

SHADOW GOVERNMENT

a two – act political drama

by Jack Adler

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Shadow Government – A Play In Two Acts by Jack Adler

Act I

Set: Spacious living room of an apartment with two facing couches, a rectangular coffee table with magazines and a laptop computer on top. A small bookcase stands off toward one side, flanked by two chairs. There's an alcove for the kitchen in the rear of the stage which serves as a bar counter.

The time is late afternoon around the cocktail hour.

At rise: Sue, mid-twenties, is resetting magazines on the coffee table in an orderly fashion. Eric, around 30, is watching her while Stan, also around 30, is looking at a book.

ERIC

Relax, Sue, it's just Sam, our interesting landlord, coming for cocktails, not the Secretary General of the United Nations.

SUE

Just tidying up.

STAN

(moving to the bar counter to look at a small array of liquor bottles.)
We don't even know if Sam drinks.

ERIC

(with extra meaning)
There's a lot we don't know about Sam.

SUE

Which we're going to find out.

(They hear a knock. Sue goes to open the unseen door at the left side of the stage. Sam Halaz, a man in his mid forties, enters the apartment.)

SAM

Am I too early?

SUE

Not at all. Please sit. Make yourself comfortable.
(Sam sits on one of the couches, and looks around)

SAM

I haven't been up here since you moved in.
It all looks very nice.

ERIC

Thanks. Sue has great skills as an interior
decorator.

SUE

(she sits on the same couch as Sam)
Hardly.

STAN

She's available to go over your apartment
if you'd like.

ERIC

(smiling)
It won't look the same afterwards.

STAN

(not smiling)
Hide all your tools. And whatever else
you want hidden.

SUE

(she gives Sam a warm look while showing
her legs)
Come on, guys, don't put Sam on the spot.

SAM

That's okay.
(to Sue)
Thanks. No need right now but I'll keep that
in mind.
(pause)
It's very nice for you to invite me up. Not all

the tenants do something like this.

ERIC

We're not conventional tenants.

STAN

To say the least.

SUE

But we're normal, more or less. So, Sam, what would you like to drink?

ERIC

We have scotch, bourbon, gin, vodka, beer and wine.

STAN

But is there any foreign blend you prefer?

SAM

A beer would be fine. I'm not much of a drinker.

(Sue gets up, goes into the kitchen, and brings back a tray of beer bottles, glasses, and napkins. They all take a bottle, glass, and napkin.)

SAM

So you all drink beers, too?

ERIC

Why not? We're roommates, aren't we?

STAN

We're very glad there was no problem in our moving in.

SAM

No problem.

ERIC

After all, we're two guys and a girl. Not married.

SUE

I'm not married to either of them and they're not married to each other.

ERIC

A useful clarification.

SAM

None of my business.

ERIC

That's good. We were afraid it might offend your sensibilities.

STAN

(he makes a point of turning over the book he was reading so its cover title could be read by Sam who takes a quick look and then swiftly withdraws his glance)
You know, coming from a different culture, different country.

SAM

(defensively)
I've been in the U.S. for over twenty years. I'm originally from Lebanon, but I'm a citizen now..

ERIC

Over the years, what has most surprised you about the United States?

SAM

That's easy. The freedom. To speak. Move around. Work.

SUE

So you don't think we're decadent?

SAM

(puzzled)

Why would I think that?

SUE

(shrugging)

I don't know. Some people from the Middle East don't care for our more permissive culture.

STAN

All the sex in movies and tv. Drugs. Crime.

SAM

This is my country. I take it as it is.

ERIC

Good answer.

STAN

Very good answer. But if you could, what would you most like to change?

SAM

Questions like that.

(pause)

I'm sorry. But am I being interviewed?

ERIC

(giving Stan a reproofing look)

Of course not. Just getting to know you.

SUE

(sliding a bit closer on the couch))

Stop picking on Sam.

ERIC

Well, we live in such an age of suspicion.

You might think we were a bunch of radical activists or something of the sort.

STAN

Which we're not.

ERIC

And you might think we were up to no good.

STAN

Even operating a terrorist cell. Making bombs.
Planning assassinations. Sending suspicious
envelopes.

SUE

Horrible things.

ERIC

Even worse: planning the overthrow of the
republic.

(Sam seems nonplussed by this litany)

SUE

Let up, guys! You're putting Sam on edge
with your babble.

(to Sam)

Don't let them get to you. They're terrible.

(she shakes her head at her roommates' antics.)

SAM

(smiling at Sue)

No, no. I'm okay. We do live in strange times.

ERIC

(standing

That's right. The Patriot Act and all the government
security agencies. You practically need a scorecard
to keep up with them.

STAN

We're reasonable people. You can have a drink
with us. No hidden cameras or tape recorders.

SAM

(involuntarily, he glances around)

I never would have thought of such things.

Never.

SUE

Thank you.

ERIC

Much relieved.

STAN

But you should know that Eric is
a carnivore.

ERIC

(patting his stomach)
Guilty as charged. I like to eat meat. But don't
worry, Sam, I don't turn into a werewolf at a
full moon. You'll leave here weighing the same
as when you came.

SUE

We watch Eric closely.

(Sam isn't sure how to take this badinage.)

STAN

He's very well behaved. Most of the time.

ERIC

I haven't done anything beastly in years.

SUE

(touching Sam's shoulder in friendly way)
Sam, they're teasing you.

SAM

(more at ease; smiling to show he understands
they're joking)
I know.

ERIC

(raising his glass)
Toast. To multi-cultural harmony and
understanding landlords.
(They all sip their beers.)
You're probably curious about our relationships.

