

# Liberty Wall

- I -

The President's plan was bold, far reaching, and America believed in it.

Everything was pretty cut and dry, and every single one of us working class stiffs could get behind it in a big way. They made it sound really simple, and excluding all of the politics and economic stuff and other stuff I don't really have a head for, it kinda was.

Just one big domestic initiative. An infrastructure so big it could feed everyone for years. It made the Hoover Dam look like a dredged canal out in the bay.

One big project. Hire everyone who could swing a hammer or walk a straight line. "Opportunities for All!" You couldn't escape the billboards and posters. As if they stopped talking about it in the news, you'd somehow forget. You couldn't forget it; things were working again. Even the naysayers who started off calling it "socialist witchcraft" got behind it when they realized how big the tax breaks were gonna be for their petrol investments.

Outside of the conspiracy nuts and privileged white art students, no one could find much fault in the program. At least, not enough fault to turn down the paycheck.

For so many of us trapped in the bad parts of the cities, those who were over-qualified and under-employed (you know, all of us), this was just like winning a lottery. Salaried contracts that would last a few years, benefits after we leave, vouchers for services, paychecks. We all felt the same way. Full fridges, finally. No more picking which bill to pay at the end of the month. This was going to pull us out of all our debts.

My brother-in-law David and I were on the first bus out of the Tennessee Valley as soon as we got the word we qualified. We didn't even unpack our documentation and paperwork until we were 100 miles in.

I'm not sure how everything happened so quick and easy. When the President introduced that big multi-media simulcast of "Project Liberty Wall", it was almost too much to take in at once. I could only imagine this sort of stuff must've already been on the back-burner. Somewhere between Operation SafeGuard and the TSA meltdown, they said. A lot of lobbying, a lot of incredible tax breaks for mining companies and the transportation industry. They practically couldn't ship blue collar down south fast enough.

This thing was big and it hit the ground running.

There was such a sudden change that the economy bounced back immediately; we could do no wrong. The world basically accepted we'd done the impossible, and we got our credit rating back up. I think we also ended up taking a Central American country while no one was looking.

Some of the less-learned workers from deeper in the 'burbs were asking about why no one was being sent North. We were able to straighten them out when we reminded them of that Jihadist attack that destroyed the reactors and wiped out most of Quebec.

All the cities along the border doubled and tripled in size. Skyscrapers went up in places like El Paso and Nogales. Each border town swelled up with legions of new workers as shipping and receiving logistics centers appeared everywhere. Some days I'd wake up in complete disbelief when buildings were built almost overnight. New Orleans suddenly had the world's largest shipping yard, becoming a metroplex in record time.

Transportation and labor laws got pretty loose and there might've been a few accidents, but hey, we were all getting fed. Foodcards (the stamp program that solved hunger for 40% of all American families) went double value in the company stores. Most nights you could see the miles and miles of headlights. They said they twinkled like stars if you saw 'em from low orbit.

It was considered the 9th wonder of the world once it was done. A continuous wall that ran for miles between Mexico and the US. Averaging between 15 and 20 feet high, wide enough for three men to run down. Occasional gates on major highways, with towers within eyesight of each other.

It was like a high tech modular version of the Great Wall of China, before part of it disappeared when Three Gorges dam went out.

I'll never get over seeing how fast things happen when the people are properly motivated. We had it completed way ahead of expectations.

All of the techie stuff got installed fast. With the way they had our work battalions set up, the entire grid was wired for power in a few weeks, instead of months.

Trenches, short retaining walls. This wide flat "clear zone" for yards on both sides. You could see people approaching from both sides for hundreds of yards. And with the motion sensors, cameras, low-lights, and infra-reds, it was almost too much. There'd be dry tests randomly down the wall during the tail end, and a jackrabbit couldn't take a dump in a bush without floods and lasers lighting it up almost instantly.

We used to joke the towers had sensors locked up inside of them that could hear someone think about looking at the wall, but mostly it looked like they just housed a few antennae and some weird electric grill looking things that must've been speakers or broadcast dishes. More than likely the garage on the bottom part of the tower didn't really carry much except for a small ATV and maybe some maintenance tools.

