

Committee of the Whole

Frank Herbert, 1965

Chapter I

With an increasing sense of unease, Alan Wallace studied his client as they neared the public hearing room on the second floor of the Old Senate Orace Building. The guy was too relaxed.

'Bill, I'm worried about this,' Wallace said. 'You could damn well lose your grazing rights here in this room today.'

They were almost into the gantlet of guards, reporters and TV cameramen before Wallace got his answer.

'Who the hell cares?' Custer asked.

Wallace, who prided himself on being the Washington-type lawyer - above contamination by complaints and briefs, immune to all shock - found himself tongue-tied with surprise.

They were into the ruck then and Wallace had to pull on his bold face, smiling at the press, trying to soften the sharpness of that necessary phrase:

'No comment. Sorry.'

'See us after the hearing if you have any questions, gentlemen,' Custer said.

The man's voice was level and confident.

He has himself over-controlled, Wallace thought. Maybe he was just joking ... a graveyard joke.

The marble-walled hearing room blazed with lights. Camera platforms had been raised above the seats at the rear. Some of the smaller UHF stations had their cameramen standing on the window ledges.

The subdued hubbub of the place eased slightly, Wallace noted, then picked up tempo as William R. Custer - 'The Baron of Oregon' they called him - entered with his attorney, passed the press tables and crossed to the seats reserved for them in the witness section.

Ahead and to their right, that one empty chair at the long table stood waiting with its aura of complete exposure.

' Who the hell cares?'

That wasn't a Custer-type joke, Wallace reminded himself. For all his cattle-baron pose, Custer held a doctorate in agriculture and degrees in philosophy, math and electronics. His western neighbors called him 'The Brain'.

It was no accident that the cattlemen had chosen him to represent them here.

Wallace glanced covertly at the man, studying him. The cowboy boots and string tie added to a neat dark business suit would have been affectation on most men.

where his campaign money came from ... but he also knew where the votes were.

They had a quorum, though.

Tiborough cleared his throat, said: 'The committee will please come to order.'

The senator's voice and manner gave Wallace a cold chill. *We were nuts trying to fight this one in the open*, he thought. *Why 'd I let Custer and his friends talk me into this? You can't butt heads with a United States senator who's out to get you. The only way's to fight him on the inside.*

And now Custer suddenly turned screwball.

Exhibit I

'Gentlemen,' said Tiborough, 'I think we can ... that is, today we can dispense with preliminaries ... unless my colleagues ... if any of them have objections.'

Again, he glanced at the other senators - five of them. Wallace swept his gaze down the line behind that table - Flowers of Nebraska (a horse trader), Johnstone of Ohio (a parliamentarian -devious), Lane of South Carolina (a Republican in Democrat disguise), Emery of Minnesota (new and eager - dangerous because he lacked the old inhibitions) and Meltzer of New York (poker player, fine old family with traditions).

None of them had objections.

They've had a private meeting - both sides of the aisle - and talked over a smooth steamroller procedure, Wallace thought.

It was another ominous sign.

'This is a subcommittee of the United States Senate Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs,' Tiborough said, his tone formal. 'We are charged with obtaining expert opinion on proposed amendments to the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934. Today's hearing will begin with testimony and ... ah, questioning of a man whose family has been in the business of raising beef cattle in Oregon for three generations.'

Tiborough smiled at the TV cameras.

The son-of-a-bitch is playing to the galleries, Wallace thought. He glanced at Custer. The cattleman sat relaxed against the back of his chair, eyes half lidded, staring at the senator.

'We call as our first witness today Mr William R. Custer of Bend, Oregon,' Tiborough said. 'Will the clerk please swear in Mr Custer.'

Custer moved forward to the 'hot seat', placed his briefcase on the table. Wallace pulled a chair up beside his client, noted how the cameras turned as the clerk stepped forward, put the Bible on the table and administered the oath.