SUE

Don't be afraid to ask.

SAM

No... no.

STAN

Sam, it's normal. Two guys, one girl.
Who uses the bathroom first in the morning?

ERIC

Who cleans the bathroom.

SUE

And sundry other things.

(But Sam is obviously embarrassed)

ERIC

All incredibly shocking and immoral.

SUE

(shaking her head as she regards Sam)
They're pulling your leg, Sam.

STAN

(to Sam)
Do you know that expression?

ERIC

Of course he does! What do you think
after twenty years?

SUE

(crossing her legs decorously)
I apologize for my silly roommates.

SAM

(his eyes on her legs)
No, no....I understand they're kidding.

ERIC

You know what we do. I'm an editor at
a publisher of academic books for middle
school students. Stan teaches history at
high school, and Sue is a high priced call
girl who supports us.

SUE

He's kidding. I work as a buyer for a

department store.

SAM

I know.

ERIC

Of course. He checked us all out before we moved in.

STAN

Somehow it isn't fair. We don't get to check out the landlords.

SAM

But you're paying rent, not me. Anyway, what would you like to know about a landlord? You know I'm from Lebanon.

ERIC

Oh, just the salient facts.

STAN

You know, just the usual. Taxpayer, good family man, patriotic

SAM

I pay my taxes. I'm single, and I'm as patriotic as the next man.

ERIC

Which calls into question who's the next man.

SAM

(taken aback by the comment)
What?

ERIC

(quickly moving on)
Other than being a success in real estate, what other work do you do?

SUE

Inquiring minds would like to know if it isn't being too intrusive.

STAN

But we don't need your social security number
or your annual salary or income.

SAM

I work for a charity.

STAN

Oh, really? Which one?

SAM

The Middle Eastern Educational Association.

STAN

That's sounds imposing.

SAM

We do charitable work like buying books,
computers, and other educational tools for
schools in the Middle East.

SUE

Very laudable, but not for madrassahs I hope.
You know, the religious schools. Where you
just memorize the Koran.

SAM

Oh, no. Just secular schools.
(pause when the others seem uncertain)
I'm not a Muslim. I'm a Christian.

ERIC

We didn't ask.

STAN

That would be bad manners.
(pause)
But thanks for your candor.

SUE

But since religion entered the conversation.
Here's the straight poop on us.
Eric is Protestant, Stan is Catholic or says

he is, and I'm Jewish, but not very

SUE (cont'd)
religious. A very ecumenical group,
you must admit.

STAN
That's what she says, but I've seen her
praying.

SUE
I was stooped over cleaning up your mess.
(Stan smiles guiltily.)

SAM
Please: whatever you are, you are.

STAN
Can't go wrong with that philosophy.

ERIC
(standing as if pondering whether to ask
his question)
Are you the director of this association?

SAM
Me? No. I'm not that important.

SUE
Oh, don't be so modest, Sam.
I'm sure you're important.

STAN
That's right. Don't downplay yourself.

SAM
I do my job.

ERIC
Right. That's all we can do.

SUE
Do you get to travel to these countries?

SAM
(a little apprehensive)

No.

SUE

But I'm sure you're in contact with the schools. Emails. Phone.

SAM

(shrugs)
Sometimes.

STAN

Were you educated in Lebanon? Or here?

SAM

I graduated from school in Lebanon. I came to the U.S. as a young man, and went to work.

ERIC

(nodding with approval)
And done very well.

STAN

A model of assimilation.

SUE

A proud record.

SAM

(unimpressed by these accolades)
Why do you want to know all this?
I'm not applying for a job.
(he laughs and the others join in)

STAN

We're just curious.

ERIC

You can ask us the same questions.
We're an open book.

SUE

(standing and making a time-out signal with her hands)
Time-out. Don't besiege Sam like this.

He's our guest.

(Sue gives Sam a sympathetic look)

SUE

Sam, would you like another beer?

SAM

No thanks. I'm fine.

ERIC

Mea culpa, Sam. Didn't mean to besiege you.

STAN

Actually, to change the subject, Sue does most of the cooking. She's a fabulous cook.

ERIC

Yes, you should let her come down to your apartment and cook you something. What's your favorite meal? From the old country?

SAM

I eat American food now.

SUE

Of course. Remember: Sam is fully assimilated. (Sue looks at Sam for corroboration; he doesn't react)

ERIC

Stan is too modest to tell you, Sam. But he's working on a book. A historical book.

SAM

Really. What's it about?

STAN

(standing and deliberating before replying)
Well, you might find the subject not to your taste.

SUE

Fair warning, Sam: you might be shocked.

ERIC

Keep an open mind.

STAN

It's a history of farting.

SAM

(trying to suppress his laughter)

You're serious?

STAN

Yes. Bodily emissions have been looked at differently through the ages. It's a legitimate historical subject calling for extensive research.

SAM

I didn't mean ...

STAN

I understand. Some people find the subject offensive, but I'll persevere.

SUE

Stan is committed.

ERIC

The book won't appeal to everyone. But you seem very liberated.

STAN

Are you a liberal, Sam? Do you vote Republican? Democrat? Splinter party?

SUE

(critical)

Oh, Stan. What a question!

SAM

That's okay. I don't mind.

ERIC

That is liberated, and thanks for not being disturbed. Stan does ask leading questions.

STAN

Mea culpa.

ERIC

But since the subject came up, let me ask:
do you belong to the tea party, though you
don't seem the type?

SUE

Don't interrogate our guest.

ERIC

What interrogation! Just a friendly chat.
Right, Sam?