Around that time some guys the next tower over thought it was pretty cute to bring paintball markers to work. The second time they hit an animal, they were fired on the spot. They didn't even get a chance to pack their bags, they were on trains heading home so quickly. They even managed to outrun the rumours about them getting tossed in Fort Carson or some Navy Consolidated over it.

And then that was about it. One regular morning we all got calls, emails, texts. Same general announcement. We all got the same letter on the same HomSec/INS letterhead.

Liberty Wall was complete.

"We're all very proud of your work. We couldn't have done it without all of you patriotic hard-working citizens", blah blah, blah. All we knew was that we could go home now. We'd all go back to our families (if they hadn't moved down here with us), our old ways of life as mechanics and masons, fry cooks and bartenders. And we got to go home with full wallets and sizable pensions for us to either reinvest in the new technology we knew about, or just blow on very extended vacations.

We were given special scannable passcards that we could use to get access to our trusts, and we were all surprised by being told that while most of our contracts were over, they were instituting an immediate lottery for workers to join this new National Border Guard. Nothing really more than a public works department for Liberty Wall.

I was in before I knew it. I had a winning number, and it was all I could do to send for my kids and their mom. Maybe this new job would be enough to convince her to move down here. Maybe the loose talk about the separation would end.

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There was a lot of arguing over the phone for the next few days.

I was able to keep my mind off of it during training. They kept us incredibly busy. Push this button when this light flashes, go connect this if this light breaks. We were definitely glorified janitors and security guards. However, we all got basic firearms training and some range time, and really none of us thought anything of it. We kinda figured from the new uniforms and gear we were going to be some sort of patrol, and most of the guys in my group were hunters or operators before they even came down. So for us it just felt like part of the job. The top scoring guys got the fancier hardware. I placed well with a scoped bolt-action rifle that was not nearly as heavy as it looked.

After a few more nights of long talks, promises made, and apologies made, Sarah and the kids were on their way down. Outside of brief visits once every few months, I didn't get to see enough of them, and the idea of them seeing their daddy in uniform and being proud of him made my heart hurt something fierce. I didn't realize how badly I'd missed them until she told me they were on the train.

A different kind of hurt came rushing back ten times harder when I recognized her through the scope of my rifle days later.

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Give me a moment.

...

Okay, I need you to keep this whole thing intact. Everything from the beginning. I need someone else to know how this went down. People need to know how it started. People need to make sure this never happens again.

I don't want to be the only person who knows. I can't be the only one.

This needs to...

-II-

Can I just talk about Dave for a bit? I just need to backtrack for a moment.

Let me tell you about him, my brother-in-law. He was one of those guys who wouldn't shut up, but oh my god, when he had a bug up his ass...

Some sort of innocent slight against the family, and he would lose his mind. He became a psycho.

Man... that was him. Dave was such a...

Dave slapped his knee when he laughed. He was such a working class stiff.

He was that guy. Completely. He was all sorts of brothers. He'd take a bullet. No question.

That fucking laugh, man.

The last good talk we had before we became official company men was on the train heading south. I was lost in a daydream and that particular goofy noise that brought me back around. By the time I shook it off, the noise had faded pretty quickly into the cabin's clean and utilitarian walls.

I asked him what was on about and I admitted to him I was zoned out, kinda watching all of the new buildings and roads go by as I stared out the window of the train. Course, he was laughing at the fact that he called me on it, so that was pretty funny. His mood shifted a bit all of a sudden and I felt he wanted to talk about his sister and I. I didn't want to talk about it, it had been weighing too much on my mind for weeks.

He told me not to worry, that this big job was going to make her come around. "Oh I know her man, she's my sister." I knew her and I had a good idea I might've known her more than he did. Dave was always that sort of guy. He saw the good in everything that happened around him. He must've stole that from his sister. Definitely stole that from his parents. By stolen I meant that. He took it and never gave it back. Outside of him, the whole family was pretty dour. Which I'm thinking might be the problem here. I don't think Sarah's parents are saying the nicest of things about me. Sarah has a lot of faith in me, but she's also realistic, and after a string of dead end warehouse jobs, she was getting a little tired of moving.