Tiborough ruffled through some papers in front of him, waited for full attention to return to him, said: 'This subcommittee ... we have before us a bill, this is a United States Senate Bill entitled SB-1024 of the current session, an act amending the Taylor Grazing Act of 1934 and, the intent is, as many have noted, that we would broaden the base of the advisory committees to the Act and include a wider public representation.'

Custer was fiddling with the clasp of his briefcase.

How the hell could that light gadget be an exhibit here? Wallace asked himself. He

glanced at the set of Custer's jaw, noted the nervous working of a muscle. It was the first sign of unease he'd seen in Custer. The sight failed to settle Wallace's own nerves.

'Ah, Mr Custer,' Tiborough said. 'Do you - did you bring a preliminary statement? Your counsel ... '

'I have a statement,' Custer said. His big voice rumbled through the room, requiring instant attention and the shift of cameras that had been holding tardily on Tiborough, expecting an addition to the question.

Tiborough smiled, waited, then: 'Your attorney - is your statement the one your counsel supplied the committee?'

'With some slight additions of my own' Custer said.

Wallace felt a sudden qualm. They were too willing to accept Custer's statement. He leaned close to his client's ear, whispered: 'They know what your stand is. Skip the preliminaries.'

Custer ignored him, said: 'I intend to speak plainly and simply. I oppose the amendment. Broaden the base and wider public representation are phases of political double talk. The intent is to pack the committees, to put control of them into the hands of people who don't know the first thing about the cattle business and whose private intent is to destroy The Taylor Grazing Act itself.'

'Plain, simple talk,' Tiborough said. 'This committee ... we welcome such directness. Strong words. A majority of this committee ... we have taken the position that the public range lands have been too long subjected to the tender mercies of the stockmen advisors, that the lands ... stockmen have exploited them to their own advantage.'

The gloves were off. Wallace thought. *I hope Custer knows what he's doing. He's sure as hell not accepting advice.*

Custer pulled a sheaf of papers from his briefcase and Wallace glimpsed shiny metal in the case before the flap was closed.

Christ! That looked like a gun or something!

Then Wallace recognized the papers - the brief he and his staff had labored over - and the preliminary statement. He noted with alarm the penciled markings and marginal notations. How could Custer have done that much to it in just twenty-four hours?

Again, Wallace whispered in Custer's ear: 'Take it easy, Bill. The bastard's out for blood.'

Custer nodded to show he had heard, glanced at the papers, looked up directly at Tiborough.

A hush settled on the room, broken only by the scraping of a chair somewhere in the rear, and the whirr of cameras.

Chapter II

'First, the nature of these lands we're talking about,' Custer said. 'In my state ... ' He cleared his throat, a mannerism that would have indicated anger in the old man, his father. There was no break in Custer's expression, though, and his voice remained level.' ... in my state, these were mostly Indian lands. This nation took them by brute force, right of conquest. That's about the oldest right in the world, I guess. I don't want to argue with it at this point.'

'Mr Custer.'

It was Nebraska's Senator Flowers, his amiable farmer's face set in a tight grin. 'Mr Custer, I hope.'

'Is this a point of order?' Tiborough asked.

'Mr Chairman,' Flowers said, 'I merely wished to make sure we weren't going to bring up that old suggestion about giving these lands back to the Indians.'

Laughter shot across the hearing room. Tiborough chuckled as he pounded his gavel for order.

'You may continue, Mr Custer,' Tiborough said.

Custer looked at Flowers, said: 'No, Senator, I don't want to give these lands back to the Indians. When they had these lands, they only got about three hundred pounds of meat a year off eighty acres. We get five hundred pounds of the highest grade proteins -premium beef - from only ten acres.'

'No one doubts the efficiency of your factory-like methods,' Tiborough said. 'You can ... we know your methods wring the largest amount of meat from a minimum acreage.'

Ugh I Wallace thought. That was a low blow - implying Bill's overgrazing and destroying the land value.

