

## The Telephone Number = The Winning Number

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"I'm a corporation now," said Jennings, with a kind of dubious pride, "but what it means is that I've got an employer's identification number now that I must remember. That's on top of my social security number and telephone number and zip code and my car's license plate."

"And your address, and the combination of any combination lock you might have," said Baranov even more gloomily, "and the birthdays and anniversaries of all your relatives and friends. We're prisoners of a numbered society."

"That," said I, "is the reason why we need to be computerized. Feed all the numbers into a computer and let *it* do the worrying."

At which Griswold stirred. His chair creaked defiantly as he leaned forward, puffed out his white mustache, and stared at us balefully.

"I'm not much good at remembering numbers," he said, "but I knew a man once who never forgot one."

He paused to sip at the scotch and soda he seems always to be holding, but there was no danger we would get away. There's something in the way Griswold looks at you through vaguely bloodshot eyes that forces you into a verbal paralysis.

His name was Bulmerson [said Griswold] and those were the days when we were holed up in a little room at the Pentagon, which nobody could find except Bulmerson and me, and two or three others who worked with us.

8 There was a sort of shabby linen-closet look about the room and it had a sign on the door that had nothing to do with what went on inside. I doubt that there were five men outside our group who knew what we were up to, and that goes even for the upper-echelon Pentagon personnel.

I remember an admiral once wandering in under the impression he was visiting a men's room. He kept looking vaguely around for the urinals as though he were sure we had one of them hidden in the lockers. We had to lead him out gently.

What was going on, of course, was intelligence. Not James Bond heroics. Infinitely duller. Infinitely more important. It was just a matter of weighing information and deciding whether it was reliable or not, and just how one piece of news fit with another, and to what degree it was possible that someone who said "yes" really meant "no" or vice versa. After doing all that we had to be ready to advise the President or the State Department and sweat out the result. We earned our money, actually—not that we were paid very much.

Bulmerson had been at it longest. A big man, broad, white hair, always very red in the face, thick neck and bulging at every seam. Looked as though he should be smoking a cigar, but he didn't.

It was he who never forgot a number. He knew the telephone number of a thousand officials and ten thousand nonofficials and never got them wrong. He could manage other kinds of numbers as well, but telephone numbers were his particular hobby. I think his secret ambition was to replace the telephone book.

It might have been that little quirk in his head that made it possible for him to have the sixth sense for telling when some foreign statesman had broken down and forgetfully said something that wasn't a lie. Who knows how odd talents fit together. Maybe it was his number sense that somehow made him an infallible spotter of the infrequent truth, and

that was always valuable. He was much looked up to, was Bulmerson. Then, too, all sorts of raw data came to us. Any anonymous phone tip was routed to us. We don't know the motives that make people report to us. We just make use of it—if we dare. Sometimes the bits we get are from harmless lunatics and sometimes from enemy agents who are making a definite attempt to mislead us. Winnowing out the ounce of wheat from the ton of chaff is another one of our jobs.

We had one informer who was infallible, though. He had found *us*, for one thing, and that was impressive. He called us directly and we never found out how he had discovered how to reach us. He was always right.

We never found out who he was, though. His voice was soft and hoarse and seemed vaguely non-American. We called him Our Boy. If it had happened a dozen years later we might have called him Deep Throat. This was in the early 1960s, however.

We made no attempt to locate him or identify him, because we feared that anything we did might stop him and we didn't want him stopped. He was our keyhole into the Kremlin. After 1965, we never heard from him again. He may have been shifted out of the country or he might have died—even naturally, for all we know. But this was a couple of years earlier.

He called, but it was always in a special way. First someone else would call and give us a telephone number and time limits. If we used that telephone number at the particular time, we got *him*. We had a little code phrase to identify each other, and then he would talk for a minute or two and hang up. We always acted on what he said and we were never sorry we did.

The numbers were always pay phones (we did check that much), but we didn't know what system he used to pick them out, for, of course, he never used the same one twice. For that matter, he never seemed to use the same person twice for making the initial call. We don't know how he picked them. They may have been winos he bought for a bottle for the one job. You can't smell their breath over the telephone.

Bulmerson always enjoyed it when he happened to pick up the telephone at the time when the message was a telephone number and a time from Our Boy. The rest of us had to scribble the number down and sometimes even say, "Would you repeat that, please?" In that case, Bulmerson would be insufferable the rest of the day, and comment on premature senility. He was very childish about it.

Of course, when *he* answered the phone, he just listened and then hung up without saying a word. Then, when the time came, he would just call, having made no note but having filed the number in his capacious and infallible number memory.