The baby though. If it wasn't for our daughter Susan, the fighting probably would've been a lot more intense. I definitely would've been drinking a hell of a lot more. No matter how angry we got, we just couldn't bring ourselves to be nasty around our kid.

At least we have her. The kid kept us together pretty well for an 8 year old, strangely enough. I was hoping the job will just make things a little more solid around the house. Susan deserved a classroom full of friends that didn't have to change every year.

Dave kept trying to talk to me. He kinda stammered and murmured something, got quiet for a bit, and I guess he eventually figure out to give up. Which was good, I wasn't in the mood. I'd rather stare out into the world and focus more on the future than on the past.

The rest of the train ride was pretty awkward, but at least with the new engines it was a short trip. Dave knew enough to let me have my space while we got sorted out and bunked up, but once we started swinging hammers on a regular basis, I was able to lighten up and start talking again. Course, once the hammers stopped, things got even uglier, and we almost got ourselves fired. I'm not going to speak ill of the dead, and I apologize for digressing like that.

After the build ended and we won into the Security side of things, it was like that night didn't happen. At least for Dave. I never really let it go.

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Right. The security detail...

We had a pretty good buzz going right away. Lottery winners such as myself got these nice new uniforms. Standard SWAT style BDUs in weird slightly off blue that we got used to pretty quick. Lots of white ceramic plates, straps and buckles.

We thought it was going to be difficult keeping them tidy, but even the guys who ended up down on the ground for shifts noticed that everything was impregnated with something that made dirt kinda just slide off easy.

The armour plating was very light and slightly flexible, and with how the helmet seemed to almost lock down into the breastplates, they made us feel almost like futuristic versions of those guys from old England with the horses and the swords.

Even our firearms and batons were mostly white.

The stuff was high tech, definitely. The guns had this thick plastic and enamel paint job that made them feel like they should've shot lasers, but instead they used this weird off-calibre round that French cops from the EU use, I think. We even got our hands on other crazy stuff, like these pocket smart-cells with flexible screens we could mount to our wrists or helmets, and these killer neck cuffs that had a few lights and buttons on them that allowed us to talk to each other over long distances. The audio and mics were so good discussions between guys a few towers away sounded like they were standing right next to you. Heavier than they

should've been though, and the battery packs seemed a little too big. They also had a habit of binding into your torso harness and helmet if you scrunched your neck the wrong way.

After the first day guys were fixing to wear them around their shoulders, but any time a supervisor saw them do that, they got into some serious shit. Things got to the point where they were pretty draconian about the whole thing.

Since no one likes doing PT out in the desert, we all just kinda dealt with them and wore them like clockwork. That and the computer voice it used for incoming transmissions was very easy on the ears, and some guys got to flirting with it, not that it got anything more than a few laughs from our guys sitting near 'em. All in all we felt like bad asses. Like we stepped right out of that Robocop remake from a year or so ago.

Things got... weird. And quick.

We had all of this high tech stuff, but our ability to talk to our friends and families started getting less and less reliable. Cell phones had a bad time connecting no matter where on the wall you were. SkypeNet got throttled more and more. It got to the point where you could barely stay awake long enough for DiaPlus to load up your friend's timeline.

It got noticeably worse within days. Suddenly we were starting to get cut off from the rest of the world, and we weren't happy about it. HomeSec said it was due to a lot of the towers housing these "invasion" countermeasures. Word around the campfire was the shielding on them wasn't as up and up as they were supposed to be. You know how it is though, lowest bidder wins.

They also started getting stricter and harsher with us. Every few days there was a new rule or operations guideline. It was hard enough to keep track that many of us were losing our vacation time on a regular basis. Some of us were starting to go for days without hearing from our families, and weeks without seeing their faces, even when they were local. Being disconnected was getting to us, and it was getting to us quick.

Everyone was getting jumpy about something, all of the time. I hear a grey market started for liquor. But I'm god fearing, I don't drink.

Everything just kept snowballing pretty quickly. Bad things everywhere.

After a weekend of bunks emptying, people got the message. A lot of us felt the whole cut-off thing was only temporary, and eventually cooler heads prevailed and we could start agreeing that even if we couldn't check our emails every day, it was better than not having a job anymore.