SAM

(uncertainly)
Yes.

SUE

I think it's time we tell Sam the truth.

STAN

Yes. You're right.

(Eric nods while Sam awaits the
explanation)

SUE

We have an ulterior purpose in inviting
you up here.

ERIC

Nothing ominous.

STAN

And we did want to get to know you better.

SUE

Share a friendly drink and lively conversation.

STAN

We're working on a new and different kind
of video game.

SUE

It's about politics. It's called Shadow

Government.

SAM

Shadow? What makes it a shadow? I don't understand.

ERIC

It's simple. You, the player, become the government. The government behind the government.

STAN

That's the challenge of the game.

SUE

And the charm.

SAM

I still don't understand.

ERIC

(to friends)

Oh, dear, are we being too subtle?

SUE

Look at it this way, Sam. When you vote you influence national policy, right?

STAN

You do vote, don't you, Sam?

SAM

Yes, yes, of course.

ERIC

Well, with this game, you decide national policy. In theory.

SUE

Which is still a great responsibility.

STAN

Really awesome if you think about it.

ERIC

(moving around he slams a fist from one

hand into the palm of his other hand)

ERIC (cont'd)

That's right! You're behind the scenes and yielding a powerful force.

STAN

For good or bad.

SUE

For progress or repression.

ERIC

We feel this game can make a big difference in how the country is run.

SUE

(giving Sam a conspiratorial look)
Said he, modestly.

STAN

It will give citizens like yourself a chance to vent their unhappiness with things. So many crises, wars, debts, ...you name it.

ERIC

You can help in being a problem solver.

STAN

Your insights will help our real leaders.

STAN

Who need all the help they can get.

SUE

You see, Sam, the game will be another facet of our democracy.

STAN

Sure, consider it like a video game initiative.

SAM

A what?

SUE

Just a way for people to innocently blow

off steam.

STAN

There are things you feel strongly about,
aren't there?

SAM

(confused)
I suppose.

ERIC

There you go!

SUE

We figured you were a forthright citizen.

STAN

Not a raving activist but someone who cares
about the condition and direction of his country.

SUE

Your chosen country.

SAM

I care.

SUE

(inching closer to Sam)
Of course you do.

ERIC

And you can be sure the politicians will
pay attention to what you, Citizen Sam
and others like you, say.

STAN

In a sense you'll be doing your patriotic
duty.

SUE

And you'll also be helping us decide on
what questions and issues to use in the
game.

ERIC

We're still in the planning stage, so bear

with us.

SUE

We can't show you the game on tv ... yet.

STAN

But soon.

SAM

(mulling it over)

When will this game be available?

STAN

We hope to roll it out in less than a year.
Just applying the final touches, which is
where you can play a big part.

SAM

I'll try.

SUE

We knew we could count on you.

ERIC

We're getting financing from all quarters.
Even abroad. You'd be surprised who some
of the backers are.

SUE

Important people. But they ask for anonymity.
You understand?

SAM

Yes, I understand that.

(pause)

But tell me, why do you call the game shadow?
Sounds so strange.

STAN

Marketing. Sales. You know, the American
way.

ERIC

Promotion. Gotta do it.

SUE

Always necessary. But we have the budget.

SAM

I see. Have to let people know.

ERIC

(getting up and standing like a master
of ceremonies)

Now let's play. We're doing the voice part
first. The video portion will come later.

STAN

You like politics, don't you?

SAM

(shaking his head)
Not too much.

ERIC

Perfect, then! That's exactly what we need.
Someone who can react to the choices in the
game without foreknowledge.

STAN

Which doesn't mean we think you're ignorant.

SUE

Far from it.

ERIC

Not at all. We think you're highly sensible.
Obviously.

SAM

Well, I

SUE

We're really depending on you.
But you have to get into the spirit
of the game.

SAM

If I can.

SUE

We're very grateful.

ERIC

(to Sue)

Don't slobber over Sam. He'll think you're trying to seduce him.

(Sam is embarrassed; Sue isn't)

SUE

Sam, you're cute, but not my type.

ERIC

Okay, the game, folks, the game.

(he has their attention)

Now you should understand that the premise of this game is for players to have to decide on critical issues of the day.

STAN

We're sure you have opinions, right?

SAM

Of course. I have opinions, but I told you I'm not political.

STAN

Relax, Sam. That's fine.

ERIC

Great! Now, for example, the issue of immigration.

STAN

You emigrated, right?

SUE

From Lebanon, you said.

SAM

Many years ago. I told you: I'm a citizen.

ERIC

Yes, we know. But you can relate to the subject.

(Sam shrugs)

ERIC

So let's say there's a bill in Congress which would deny citizenship to all immigrants for a period of five years?

ERIC

The bill is designed to keep American strictly American.

SUE

Let's say you have a typical immigrant come before you and make a plea.

STAN

We'll simulate what we might have on the video portion later.

(stands and hunches his shoulder over and simulates a look of distress)

Please, ladies and gentlemen, I can't go back to my country. I'll be killed as a political dissident. I have no job. All my possessions have been confiscated.

SUE

It's a pitiful but representative case.

ERIC

How would you vote?

SAM

(after a little thought)

It sounds ... very harsh.

ERIC

So that's a no vote?

SAM

(reluctantly)

Yes.

SUE

(with a smile for Sam)

He's got the hang of it.

STAN

How about abortion? Suppose the game said there was a bill in Congress to make abortion, any kind of abortion at any time, illegal?

SUE

(pressing couch pillow to her abdomen to simulate pregnancy as she preens before Sam)

You know, overthrow Roe versus Wade?