'My neighbors, the Warm Springs Indians, use the same methods I do,' Custer said. 'They are happy to adopt our methods because we use the land while maintaining it and increasing its value. We don't permit the land to fall prey to natural disasters such as fire and erosion. We don't ... '

'No doubt your methods are meticulously correct,' Tiborough said. 'But I fail to see where ... '

'Has Mr Custer finished his preliminary statement yet?' Senator Flowers cut in.

Wallace shot a startled look at the Nebraskan. That was help from an unexpected quarter.

'Thank you, Senator,' Custer said. 'I'm quite willing to adapt to the Chairman's methods and explain the meticulous correctness of my operation. Our lowliest cowhands are college men, highly paid. We travel ten times as many jeep miles as we do horse miles. Every outlying division of the ranch - every holding pen and grazing supervisor's cabin is linked to the central ranch by radio. We use the ... '

'I concede that your methods must be the most modern in the world,' Tiborough said. 'It's not your methods as much as the results of those methods that are at issue here. We ... '

He broke off at a disturbance by the door. An Army colonel was talking to the guard there. He wore Special Services fouragere -Pentagon.

Wallace noted with an odd feeling of disquiet that the man was armed - a .45 at

history.'

'Come now, isn't that a bit pretentious?' Tiborough asked.

'We tend to think of history as something old and slow,' Custer said. 'But history is, as a matter of fact, extremely rapid and immediate. A President is assassinated, a bomb explodes over a city, a dam break, a revolutionary device is announced.'

'Lasers have been known for quite a few years,' Tiborough said. He looked at the papers the colonel had given him. 'The principle dates from 1956 or thereabouts.'

'I don't wish it to appear that I'm taking credit for inventing this device,' Custer said. 'Nor am I claiming sole credit for developing the sustained-emission laser. I was merely one of a team. But I do hold the device here in my hand, gentlemen.'

'Exhibit, Mr Custer,' Flowers reminded him. 'How is this an exhibit?'

'May I explain first how it works?' Custer asked. 'That will make the rest of my statement much easier.'

Tiborough looked at Plowers, back to Custer. 'If you will tie this all together, Mr Custer,' Tiborough said. 'I want to ... the bearing of this device on our - we are hearing a particular bill in this room.'

'Certainly, Senator,' Custer said. He looked at his device. 'A ninety-volt radio battery drives this particular model. We have some that require less voltage, some that use more. We aimed for a construction with simple parts. Our crystals are common quartz. We shattered them by bringing them to a boil in water and then plunging them into ice water ... repeatedly. We chose twenty pieces of very close to the same size - about one gram, slightly more than fifteen grains each.'

Custer unscrewed the back of the tube, slid out a round length of plastic trailing lengths of red, green, brown, blue and yellow wire.

Wallace noticed how the cameras of the TV men centered on the object in Custer's hands. Even the senators were leaning forward, staring.

We're gadget crazy people, Wallace thought.

'The crystals were dipped in thinned household cement and then into iron filings,' Custer said. 'We made a little jig out of a fly-tying vice and opened a passage in the filings at opposite ends of the crystals. We then made some common celluloid - nitrocellulose, acetic acid, gelatin and alcohol - all very common products, and formed it in a length of garden hose just long enough to take the crystals end to end. The crystals were inserted in the hose, the celluloid poured over them and the whole thing was seated in a magnetic waveguide while the celluloid was cooling. This centered and aligned the crystals. The waveguide was constructed from wire salvaged from an old TV set and built following the directions in the Radio Amateur's Handbook.'

Custer re-inserted the length of plastic into the tube, adjusted the wires. There was an unearthly silence in the room with only the cameras whirring. It was as though everyone were holding his breath.