I got worried when I started hearing rumours about outbursts and FoodCards suddenly just not working for a day or two. Even at HomeSec's worst though, they're not going to starve people. We were Americans. They would never let us go hungry.

Then again, after the very last State of the Union address we had, the one that

started The Panic, I really don't put anything past them anymore. Once a government hits murder, then nothing is off the table anymore.

- III -

Just like that, everything went from real bad to absolutely fucked. It started off as another regular day, with the only real difference in the start of the day was during breakfast our cell phones and all of our net connections just stopped working.

That didn't stand out, not for a second. Looking back, we thought we got it figured out. That was the moment the game changed. Well, no. A lot of people said that for a while, and some people might even still believe it. But they either can't figure it out, or they don't want to. It wasn't the loss of contact, it was when the Compliancy model was activated.

That penultimate loss of freedom. Those little blinking lights. The smell of the first one that goes off. That's when the game changed.

We didn't know if it was a drill or not, but without warning an alert went out near the tail end of breakfast, all hands on deck. We locked and loaded as quick as our best times, and we all hit our positions on the wall.

I looked down from the wall and saw David, where he was stationed operating one of the hybrid ATV scouts.

Weirdly, he looked up at the same time, and we caught each other. He smiled and winked at me, but I saw his face changing when he looked away. I could only imagine how dark my face must've looked at the moment. It felt as black as pitch. I'm sure he saw it.

Klaxons, lights, the whole thing. All of the weird antennae and shutters extended on all of the towers. The garages opened and all of the vehicles poured out. Somewhere right in the middle of the day, after only a few minutes of warning, we were battle ready. We had no idea what was coming, but we knew it was big. All of the towers and troops as far as I could see across the entire valley were standing active. If this was a drill, this was going to be one that would take hours to reset from, what with having to put all of the weapons and armour away.

Suddenly, from each of our collars, the towers, and our wrist units, first the Seal of the US, then the Presidential Seal, and then the announcement in all of its flat hologram glory.

The President made the announcement. The grimmest of events in our country's history. I don't think a single man in that valley was breathing as he continued.

The President was very calm and collected. I think there might've even been a tear in his eye. I don't know, those images were pretty lossy. Oh but his voice, I will never forget how crystal-clear his voice sounded.

He said what he needed to say, the video feed ended, and then The Panic hit.

We could practically hear the screams of outrage and doom coming from every city across the country.

I will give credit to the men of our battalion that almost none of the men broke rank. I saw a few go into "at ease". I definitely saw quite a few relax the grips on their tools and reach for their phones. None of them worked period. Dead bricks in our hands. Some men fell to their knees, but those men at least stayed very, very quiet.

At least at that point we knew right away, somehow, without any real logical explanation as to why we all knew at once, that we had to be quiet.

Our attention immediately fell back on our training and our duties as soon as we heard the first explosion farther down the wall, somewhere near another vehicle.

We planted our feet, brought our weapons up to attention, and we were ready to operate as soon as we could acquire target.

We meticulously scanned the horizon, and saw no movement. The explosion echoing in the distance was felt like an anomaly- until there was another one, closer on the other side, causing us to go into high alert. We were ready for all Hell to break loose.

Silently, very silently, the thin report of automatic machine gun fire slowly and increasingly drifted towards us. At first we couldn't tell where it was coming from because of how it echoed across the valley, but eventually we realized it was coming from the farther side of the mountains that cradled us.

Our collars blinked to life, and as lights switched from green to red, they barked small moments of static, and then they seemed to buzz with a sharp energy.

It steadily grew louder, like thunder in the distance, and then we heard the unmistakable sound of artillery fire from one of the towers East of us.

Or West of us.

And here's a weird thing -- I remember so much about that day, but I don't remember which way the fighting started from. The sun was in the wrong position, and with the stress of the situation, I could barely tell what was up or down. All I knew was "in front".

I damn near jumped over the barricade and ran for it when the tower next to me came online.

Dishes rotated into position, bulky oblong cannons that looked like plastic whales with glowing blue teeth drew their full lengths into the still air. We could smell the ozone and hear the crackling.

