proved so, he refused to admit fault or accept

responsibility for his mistakes. His was the blissful certitude and arrogance of the “true believer,” an affliction common among obsessively religious individuals. Some of the devout were altogether selfless and benevolent, of course, but many more were just the opposite: sanctimonious, judgmental, narrow-minded, self-delusive. Alas, Dubyah was permanently encamped among the latter.

The rigid conviction and sense of entitlement that seemed to be fixed in young Fratbush’s personality, in his very nature, had been greatly reinforced and magnified after he experienced a transforming religious conversion (an epiphany which, curiously, he referred to in a humorous and somewhat offhanded way as “my Damascus moment,” even though there is nothing to indicate that he knew anything at all about the old Syrian capital). Whatever the source of its power, this episode turned Dubyah into a professed follower of the early Middle Eastern Jewish mystic and prophet, Jesus of Nazareth, whose disciples had spread from Jerusalem across Europe and America over a period of some two thousand years.

It was fashionable among many Euro-Americans

of this Bush-age to stage elaborate public displays of their religious piety. These so-called Christians were by no means unique in this regard, for as we know from the long train of history, there have been Islamic brotherhoods of Muslims in thrall to the prophet Muhammad, and Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, and other religious societies equally as imbued with the zealous certitude of a “chosen people” favored by “the one true God.”

Had Dubyah not drifted into politics as his profession, his religiosity might have been persuasive, at least superficially. But he was so shallow, and so incurious, that few who knew him well could imagine him as a philosopher or a theologian or a wise man. Some believed he was smart enough, but intellectually lazy, lacking the desire or the discipline to achieve genuine excellence as a true statesman and an inspirational leader of his people. He did have a certain narrowly channeled ambition, however, and an enthusiastic spirit that traced back to his schooldays, and on the strength of these, he gathered round him over the years a tight circle of partisan loyalists, sycophants, political handlers, and wordsmiths who were willing to do

the hard and dirty work of political skullduggery at his bidding. Their unwritten covenant with him was mutually beneficial: He had what they most desired (wealth, influence, name recognition), while they, collectively, had all the knowledge, organizational ability, and technical skills that he sorely lacked. They deferred to him and followed his lead when the citizens were watching—but often, in private, these shrewd handlers shaped their simple-minded and malleable leader to their own aims and desires. Looking back, it is quite easy to see how such a hollow man, together with his band of rogue companions, would ride to notoriety as Ali Dubyah and the Forty Thieves.