(Sam nods that he understands)

ERIC

Big issue. Lots of emotion on both sides.

STAN

This game lets us create whatever bill we want.

SAM

I see.

SUE

The game calls upon you to take a stand, but you don't have to tell us if you don't want to.

ERIC

You can vote your conscience or pretend you have some special interest to serve.

SUE

You know about all of the special interests?

(Sam nods again)

STAN

Voting your conscience is much easier in the game. But you can use your imagination to show you're beholden to some special interest. God knows, there's lots of them.

SUE
We try to be realistic.

SAM
(without hesitation)
I think a woman's body is her own.

STAN
Great! So you'd vote against the bill?

(Sam nods)

ERIC
Bravo!

SUE
Good for you. Glad you're pro-life.

SAM
No, I think abortion is wrong. I just don't like the government telling women, and families what to do.

STAN
So, by implication, you're against the government intruding on personal rights?

SAM
On this, yes.

ERIC
Where do you think the government is right in taking away personal liberties?

SUE
Oh, don't pin Sam down.

ERIC
Sorry.

SAM
That's okay, but I don't know how to answer

that question.

STAN

Yes, we know. It's complicated.

SUE

Depends on the individual right.

(to Sam)

The Bill of Rights doesn't cover everything, does it?

SAM

Well, I -

STAN

(interrupting he jumps up with sudden emotion while keeping Sam on the defensive).

Do you think they keep finding new rights not in the Constitution?

ERIC

Lots of politicians think so.

SAM

I don't know. I don't know about these things.

SUE

(calming Sam)

No problem. You're doing fine.

ERIC

But it would be nice, wouldn't it, to have a society where everything was clear?

STAN

Orderly.

SAM

I suppose.

ERIC

You'd vote for that, wouldn't you?"

SUE

In the game.

SAM

I think so.

ERIC

Good.

STAN

Here's a toughie. There's a bill in Congress that allows any publication or type of entertainment the freedom to make images of any religious figure.

ERIC

You understand the significance? That would include Mohammed.

SUE

Which is really the point as Muslims take exception to Mohammed's name and image being used.

STAN

Especially if done in an irreverent manner.

ERIC

You know about the cartoons in Danish newspapers, Salmon Rushdie's book, and other incidents?

SAM

I know the background. I haven't been living in a cave.

ERIC

Of course, Sam. Just want to make sure.

SAM

No religion should be made fun of.

STAN

But if images of Christ can be used, why not Mohammed?

SUE

That's the issue.

ERIC

It's up to you to vote.

SAM

Then I will. I'll vote against this bill.
Respect for all religions. I'm for that.

(the trio exchange a glance)

SUE

Kudos.

ERIC

Yes. Way to go, Sam.

STAN

The game also has decisions to be made
on some odd issues.

ERIC

You might find them bizarre.

SUE

Even humorous. We want players
to have a good time.

SAM

That's good.

STAN

But you have to keep an open mind.

(Sam nods)

ERIC

One bill in the game is about
medical care. It calls for repeal
of Obamacare.

STAN

You have medical insurance, right?

SAM

Yes. Of course.

STAN

How do you feel about Obamacare?

SAM

We need good medical care.

STAN

Was that a pro or con vote?

SUE

Shouldn't sit on the fence in this game.
Let it all out. Establish your persona.

SAM

Okay. I'm for it. I'd vote against repeal.

STAN

Doesn't it feel liberating to determine
your stance on key issues?

(Sam doesn't respond)

SUE

The game also has marvelous psychological
implications.

(Sam nods in cursory fashion.)

ERIC

Sam, you're going great.

SUE

(with a warm look)
Very helpful.

ERIC

Okay, moving on. One of the bills we came
up with would be about some new medical
procedures which we made intentionally
controversial..

SUE

Be prepared. But keep in mind that science moves on, right?

SAM

Yes. Of course.

ERIC

Now, this is going to sound weird. Imagine that a miniature camera-like instrument has been developed that can be inserted into the penis.

SAM

(Sam stares at Sue)
What!

SUE

It's science, or pseudo science, and I'm not embarrassed.

STAN

We warned you.

ERIC

And this penile camera would allow doctors to explore a woman's uterus at the same time they're making love to the lady. Of course, the woman, if she's just a patient, might just think of it as just another preventive procedure.

STAN

Two stones at one throw. Very efficient.

SUE

The procedure would be called a penisocopy. But you have to practice saying this.

STAN

Doesn't roll off the tongue.

SUE

(moving her mouth muscles)
Penis ...os ... scopy. Try it.

(Sam shakes his head)

ERIC

You can practice in front of a mirror if you like. But now the Senate and the country await your vote. Would you be in favor of such a procedure? To be paid for by Medicare?

SUE

Only to be permitted with the woman's consent.

SAM

(unsure of how serious the others are)
Is this serious?

ERIC

We warned you it might sound odd.

STAN

Assume it's serious. There's a principle involved.

SAM

I don't know. It does sound very weird. Is such a thing even possible?

STAN

Could be.

ERIC

We have to be open to new developments, Sam. Don't you agree?

SAM

Yes, yes, of course.

SUE

So, your vote?

SAM

No. I'd have to vote no.
What woman would accept that?

SUE

If she thought she was seriously ill
and this was a good way to learn what
was wrong with her.

STAN

And if she was horny.
(as everyone stares at him)
Sorry. I couldn't resist that.

ERIC

A thoughtful vote, despite all the time
limitations involved.

SUE

This game makes people think, and
without a lot of time to ponder.