Suddenly the my comm collar let out this weird noise. It was some sort of frequency static, like some sort of white noise, and it got loud, I mean like it almost hurt.

Then the cannon I was staring at just fired, with this brilliant flash that left some sort of glowing in the air, like the opposite of the inside of an electric toaster.

I understood what the sound from the collar was doing. It came to me when I realized that after the cannon fired I could still hear everything around me as clear as day.

Off in the distance I saw one of the blue cannons from the tower down the wall, and watched as there was no beam or projectile, just that weird glow and then nothing. A few hundred yards away I noticed it. The movement got my attention. I guess with being a sniper now, small movements from far away kinda get my attention.

It was as if the trees and bushes across the clearance zone seemed to be hit with the swiftly moving cough of a small god. They bended incredulously for just a moment, and then slowly straightened themselves out.

The moans came first. Something was in the bushes. A little further off, inhuman screams.

Not constant screams like the battle cry of an approaching army, but the sudden and frantic anquished screams, the short high-pitched bark of the mortally wounded.

And the moaning.

- IV -

At this point the machine gun turrets came to life, swinging their barrels back once or twice in a quick movement of target acquisition.

The guns fired until they barrels practically glowed. Then they would pause unnaturally until they cooled down for a while. Then the cannons would fire again, doing that weird ghostly launching of something powerful and invisible.

Like clockwork, the guns would take their turn a few times winding up and cooling down, and then the cannon launching. Eventually and at different times the turrents would start beeping in defiance and settle down into their locked positions.

Like weird and ugly bull terriers, they sat quietly, waiting for operators to come around and reload their ammo pods.

Training prepared me to move instantly. I immediate set up at a bench position and loaded a round into my rifle, and looked into the scope. At the same time I heard the ATVs disengage from their parked position, and start tearing down the range towards the trees and outcroppings.

The collars didn't do that constant chatter thing like they did in the movies and games. No one said anything. We sat in defensive response positions until the ATVs could recon. Without hesitation I started looking for David's unit.

Just like him, he was one of the farthest ones, racing to get a first glimpse at the horrors awaiting us.

A single rivulet of sweat ran down the side of my neck as I zeroed in the scope, watching every moment of Dave's approach.

He stopped short from a clump of bushes, and he and his wingman lept quickly from their vehicle and approached the edge of the clearing with their SMGs at the ready.

They stopped. They stopped dead in their tracks. I couldn't see what was in front of them. I couldn't see Dave's face, but I could tell by the sudden rigidity of his body that something was very, very wrong.

I saw his partner move first, he dropped he shoulders down, curved his body tightly against his weapon, and fired into the bushes.

Dave snapped out of his shock, and as the echoing of gunfire hit us, I saw David lurch swing his weapon at the man next to him, knocking him off target and sending him sprawling into the dirt.

The look of utter dismay ran across the other soldier's face. He screamed something at my brother in law, got up on one knee, and continued to fire at whatever was in front of him.

A body fell clumsily out of the bushes in front of him, I caught only a momentary glimpse of what looked like rotting and decaying flesh. Or something horribly burned and mangled. I only caught a twisted limb as it landed in the high weeds.

I could hear David's anguished cry, and as I brought my view back to the men, I saw David open fire on his mate, sprays of gore blossoming in the air as rounds tore through the man on his knees.

I couldn't feel my heart.

- V -

Numb with shock.

Another body lurched out of the bushes. All I saw was teeth and claws and movement.

Instinct kicked in and I pulled the trigger, sending a .50 PLUS round down range at nearly the speed of sound.

Whatever was menacing Dave disappeared from the floating ribs up in a thick cloud of gore.

Dave hesitated, firing once or twice wildly into the bushes. But movement came from everywhere.

Dave, seeing something far worse than I could imagine, clumsily fell back,

tripping over the under-bush, and smacking his head against the ATV.

I pressed my fingers to my collar, key'd into Dave on speedtag, and I yelled at him to run.