'A laser requires a resonant cavity, but that's complicated,' Custer said. 'Instead, we wound two layers of fine copper wire around our tube, immersed it in the celluloid solution to coat it and then filed one end flat. This end took a piece of mirror cut to fit. We then pressed a number eight embroidery needle at right angles into the mirror end of the tube; until it touched the side of the number one crystal.'

Custer cleared his throat.

Two of the senators leaned back. Flowers coughed. Tiborough glanced at the banks of TV cameras and there was a questioning look in his eyes.

'We then determined the master frequency of our crystal series,'

Custer said. 'We used a test signal and oscilloscope, but any radio amateur could do it without the oscilloscope. We constructed an oscillator of that master frequency, attached it at the needle and a bare spot scraped in the opposite edge of the waveguide.'

'And this ... ah ... worked?' Tiborough asked.

'No.' Custer shook his head. 'When we fed power through a voltage multiplier into the system we produced an estimated four hundred joules emission and melted half the tube. So we started all over again.'

'You are going to tie this in?' Tiborough asked. He frowned at the papers in his hands, glanced toward the door where the colonel had gone.

'I am, sir, believe me,' Custer said.

'Very well, then,' Tiborough said.

'So we started all over,' Custer said. 'But for the second celuloid dip we added bismuth - a saturate solution, actually. It stayed gummy and we had to paint over it with a sealing coat of the straight celluloid. We then coupled this bismuth layer through a pulse circuit so that it was bathed in a counter wave -180 degrees out of phase with the master frequency. We had, in effect, immersed the unit in a thermoelectric cooler that exactly countered the heat production. A thin beam issued from the unmirrored end when we powered it. We have yet to find something that thin beam cannot cut.'

'Diamonds?' Tiborough asked.

'Powered by less than two hundred volts, this device could cut our planet in half like a ripe tomato,' Custer said. 'One man could destroy an aerial armada with it, knock down ICBMs before they touched atmosphere, sink a fleet, pulverize a city. I'm afraid, sir, that I haven't mentally catalogued all the violent implications of this device. The mind tends to boggle at the enormous power focused in ... '

'Shut down those TV cameras!'

It was Tiborough shouting, leaping to his feet and making a sweeping gesture to include the banks of cameras. The abrupt violence of his voice and gesture fell on the room like an explosion. 'Guards!' he called. 'You there at the door. Cordon off that door and don't let anyone out who heard this fool!' He whirled back to face Custer. 'You irresponsible idiot!'

'I'm afraid, Senator,' Custer said, 'that you're locking the barn door many weeks too late.'

For a long minute of silence Tiborough glared at Custer. Then: 'You did this deliberately, eh?'

Chapter III

'Senator, if I'd waited any longer, there might have been no hope for us at all.'

Tiborough sat back into his chair, still keeping his attention fastened on Custer. Piowsrs and Johnston on his right had their heads close together whispering fiercely. The other senators were dividing their attention between Custer and Tiborough, their eyes wide and with no attempt to conceal their astonishment.

Wallace, growing conscious of the implications in what Custer had said, tried to wet his lips with his tongue. *Christ!* he thought. *This stupid cowpoke has sold us all down the river!*

Tiborough signaled an aide, spoke briefly with him, beckoned the colonel from the door. There was a buzzing of excited conversation in the room. Several of the press and TV crew were huddled near the windows on Custer's left, arguing. One of their number - a florid-faced man with gray hair and horn-rimmed glasses, started across the room toward Tiborough, was stopped by a committee aide. They began a low-voiced argument with violent gestures.

A loud curse sounded from the door. Foxman, the syndicated columnist, was trying to push past the guards there.

'Poxman!' Tiborough called. The columnist turned. 'My orders are that no one leaves,' Tiborough said. 'You are not an exception.' He turned back to face Custer.

The room had fallen into a semblance of quiet, although there still were pockets of muttering and there was the sound of running feet and a hurrying about in the hall outside.