It was just two months before the assassination of President Kennedy—

I was in the office with Bulmerson, who wasn't looking particularly well, and with two others— What were their names? I don't remember, but it doesn't matter. Call them Smith and Jones.

It was a muggy day, overcast and gloomy, not at all comfortable even though it was just about the autumnal equinox that supposedly ends summer. In the Washington area, summer doesn't end as neatly as that, or on time.

Bulmerson was scowling because he said the lousy sandwich he'd had for lunch had left him with heartburn, and that didn't strike me as odd considering the trouble we were having in Vietnam.

Ngo Dinh Diem was running South Vietnam pretty much to suit himself, and his way of

doing so wasn't suiting *us*. He was growing increasingly unpopular and Buddhist monks were burning themselves alive in protest, which they were not doing in North Vietnam and which made our side look like the villains. What's more, the number of American "advisers" was rising steadily and had passed the ten-thousand mark.

It was clear, at least to the little group of us whose job it was to study the world of international politics, that we were being suckered into a booby trap, but it didn't seem as if there were anything that could be done about it. We couldn't leave and make it look as though we were abandoning an ally, and the Democrats, in particular, would have been skinned alive if they had— But you all know the story—

What we needed was some way of getting a clean-cut, fairly bloodless, and quick—especially quick—victory, and get out. What happened afterward, well, at least it would happen without Americans in the middle of it. Trouble was we didn't have that way.

Then, on the day I'm talking about, the telephone rang and it was Bulmerson, scowling, who picked it up.

"Adamson's Five and Ten," he said, that being the code phrase of the day.

He listened expressionlessly, then hung up the telephone without saying a word.

He turned to us, gasping a little, and said, "Our Boy wants to talk to us and it's got to be in thirty minutes, between 2:30 P.M. and 2:35, and it's double-Z."

That was the term Our Boy used when it was highest possible priority. The last time he had used it was during the Cuban missile crisis the previous year, and it had meant we went into it knowing we would win, which was very convenient—and another story.

I said, "Don't forget the telephone number."

A look of contempt crossed Bulmerson's sweating face. "Are you kidding? It's so simple it's no fun to remember it. Even *you* could remember it. At least today you could. I'll even tell you what it is and you'll see. It's 9—"

That's all he said, because he then made a sound that was half gasp, half groan, clutched at his chest and fell to the ground, where he twisted and twitched. That was no heartburn he had been suffering from: it was a coronary and a bad one.

There was nothing we could do except ring Emergency.

I'll say this for the Pentagon. They had a team there in five minutes and the paramedics worked on him for a while, then heaved him into a stretcher and carted him off. It didn't do much good; the poor man died in the hospital that evening. We remained behind, shocked and stunned, after Bulmerson had been taken away. It's hard to get your bearings when something like that happens.

But then Smith nudged me. He looked pasty white and it wasn't from what he had just seen. He said to me, "Bulmerson never told us the telephone number."

We had to think about that. In our business, it's first things first.

I looked at the clock. It was 2:31 and we had four minutes to go. "Don't worry about it," I said. "He told us enough."

I called and got Our Boy. What he had to say was what we had been waiting to hear.

There was a way of getting the Chinese People's Republic into a neat corner. It would take time, but if we played our part correctly, North Vietnam would be unable to move, and we would have the perfect excuse to call it a victory and get out of South Vietnam.

Happy ending—except that things broke wrong. On November 1, Diem was killed in a coup and on November 22, John F. Kennedy was assassinated, and by the time we had the

government working again, the chance had passed and there was no way out. Johnson had to keep raising the ante and raising, and, in the end—well, you know the end. And since I expect you know what the telephone number was, that's the end of the story. Griswold was closing his eyes, but all three of us were at him simultaneously. Baranov said, "What was the telephone number, and how did you know?" Griswold raised his white eyebrows. "But it's obvious. Bulmerson said it was an easy number to remember and had time to give the first digit as 9. That meant it could be 999-9999 or 987-6543, which would be the limit he would expect us to be able to keep in mind. He said, however, 'At least today you could.' That made the day special, and what can possibly make a day special in connection with a number but its date. "I told you it was two months before the assassination, which was on November 22, so the date was September 22, or, if you wish, 22 September. September is the ninth month, so the day can be written 9-22, or 22-9. Bulmerson said the first digit was 9 so, if you forget the hyphen, it was 922. If you remember the year of the assassination, you know the date was 922-1963 and that was the number I dialed."

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