ERIC

Okay. Let's get back to what we know
is happening. Sam, how do you feel about
the U.S. trying to make other countries
have a democratic form of government?

STAN

We've been doing that, you know.

SUE

Hasn't always worked out.

SAM

The U.S. is a great country.

STAN

A good role model?

SAM

Yes.

ERIC

So here's the bill you have to vote on.
It would forbid any administration from
interfering in any way, military or economic,
with the affairs of another country. Obviously,

that would include Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan ...

STAN

The list goes on and on. You know all the issues. The U.S. being accused of stationing troops in the holy places in Saudi Arabia, invading Iraq and Afghanistan.

SUE

And we supported the Shah in Iran.

ERIC

It's true we've interfered in the politics of some Islamic countries. Can't deny it.

STAN

We're the Great Satan, accused of economic colonialism and all sorts of sin.

SUE

It's a colossal issue. And you should take all this into account in how you might vote.

SAM

I don't know. I told you I'm not political. I don't know much about foreign policy but I do try to keep up on what's going on.

STAN

Commendable.

SUE

Which is true of most people.

STAN

That's why this game is good for the public. If it's not being too strict it should be made mandatory and be in every home.

SUE

(apologetically)
You have to pardon Stan. He's very passionate about the game.

SAM

I can respect that.

STAN

(to Sue)

You see. Sam understands.

(pause)

What are some of your passions, Sam?

(Sam is silent)

ERIC

Okay. Let's get back on track.

Sam, what would be your vote, if you did vote.

(pause as if remembering something)

We should have clarified this before.

You can abstain in this game, though we prefer players make choices.

(pause)

SAM

Then I abstain.

STAN

Interesting.

SUE

But we'd still like your thoughts. If you can share them with us.

(she gives him a warm smile)

Do you think people have the right to overthrow governments if they think they're being badly governed? Like in Egypt and other countries in the Middle East? This is an area you know well, right?

SAM

(shrugging)

A little.

(pause as he reflects a moment)

You had your own American spring with the Declaration of Independence.

(pause)

Right?

STAN

(Sue, Stan and Eric exchange a significant look)

Right! Very good.

ERIC

The man knows his history.

SUE

You're being very helpful, Sam.

ERIC

As long as we're on the subject, Sam, can you foresee any possible situation where the American people would want to overthrow the government?

SAM

A revolution?

STAN

It could just be an underground movement. You know, conspiracy.

ERIC

We do have people who hate the government. Like those behind the Oklahoma City bombing. And the Boston Marathon massacre.

SAM

Yes, terrible.

(pause)

Anything is possible, I suppose.

ERIC

So that's a yes?

SUE

Being specific does help us in framing a possible bill for the game.

SAM

Okay.

ERIC

Here's another biggie. How do you feel about the government listening to your phone calls?

SAM

(laughing) They'd be bored.

(Now the others are surprised)

ERIC

A healthy attitude.

STAN

Very much so. Considering, if you make and receive lots of phone calls from abroad.

SUE

But Sam doesn't make a lot international calls, do you?

STAN

Back to the old country.

SAM

I've been here so long I only have one distant relative. A cousin, and I'm never in contact with him.

ERIC

But phone calls for work?

SAM

What does this have to do with your game?

SUE

Sam is right. Stay focused on the game.

(pause)

The next bill, Sam, is relevant though.

It's about the government and data mining.

Imagine a bill which would let the government keep a record of everything you watch on

television.

SAM

(shaking his head in disbelief)
They'd never do that.

STAN

How can you be sure?

SUE

You know how frightened the government
is of terrorism.

STAN

Aren't you frightened of some act of terrorism?
It could happen anywhere, anytime.

SAM

I don't think of such things. We have to
be careful but

ERIC

Okay. We have dialogue for this bill which
might help in your reaching a decision.

SUE

You can hear the arguments, then vote.

STAN

Big help. The dialogue can give you a
better idea of the values.

ERIC

(standing before Sam as if he represents a
larger audience)

Now use your imagination.

(pause)

I'm Senator Horace Bigmouth from Texas
and this is what I'm saying.

(Eric takes a deep breath and speaks with
a drawl)

I think it's time the American people
understand we have to take sterner
measures to weed out the traitors among
us.

SUE

(hands a Sam a piece of paper)

Now, Sam, you can speak. Here's what you might say in response. Think of yourself, say, as Senator Bill Sensible from New York.

STAN

But stand up and address us like you're on the floor of the Senate.

(Sam stands before the trio and hesitantly reads)

I don't believe that's right. This bill takes away a basic freedom. First books, then television
What's next?

ERIC

Terrific!

SUE

(as Sam sits, she claps her hands)

Said with conviction. The Senate would surely be moved.

(Sam isn't sure how to react but looks pleased)

STAN

You can always change the dialogue if you want. That's another facet of the game. You might even want to take a different position.

ERIC

How would you vote?

SAM

I'd be against this bill for sure.

SUE

You're a real defender of our liberties.

STAN
Red, white and blue.

SAM
So does this help you?

ERIC
Very much.

SUE
And, you see, how the game shows a lot
about the players.

STAN
How you think.

ERIC
What you think.

SAM
All good, I hope.

ERIC
Exactly what we want.

STAN
Sam, I hope all players are as good
as you.

SUE
(as Sam doesn't seem to know how
to react)
Now, boys, don't embarrass poor Sam.

STAN
Sorry, Sam. But I did mean the compliment.

ERIC
Getting back to the game, you remember how
a governor was recalled in California?

STAN

Good old Schwarznegger. He was an immigrant, too

SUE

So think of the recall initiative as if it were on the national stage.