'Two channels went out of here live,' Tiborough said. 'Nothing much we can do about them, although we will trace down as many of their viewers as we can. Every bit of film in this room and every sound tape will be confiscated, however.' His voice rose as protests sounded from the press section. 'Our national security is at stake. The President has been notified. Such measures as are necessary will be taken.'

The colonel came hurrying into the room, crossed to Tiborough, quietly said something.

'You should've warned me!' Tiborough snapped. 'I had no idea that ... '

The colonel interrupted with a whispered comment.

'These papers ... your damned report is *not* clear!' Tiborough said. He looked around at Custer. 'I see you're smiling, Mr Custer. I don't think you'll find much to smile about before long.'

'Senator, this is not a happy-smile,' Custer said. 'But I told myself several days ago you'd fail to see the implications of this thing,' He tapped the pistol-shaped device he had rested on the table. 'I told myself you'd fall back into the old, useless pattern.'

'Is that what you told yourself, really?' Tiborough said.

Wallace, hearing the venom in the senator's voice, moved his chair a few inches farther away from Custer.

Tiborough looked at the laser projector. 'Is that thing really disarmed?'

'Yes, sir.'

'If I order one of my men to take it from you, you will not resist?'

'Which of your men will you trust with it, Senator?' Custer asked.

In the long silence that followed, someone in the press section emitted a nervous guffaw.

'Virtually every man on my ranch has one of these things,' Custer said. 'We fell trees with them, cut firewood, make fence posts. Every letter written to me as a result of my patent application has been answered candidly. More than a thousand sets of schematics and instructions on how to build this device have been sent out to varied places in the world.'

'You vicious traitor!' Tiborough rasped.

'You're certainly entitled to your opinion, Senator,' Custer said. 'But I warn you I've had time for considerably more concentrated and considerably more painful thought than you've applied to this problem. In my estimation, I had no choice. Every week I waited to make this thing public, every day, every minute, merely raised the odds that humanity would be destroyed by...'

'You said this thing applied to the hearings on the grazing act,' Flowers protested, and there was a plaintive note of complaint in his voice.

'Senator, I told you the truth,' Custer said. 'There's no real reason to change the act, now. We intend to go on operating under it - with the agreement of our neighbors and others concerned. People are still going to need food.'

Tiborough glared at him. 'You're saying we can't force you to ... ' He broke off at a disturbance in the doorway. A rope barrier had been stretched there and a line of Marines stood with their backs to it, facing the hall. A mob of people was trying to press through. Press cards were being waved.

'Colonel, I told you to clear that hall!' Tiborough barked.

The colonel ran to the barrier. 'Use your bayonets if you have to!' he shouted.

The disturbance subsided at the sound of his voice. More, uniformed men could be seen moving in along the barrier. Presently, the noise receded.

Tiborough turned back to Custer. 'You make Benedict Arnold look like the greatest friend the United States ever had,' he said.

'Cursing me isn't going to help you,' Custer said. 'You are going to have to live with this thing; so you'd better try understanding it.'

'That appears to be simple,' Tiborough said. 'All I have to do is send twenty-five cents to the Patent office for the schematics and then write you a letter.'

'The world already was headed toward suicide,' Custer said. 'Only fools failed to realize ... '

'So you decided to give us a little push,' Tiborough said.

'H. G. Wells warned us,' Custer said. 'That's how far back it goes, but nobody listened. 'Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe,' Wells said. But those were just words. Many scientists have remarked the growth curve on the amount of raw energy becoming available to humans - and the diminishing curve on the number of persons required to use that energy. For a long time now, more and more violent power was being made available to fewer and fewer people. It was only a matter of time until total destruction was put into the hands of single individuals.'

'And you didn't think you could take your government into your confidence.'

'The government already was committed to a political course diametrically opposite the one this device requires,' Custer said, 'Virtually every man in the government has a vested interest in not reversing that course.'

'So you set yourself above the government?'

