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Title: The Business, As Usual

Author: Jack Sharkey

Release date: March 13, 2016 [EBook #51435]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Greg Weeks, Mary Meehan and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BUSINESS, AS USUAL \*\*\*



# **THE BUSINESS, AS USUAL**

**By JACK SHARKEY**

**Illustrated by TRATTNER**

**[Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from  
Galaxy Magazine August 1960.  
Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that  
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***Giving Certain Powers the business for a change  
would be a joy—but it must not backfire—and  
here at last was the perfect recoilless diddle!***

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In 1962, the United States Air Force found itself possessed of a formidable tool of battle, a radar resistant airplane. While this was the occasion for much rejoicing among the Defense Department members who were cleared for Top Secret, this national-defense solution merely posed a greater problem: What should we do with it?

"There must," said the Secretary of Defense, "be some utilization of this new device to demonstrate to 'Certain Powers' that the world can be made safe for Freedom and Democracy!"

"'Certain Powers,' my foot," said the President. "Why don't we ever come out and just say it?"

"Policy," the Secretary said. "We've always walked softly in our Foreign Policy; especially softly in cases where we didn't have the 'big stick' to carry."

"Well," grumbled the President, "we've got the big stick now. What do we do with it?"

"We just want to shake it a bit," said the Secretary. "No contusions intended, of course. We just have to let them know we *have* it, but are too kind-hearted to use it. Unless provoked, naturally."

"I can see," said the President, "that this new plane is burning a hole in your pocket. Suppose we do send it flying over Rus—"

"*Mister* President!" said the Secretary of Defense.

The President sighed. "All right, all right. Flying over 'Certain Areas,' then. Let's say we get it there. Fine. What do we do with it? Drop leaflets?"

"No. That comes under the proselytizing clause in the Geneva Conference of '59."

"I don't suppose a small—well, you know."

"Aggression," said the Secretary. "We'd lose face in the Middle East."

"So?" demanded the President, spreading his hands. "They don't like us anyhow, do they? Or the competition—or each other, for that matter."

"That's not the point. We have to *feel* as though our dollars are buying friends, whether or not it's true."

"Well, then, what *can* we do?" said the President. "No leaflets, no aggression. We couldn't maybe seed their clouds and make it rain on them?"

"And get sued by other countries for artificially creating low-pressure conditions that, they could claim, robbed them of their rightful rainfall? We've had it happen right here between our own states."

"Maybe we should just forget about it, then?"

"Never! It must be demonstrated to the world that—"

"We could take a full-page ad in the New York *Times*."

"It just isn't done that way," the Secretary protested.

"Why not? It'd save money, wouldn't it? A simple ad like, '*Hey, there, Certain Powers! Lookie what we got!*' What'd be wrong with that?"

"They'd accuse us of Capitalistic Propaganda, that's what! And to get the egg off our face, we'd have to demonstrate the plane and—"

"And be right back where we are now," the President realized aloud, nodding gloomily. "Okay, so what do we do?"

The Secretary looked to left and right, although they were alone together in a soundproofed, heavily guarded room, before replying.

"We drop an agent!" he whispered.

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The President blinked twice before responding. "Have you gone mad? What man in his right mind would volunteer for such a thing? 'Drop an agent,' indeed! Ten minutes after landing, he'd be up against a wall and shot. Wouldn't *that* be lovely for Freedom and Democracy? We'd have the R—the Certain Powers gloating over the air waves for weeks about nipping a Capitalist Assassination Plot in the bud, not to mention the Mothers of America beating down the White House door because one of Our Boys was sacrificed. You know how our country reacts: If an entire division is wiped out, we bite the bullet and erect statues and make speeches and then forget it. But let a single man get in dutch and the whole populace goes crazy until something is 'done' about it. No,

it won't work."

"May I finish?" said the Secretary patiently.

The President shrugged. "Why not?"

"This agent would be something special, sir. One that would not only demonstrate our new aircraft, but which would positively leave the R—damn, you've got *me* doing it!—Certain Powers tied in knots. In point of fact, our military psychologists think that this agent might be the wedge to split Communism apart in hopeless panic!"

"Really?" the President said, with more enthusiasm than he had shown throughout the entire meeting. "I'd like to meet this agent."

The Secretary pressed a black button upon the conference table. An instant later, the door opened and the Secretary's personal aide stepped in. "Yes, sir?"

"Jenkins, have the corridor cleared and Secret Service men posted at all entrances and exits. When it's safe, bring in Agent X-45." He paused. "And Professor Blake, too."

"At once, sir." Jenkins hurried out.

"X-45?" said the President. "Has he no name?"