ERIC

Here's the bill calling on votes about a law or amendment which would let us recall a sitting president?

SUE

That would be a peaceful way to make changes, wouldn't it?

STAN

Instead of waiting for the next election.

SUE

And of course you're all for doing things like this peacefully rather than by force?

SAM

Is that a question on your game?

ERIC

Not directly.

SAM

Then why ask me?

SUE

Sam is right. Keep to the game format.

ERIC

My apologies.

STAN

Me, too.

SUE

Likewise. I'm sorry for anything I've said that rubbed you the wrong way.

SAM

(his smile is just for her)

No problem.

ERIC

(to Sam)

So how would you vote?

SUE

Enormous issue.

SAM

You know what? I'll abstain. I'd have to give the idea more thoughts. I can do that, right?

ERIC

Absolutely. The game doesn't have to be finished in one sitting. It can go on for hours.

SUE

Actually, the longer, the better.

STAN

Our rules state that's there no time limit for players to vote unless the players set one up before the game starts. Like Scrabble.

SUE

They could use a timer clock like in chess.

SAM

That makes sense.

ERIC

Here's a bill that might be easier to decide. It makes it a federal offence with a jail sentence and a big fine if you criticize the sitting American president abroad.

SUE

But we realize it may be hard to judge how serious such a criticism is. So we have a little skit that might help.

(Sue and Stan stand before Sam and look around in awe as if sightseeing. Eric stands nearby, obviously listening to their conversation)

SUE

Stan, I don't believe it. Here we are at last in front of the Arc de Triumphe in Paris.

STAN

Great. If only the dollar were worth more so we didn't have to stint, even on eating.

ERIC

(simulating a French accent)
Pardon me. I couldn't help overhearing. Isn't it your president's economic policies that creates the weak dollar?

SUE

Sure does.

STAN

The president is an idiot! He should be impeached.

SUE

We're not professional actors, Sam, but you get the picture.

ERIC

How would you vote?

SAM

I think there should be limits on what one says, but to throw someone in jail for such a statement. No. I vote no.

SUE

(nodding in approval)
You'd never say anything like that yourself, would you?

SAM

Me? No. Never.

ERIC

Good to hear.

SUE

Let me ask the next question. Sam, this is a bill about making same-sex marriage the law of the land? You know the issue?

SAM

How could one not know?

ERIC

(nodding)

You were married, right?

SUE

Eric!

ERIC

Sorry.

SAM

This is like a poll or something?

STAN

No, it's a video game. Just based more on current events.

SUE

And you're being very helpful.

SAM

(more reluctantly)

I believe in traditional marriage.

I was divorced. Years ago.

SUE

Sorry.

ERIC

But our coed arrangement doesn't bother you?

SAM

At first, to be honest, I wasn't sure.
But not now.

SUE

Aha! So there was some doubt.

(Sam looks a little crestfallen)

STAN

We're quite celibate. With each other,
that is.

ERIC

We're also normal heterosexuals. But the
three of us are just friends.

SUE

Just like you have friends.

SAM

Of course.

STAN

Oh, Sam, just my curiosity again.
Do you belong to any club? Like a
Lebanese Club?

SUE

Stan, you promised!

STAN

(with regret)
I'm incorrigible, I know.

ERIC

(annoyed at distraction)
So which way would you vote – if you
didn't abstain.

SUE

Which we could understand.

SAM

I think it's silly for one state to say yes,
and another no. I might change my mind,
But right now my vote would be in favor
of such a bill.

ERIC

Very forthright. Very sensible.

STAN

You got right to the essence of the bill.

SUE

Anyone for a refill?

(No takers)

STAN

We're on a roll. Okay, Sam. Gun control.
The bill calls for a federal ban on gun ownership
by private citizens in cities of over ten thousand
population.

SUE

Especially assault weapons.

STAN

I should add that a provision of the bill also calls
for tightening registration of gun ownership for
everyone else. It's targeted at the National Rifle
Association.

SUE

You're not a member of the NRA,
are you?

SAM

No.

ERIC

I have to ask. Sam, do you have a gun
downstairs?

SUE

(quickly)

Sam, don't answer Eric. That's too personal.
But how would you vote, if you did?

SAM

I don't have a gun downstairs or anywhere.
There are too many shootings, so I'm favor
of the bill.

STAN

Good. We're with you.

(pause)

Next. This is a bill to crack down on the
neo-fascist groups in the country. You know,
the ones with their own camps and weapons?

ERIC

Domestic terrorists.

STAN

The bill would simply outlaw them. Put them
out of business. Yea or no?

SAM

I'm against violence. But would such a bill
be constitutional. You know, the right of
assembly?

SUE

Excellent! You could argue that. Good for you.

ERIC

This is great. Okay. Very controversial bill.
Should American Muslims have to swear
a loyalty oath?

SAM

Loyalty oath?

SUE

Too drastic?

STAN
Infringement of religion?

ERIC
You'd swear a loyalty oath yourself if
asked to, wouldn't you?

(Sam is silent)

SAM
I'd vote no. The pledge of allegiance is
enough.

SUE
(to friends)
See? Sam isn't a right wing conservative.

SAM
I'm not a right wing anything.
(pause)

ERIC
Drones.

SAM
What?

STAN
There's a bill on drones.

ERIC
But let's help set the question up better.

SUE
Good idea. We'll improvise again.
(Sue sets up the laptop computer in
front of Sam on the coffee table)
Now imagine you're sitting in a command
structure somewhere in Florida.

STAN
Doesn't have to be Florida.