'I'm probably wasting my time,' Custer said, 'but I'll try to explain it. Virtually every government in the world is dedicated to manipulating something called the 'mass man'. That's how governments have stayed in power. But there is no such man. When you elevate the non-existent 'mass man' you degrade the individual. And obviously it was only a matter of time until all of us were at the mercy of the individual holding power.'

'You talk like a commie!'

They'll say Pm a goddamn' capitalist pawn,' Custer said. 'Let me ask you, Senator, to visualize a poor radio technician in a South American country. Brazil, for example. He lives a hand-to-mouth existence, ground down by an overbearing, unimaginative, essentially uncouth ruling oligarchy. What is he going to do when this device comes into his hands?'

'Murder, robbery and anarchy.'

'You could be right,' Custer said. 'But we might reach an understanding out of ultimate necessity - that each of us must cooperate in maintaining the dignity of all.'

Tiborough stared at him, began to speak musingly: 'We'll have to control the essential materials for constructing this thing ... and there may be trouble for awhile, but ... '

'You're a vicious fool.'

In the cold silence that followed, Custer said: 'It was too late to try that ten years ago. I'm telling you this thing can be patch-worked out of a wide variety of materials that are already scattered over the earth. It can be made in basements and mud huts, in palaces and shacks. The key item is the crystals, but other crystals will work, too. That's obvious. A patient man can grow crystals ... and this world is full of patient men.'

'I'm going to place you under arrest,' Tiborough said. 'You have outraged every rule -'

'You're living in a dream world,' Custer said. 'I refuse to threaten you, but I'll defend myself from any attempt to oppress or degrade me. If I cannot defend myself, my friends will defend me. No man who understands what this device means will permit his dignity to be taken from him.'

Custer allowed a moment for his words to sink in, then: 'And don't twist those words to imply a threat. Refusal to threaten a fellow human is an absolute requirement in the day that has just dawned on us.'

'You haven't changed a thing!' Tiborough raged. 'If one man is powerful with that thing, a hundred are ... '

'All previous insults aside,' Custer said, 'I think you are a highly intelligent man, Senator. I ask you to think long and hard about this device. Use of power is no longer the deciding factor because one man is as powerful as a million. Restraint - *self*-restraint is now the key to survival. Each of us is at the mercy of his neighbor's

good will. Each of us, Senator - the man in the palace and the man in the shack. We'd better do all we can to increase that good will -not attempting to buy it, but simply recognizing that individual dignity is the one inalienable right of ... '

'Don't you preach at me, you commie traitor!' Tiborough rasped. 'You're a living example of ... '

'Senator!'

It was one of the TV cameramen in the left rear of the room.

'Let's stop insulting Mr Custer and hear him out,' the cameraman said.

'Get that man's name,' Tiborough told an aide. 'If he ... '

'I'm an expert electronic technician, Senator,' the man said. 'You can't threaten me now.'

Custer smiled, turned to face Tiborough.

'The revolution begins,' Custer said. He waved a hand as the senator started to whirl away. 'Sit down, Senator.'

Wallace, watching the senator obey, saw how the balance of control had changed in this room.

'Ideas are in the wind,' Custer said. 'There comes a time for a thing to develop. It comes into being. The spinning jenny came into being because that was its time. It was based on countless ideas that had preceded it.'

'And this is the age of the laser?' Tiborough asked.

'It was bound to come,' Custer said. 'But the number of people in the world who're filled with hate and frustration and violence has been growing with terrible speed. You add to that the enormous danger that this might fall into the hands of just one group or nation or ... ' Custer shrugged. 'This is too much power to be confined to one man or group with the hope they'll administer wisely. I didn't dare delay. That's why I spread this thing now and announced it as broadly as I could.'

Tiborough leaned back in his chair, his hands in his lap. His face was pale and beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead.

'We won't make it.'

'I hope you're wrong, Senator,' Custer said. 'But the only thing I know for sure is that we'd have had less chance of making it tomorrow than we have today.'