Suddenly the cannon fired again, the bushes shook, and Dave lurched to his feet. He swayed and shook his head. Realizing what he was leaning on, he climbed higher, his feet planted on the rack and the gas tank of the four wheeled piece of armor.

Releasing his SMG and letting it swing down and out of the way, he grabbed the heavy cannon.

Another ATV raced to his location.

Tearing his attention from the bushes, his screams of fury echoed in the same frequency as the molten hot engines of the vehicles skidding through the grass towards him. David reracked and reloaded the Stoner/Browning Hellfire, swung it in a deadly arc.

He bore down on the approaching teammates with the sure stance of a death dealer. A man in absolution, killing as freely as a god.

The ATV careened out of control, spilling the two riders bodily into the dirt. As the vehicle rolled to a stop, the driver was gunned down in a hail of bullets from Dave. The other rider opened fire, and managed to hit my brother-in-law once on the thigh. Dave did not so much as flinch from his course as he ripped the survivor in half with a thousand slivers of synthetic poly rounds.

I called out to Dave again over the comm, screaming over and over again, screaming for his attention.

As he brought his hand up to his collar to respond, I noticed every light on his collar was blinking and red.

His hand stopped, I saw him listen to some sort of command only he could hear, and I swear to god he was looking right at me as his collar detonated.

As his headless body slowly sank to the ground, I saw the limbs and claws of monstrous shapes find their ways out of the shadows and deep bushes and roots.

My body on automatic, I felt my arm go through the motions of reloading. I froze just as I was about to finish decisively gliding the action forward.

My collar gently beeped once and intoned:

"Incoming Foot Tangos. Comply with orders or face execution."

The first visible tango was a mess of flesh. Flesh that barely hung on to its skeleton. Every inch of this barely alive creature horribly purpled and twisted.

This creatures were alive, and falling apart from massive injuries that could only be caused by the disruption cannons in the towers.

Sonic waves of atomic particles driven into the specific proteins found only in warm blooded creatures. Leaving all soft tissues sonically ruptured. Cellular destruction at the speed of sound.

I felt one of my crowns snap under the tightened anguish of my clenched jaw, what ever this is was an abomination. This was the mewling face of a humanity driven blind with the madness of pain, and still able to move forward with every agonizing lurch forward.

Clockwork. Chromed fabrications effortlessly gliding across newtonian level smoothness. Another .50 PLUS round. A metal nest for the birth of another phantom. A kinetic explosion that made things just never be there anymore.

I called out the name of someone's god as I pulled the trigger. The pad of my finger. The trigger. The straight squeeze back.

"The operator and the machine became as one, as always each time. One purpose."

I exhale as I hear the litany.

The visible tango is down.

I see movement. Training takes over.

I breathe as I was trained.

The visible tango is down.

Movement. Breathe. Down

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I am three magazines in, and there is a mound of dead flesh piling up in the shallow crotch of boulders choking off a natural river a few hundred yards in front of me.

My shoulder aches from the abuse. I am holding the line against them as I wait for the clear signal. My arm burns in agony as I can't stop firing at every pale and blue eye I see come out into the setting sun.

Everything I have. Open purpose. Unstopping.

I felt my held breath die in my chest as I watched the face of my wife emerge from the bushes.

She was alive. She was hurt badly from a grazing gun wound. She was very very

frightened, but very very much alive. She was also holding our daughter against her chest.

She fell to her knees and screamed. My hand froze for the first time in a lifetime.

Just as the wind carried her voice to me, my heart broke.

Then the turrets next to me started spinning.

My collar beeped in warning.

Time stopped. I saw the tears in her eyes from hundreds of yards away.

I watched as a leaf gently float past her face, casting a shadow across her.

My mind latched on to the shadow, realizations burned a bolt of lightning into my brain.

I watched the leaf land in the grass. The wind whipped Sarah's beautiful long hair across her face and the face of our child.

I watched as she took in another breath, and my eyes pulled themselves away from her face just for a moment as I looked at the sun.

All this time, I didn't know. I never noticed. All this time. How did it escape us until today?

Our guns, our weapons, our troops.

Liberty Walls faced inward.

My collar started screaming it's shielding frequency, and the cannons started to glow.

9/11/11 (7/7/12)