The Secretary smiled inscrutably. "Teddy, sir."

"Why that smirk?"

"You'll see, sir."

They sat in fidgety silence for another minute, and then a buzzer sounded, twice.

"Ah, that's Jenkins," said the Secretary, and pressed the button once more.

Jenkins came in, followed by a tall gray-haired man who carried a large black suitcase. The President arose, and, as Jenkins left the room again, shook hands with the man. "Agent X-45?" he asked.

"Professor Charles Blake," the man corrected him calmly. "Agent X-45 is in here."

The President stared. "In the *suitcase*? What are we sending? A *dwarf*?"

"Hardly," said the Secretary, snapping up the hasps on the suitcase and opening it upon the table. "This," he said, lifting something from under tissue-paper padding, "is Agent X-45."



The President's gaze was returned by two shiny black eyes, set on either side of a little brown muzzle with a gentle, stitched-on smile. Agent X-45 was clad in flight helmet, miniature jacket and tiny boots, with a baggy pair of brown canvas trousers belted at the waist with a bandolier holding a dozen small wooden bullets, and dangling a patent-leather holster containing a plastic water pistol. And he wore a small parachute and harness.

"But that's a teddy bear!" cried the President.

"Precisely," Professor Blake said.

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"I think I'll sit down," said the President, and did so, visibly looking like a man who believes he is surrounded by lunatics.

"And look here!" said the Secretary, slipping his hand within Teddy's jacket and withdrawing a small oilskin pouch. "It's rather rudimentary, but the Cyrillic lettering is genuine, and our ambassador assures us the layout is correct."

The President took the pouch, unfolded it and drew out a small sheet of paper, covered with the inscrutable letterings, and numerous rectangles and curving red lines.

"I give up," he said. "What is it?"

"A map of the Kremlin," said the Secretary, his eyes dancing. "That big red 'X' is the location of the Politburo Council Chamber."

"Perhaps," the President said weakly, "you could explain...?"

"Mister President," said Professor Blake, "I am the new Chief of Propaganda for the government."

The President nodded, poured himself a glass of water from a pitcher and drained it. "Yes, yes?" he said.

"Naturally, I have spent my career studying the psychology of a Certain Power...."

The President groaned. "Please, gentlemen, let's name names! It need never go outside this room. *My* lips are sealed!"

The professor and the Secretary exchanged a look, a raising of eyebrows, then a shrug of surrender.

"Very well," said Blake. "Russia—"

"There," said the President. "That's more like it."

Blake cleared his throat and went on.

"We know the weak spot in the Russian armor is the mentality of the average Communist official," he explained, while the Secretary, who had heard this all before, fiddled with the straps of Teddy's parachute and hummed softly to himself. "They have a distrust complex. Everything and everybody is under 24-hour-a-day suspicion."

"Yes, so I hear," said the President.

"What do you suppose would happen to an agent that was caught by the Russians?" asked Blake.

"I'd rather not even think about that."

"Not the sadistic details, sir. I mean the general train of events, from the time of capture onward."

The President pondered this. "After his capture," he said thoughtfully, "he would be questioned. Through various methods—hopelessly at variance with the regulations of the Geneva Convention—they would discover his mission, and then he would be shot, I guess, or imprisoned."

Blake nodded grimly. "And what if an agent landed there that could *not* divulge his mission?"

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The Secretary stopped fiddling with the harness and watched the President's face. On the worn features he read first puzzlement, then incredulity, then a flash of sheer amazement.

"Good heavens!" said the President. "They'd—they'd have to admit a defeat, I suppose...."

"But can they?" Blake leaned forward and slammed his fist upon the tabletop. "Can the Communist mentality ever admit that it's been bested?"

"I—I guess not. At least, they never do," said the President. "But this—" he wagged a forefinger at the stuffed thing on the table—"this certainly won't upset them. I mean, after all...." He looked from one to the other for agreement and found none. "But, gentlemen, it's nothing but a stuffed bear!"

"It won't upset them?" queried Blake slowly. "Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. They'll find the bear, wherever it lands, and they'll—well, they'll *know* it's a gag and just laugh at us."

"*How* will they know?" Blake persisted.

"Well, they'll be *pretty* well certain!" the President said scathingly: "I mean a stuffed toy—"

"Would they give up on something of which they were 'pretty well' certain?"

"They'd have to. Teddy, here, certainly couldn't tell them anything. They'd say it was a joke and forget it...." His voice barely sounded the last few words. He no longer believed them. A smile flickered upon his face. "Gentlemen, you don't think they'd—"

"The Russians," said Blake, without emotion, "would go off their rockers, sir. To be unable to

explain a thing like this would devastate their morale. The Communist is a man who must hold all the aces. He'll shuffle and reshuffle until he gets them, too. Well, we're giving him a cold deck, sir. There are no aces for him to find."