ERIC

Could be anywhere.

(pause)

And you know, they're using drones
now in the U.S. too.

STAN

And not everyone is very happy about
it either.

SUE

Now, Sam, you know how drones work,
right?

SAM

(shrugging)

I think so.

SUE

So, let's say, this is somewhere in the
tribal areas in Pakistan next to Afghanistan
and you've located – on screen - a major
terrorist figure.

ERIC

Someone high up in al Qaeda or the
Taliban hierarchy.

STAN

You know where the Taliban goes
for R and R between fighting us and
the Afghan army.

SAM

R and R?

STAN

Rest and recuperation.

SAM

(irritated)

I know what it means. I was just ...
surprised by its use.

SUE

Stan is very irreverent sometimes.

STAN

(showing mild penitence)
Character flaw. I try but....

ERIC

(dismissing Stan's lament)
Doesn't have to be Pakistan. Could
be Yemen. Or Somalia. Anywhere.
God knows, there's trouble spots all
over the world.

SUE

So, decision time. If there's a chance
of killing or wounding civilians, innocent
people, would you have the drone shoot its
missiles to take out the terrorist?

STAN

And other terrorists with him.

ERIC

It's a tough decision. You have to weigh
the possibility of collateral damage.

STAN

And we're sure you're familiar
with the dangers of collateral damage.
Innocents killed.

(Sam nods but with a grimace.)

ERIC

And time is fleeting. A quick decision
is needed.

SUE

That's right. Is it a go?

SAM

(getting up)
I'm not for or against drones.

I'm against killing innocent bystanders.

ERIC

So you wouldn't give permission?

SAM

(shaking his head firmly)

No. Well, probably not.

SUE

Good for you.

ERIC

Okay, Sam. Here's a fun aspect. You sit right there with Sue next to you. And Stan and me will be facing you on the other couch.

(they arrange themselves accordingly)

Imagine you're being interviewed by a congressional subcommittee on the subject of leaks.

STAN

Actually, you're being accused of leaking valuable documents.

ERIC

Like the stuff WikiLeaks got or Edward Snowden released. Or that Army soldier. You know what happened.

SAM

More or less. But why would I leak anything?

ERIC

Just assume you had possession of key high-security information and you felt compelled by your conscience to release it to the world.

STAN

And Sue is your legal counsel.

SUE

(sliding closer to Sam)

Right by your side, Sam.

ERIC

Ready?

(Sam nods)

ERIC

(simulating a microphone in his hand)
I'm the chairman of this subcommittee.
Senator Fungicle.

SAM

(laughing)
Fungicle?

STAN

Be serious.

ERIC

(affecting great gravity)
Now, Mr. Halaz, do you admit having
possession of these documents?

SUE

(whispering loudly)
You have to say yes. You can't plead the
Fifth Amendment in this game.

SAM

Why not? They do it all the time,
don't they? I've seen it on television.

SUE

Rules of the game. Bear with us.

SAM

(reluctantly)
Yes.

STAN

And did you release these documents
to the media?

SUE

(whispering loudly)
This is where you make your own

decision. Be bold!

SAM
(shaking his head)
I don't know what to say.

ERIC
Tell us the truth.

STAN
Confess!
(pause)
I'm a Senator too

SAM
(getting up)
Okay. I understand the game better now.
I see what you're doing.

ERIC
Good. We have a lot of other bills we might
use. On climate control, the debt limit, voting
rights, Iran, China, ecetera.

SUE
We cover a wide spectrum.

STAN
But is this a game you would buy and play?

SAM
To be honest, I doubt it. But others might.

SUE
Well, we have to hope.

SAM
It's getting late. I have to go.

ERIC
Sam, do you have a date?

STAN
You sly dog.

SUE

We'd like to meet her.

SAM

(taking a step to the door)
What are you all talking about?
I don't have a date.

ERIC

Please wait a moment.
(Sam waits)
And sit. We're almost finished.
(Sam reluctantly sits)

ERIC

Thank you.
(pause)
There's one other key question you
can really help us with..

SUE

Just one more, we promise.

ERIC

Let's say you have to make a critical
decision. The government has learned
of a threat from a suitcase nuclear bomb.
If detonated it would kill thousands.

STAN

Maybe millions, eventually. From the
fall-out.

ERIC

But the only way you can find out where
and when is through one person you've
captured. Would you sanction torturing
this person to get the crucial information
in time to save millions?

SAM

Torture?

ERIC

This is clearly a subject we should deal
with in the game.

STAN

Here! This may help.
(he lies down on the couch. Sue places
a cloth over his face and pretends to have
a pail of water which she pours over him.
He coughs madly.)

SUE

(to Stan)
Don't overdo it.
(to Sam)
Waterboard simulation. Not too realistic,
I know.

SAM

I know what waterboarding looks like.

ERIC

It's a tough decision. But you can make it.

SUE

The price of leadership.

SAM

But I'm not a leader. I'm just an everyday
person.

ERIC

But not in the game. When you play the game
you hold the levers of government power.

SUE

It's a game of pretend.

STAN

(rising)
You can pretend you're both the terrorist
confronting possible torture and the person
deciding whether to use torture or not.

SAM

(surprised)
Both?

SUE

Yes. You can show dual insight. You have the imagination. I'm sure of it.

STAN

We all believe in you, Sam.

SAM

(musing)

If it saved lives, I think I might allow some form of torture. I'd really have to be sure though.

ERIC

Including waterboarding?

SAM

(shrugging)

Maybe. I don't approve of torture but with so many lives at stake, I think I'd have to allow some torture – if absolutely necessary.