"Hmmm," said the President. "As long as there's any doubt in their minds, they'll have to keep plugging at it, won't they! And since there's no solution—" His smile grew calculating. "Yes, yes I begin to see. It's a small thing, to be sure, but I find I must leap at the opportunity to stick a few ants in *their* pants for a change."

"It won't wipe them out," began the Secretary.

"But it'll wear them down a little," Blake finished.

"Done!" said the President. "How soon can we get Operation Frustration under way?"

"The plane is ready to leave right now," said the Secretary, with a small blush. "I—I rather thought you'd see this thing our way."

The President frowned at this, then shrugged. "Good enough. Let's get this bear into the air."

---

"You sure this plane will work?" asked the President, averting his face from the spray of leaves caught up in the shrieking jet stream of the waiting plane.

"It's too simple not to," said Blake, clutching the suitcase—on whose side a large red "Top Secret" had been stenciled—to his chest, and shouting over the scream of the plane. "The radar-resistant device is nothing more than a radio-receiver that blankets the structure, making the entire plane a receiver. If it receives the radar impulses, they can't bounce back and make a blip on the enemy radar screens."

The President sighed. "You make it sound almost too easy. Very well." He shook the man's hand. "Good luck."

"Thank you, sir," said Blake, patting the suitcase. "I'll take good care of Teddy."

The President nodded and moved away. Blake boarded the jet, and, minutes later, the President was watching a last fading streamer of the twin exhausts dwindling upon the eastern horizon.

"I shan't sleep till he's back," said the Secretary.

"Nor I," said the President. "I have the weirdest damned apprehension...."

"About what, sir?" asked the Secretary, as they made their way from the field.

"About the—" the President looked around, then lowered his voice to a whisper—"the Russians. There's something in their makeup we may have overlooked."

"Impossible, sir," said the Secretary of Defense. "Blake is our top psychologist."

"I hope you're right. If this fails, I'd hate for it to be traced to us."

"It can't be. The jacket was made in Japan, the boots in Mexico, the parachute in—"

"I know, I know," said the President. "But if they *should* trace it to us, we'll be a laughing-stock."

"They won't," the Secretary assured him.

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Two days later, Blake was back, his manner jovial when he met in secret session once more with the two executives.

"Couldn't have gone more perfectly, gentlemen," he said, rubbing his hands together and bouncing on his toes. "We passed directly over Moscow, at a height of ten miles, on the stroke of midnight. The night was overcast and starless. Teddy was dropped through the bomb bay. I saw his parachute open myself. He's down there now, and we're sure to see signs any day now of the little cracks in the Iron Curtain."

"You had no trouble with the enemy?" the President asked, though the answer—since Blake was back alive—was obvious.

"None," Blake said. "The radar shield performed exactly as specified, sir. Not a blink of a searchlight nor a single ground-to-air rocket did we see. Perhaps, on hearing us pass by, they sent up an investigating plane or two, but we were long gone by then. That's the advantage of moving faster than the sound you make," he added pontifically.

"I still feel we've overlooked something," said the President. "In the back of my mind, a small voice keeps trying to remind me of something about the Russians, something that should have made me veto this whole scheme at the start."

Blake looked puzzled. "What about them, sir? If it's in regard to their psychology, I can assure you—"

"I don't mean their psychology at *all*," said the President. "No, wait—yes, I do, in a minor way. They must pursue this thing, no matter what, but—"

A light glimmered, then burned brightly in the President's eyes, and he stood up and smacked his

fist into his open palm. "Of course!" he said. "Their methods!"



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"Methods?" asked Blake, a little nervously.

The President's reply was interrupted by a knock at the door. The three men exchanged a look; then the Secretary jabbed the button, and Jenkins came in.

"This just came for you, sir," he said, handing the Secretary a small envelope, and making his exit silently.

The President waited impatiently as the envelope was torn open and its contents read. Then the Secretary's hands opened limply and the message fell upon the table.

"Diplomatic note—Russian—Teddy," he whispered.

"What!" yelled the President. He snatched the paper from the table and read it, then sank into his chair once more, his face grim and eyes suspiciously moist. "The dirty, lowdown, rotten...."

Blake, hovering at tableside, hesitated a moment, then asked, "What about Teddy? What's happened?"

"What we might have expected," said the Secretary dolefully.

"You don't mean—" Blake mumbled, horrified. He couldn't continue, just waited for the worst.

The President nodded miserably.

"He's confessed."

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