STAN

(nodding with approval)
Very decisive.

SUE

Gutsy.

ERIC

You have courage.

SUE

More than impressive, it shows insight into what is necessary and merely moral..

SAM

Moral?

ERIC

Yes. Surely you see the distinction, or you would have voted otherwise. You ask difficult questions. Not everyone

will like this question..

STAN

The game is a risk, and we understand how you feel.

SAM

How I feel?
(pause)

SUE

About key issues. Like torture.
You'd allow it.

SAM

(backtracking)
Well, just in limited situations. What you described.

STAN

You took a stand. You didn't sit on the fence.

SAM

Well, this is one tough game.

ERIC

But a necessary one. It serves the public, don't you agree?

SAM

I'm not a judge, but I wish you well. I hope you sell a lot of copies.

ERIC

So do we.

SUE

You've been a wonderful player.

STAN

Yes, we've learned a lot about you, how you think, ecetera.

SAM

Really?

STAN

Oh, yes.

SUE

Sam, thank you so much. You've been a wonderful sport. I hope we haven't bombarded you with too many questions.

ERIC

Yes, sorry if we've been too aggressive in our questions.

STAN

Just trying to come up with the best game. See what questions work and which don't.

SUE

(Sue comes up to Sam as he moves to the door and kisses him on his cheek)

Thank you so much, and we hope you can visit us again.

ERIC

Yes, please.

STAN

Thanks for a stimulating evening.

SAM

(at the door; speaking politely but with obvious insincerity)

Yes, it was fun.

(Sam leaves)

ERIC

(Stan goes to the door, listens for a moment, and then nods that Sam is gone)

Do you think it worked? Or did we pour it on too much?

STAN

He looked frazzled at the end.

SUE

We'll see.

STAN

He looked like he thought we were
a bunch of loonies.

ERIC

Dangerous loonies, I hope.

STAN

Got his pronouns mixed up a bit with the
Declaration of Independence. Rather
incriminating slip.

SUE

He fell into a couple of our other trap
questions.

ERIC

He just added to what we already knew.

(Scene shifts to edge of stage outside of the
apartment. Sam is using his cell phone.)

SAM

Hello, FBI?

pause)

My name is Sam Haraz. I'm the landlord of a
building. I have some strange tenants who just
moved in. I think they're dangerous. Maybe
planning something. Yes, I'll be here. My
address is 49 Lombard Avenue.

Act II

(The next day in the mid-morning. Stan is taking notes from a book while Sue is in the kitchen. Eric comes inside the apartment with Maurice Haley, a man in his late thirties who is wearing a suit with a white shirt and a tie.)

ERIC

Guys, meet Maurice Haley, your friendly neighborhood FBI officer.

(pause as Haley scowls with this introduction)

I noticed him noticing me. In his car, just across the street.

STAN

That's enough for an introduction.

SUE

(appraising Haley who appraises her in return)

Not for me. You have to be careful.

ERIC

I introduced myself, and when I learned that we were the cause of his presence, I thought a lot of time could be saved if I just invited him upstairs.

STAN

Makes sense.

SUE

Greetings then. Please sit down.

(Haley sits on one of the couches and looks around aggressively. Sue sits demurely on the same couch.)

HALEY

(to Eric)

I don't know how you made me.

ERIC

Sheer luck.

STAN

Mi casa es su casa.

HALEY

Gracias.

ERIC

You have Hispanic blood?

HALEY

No, Irish blood.

SUE

Can we offer you some refreshment?
Beer? Coca cola?

HALEY

No, thanks. Just a brief visit. My office
knows I'm here.

STAN

(nodding with approval)
Very professional.
(to others)
He's on duty.

ERIC

Indeed! I just thought Maurice – may we call
you Maurice -
(Maurice nods)
.... looked lonely sitting in his car.

SUE

No company. All the traffic fumes
and noise.

STAN

The rigors of surveillance.

ERIC

I thought it was silly for him to sit in a hot
car while he could be up here checking us
out.

SUE

An act of true consideration.

(pause)

I hope it's so noted.

(Haley doesn't react)

STAN

Sure. Have him upstairs for coffee.

(to Haley)

Save you the trouble of getting a warrant.

HALEY

Why would you think there should be
a warrant?

ERIC

Why indeed? Just because you were parking
in front of our building is hardly cause for
concern over a warrant.

HALEY

How do you know you were involved?
Feeling guilty about something?

ERIC

Not at all. I – we – are just concerned
citizens.

STAN

Anyway, it does save government time.
But are you an employee of the FBI or a
subcontractor?

ERIC

There are lots of those.

STAN

Too many. The government subcontracts
everything out these days.

HALEY

I'm an employee of the Federal Bureau

of Investigation.

SUE

It's impressive when you say it like that.

(to Haley)

So you're not on the clock?

HALEY

Bunch of comedians, eh?

ERIC

Oh, we have a serious side.

STAN

Come on, Eric. Be hospitable.

Maurice has a job to do.

SUE

Are you sure you wouldn't like something?

Coffee? Something stronger. Oh, it's too early for a drink, isn't it?

HALEY

Okay. How about a glass of water?

SUE

Coming right up.

(she crosses into kitchen and brings back a glass of water which Haley drinks, and beers for herself, Eric and Stan)

ERIC

We want to cooperate. You doubtless have our names.

STAN

Thanks to our enterprising landlord.

That's why you're here, right?

(Haley doesn't respond)

SUE

Does Sam know you're here?

STAN

Did you knock on his door first?

Or phone him?

SUE

Sort of a courtesy call.

STAN

But we're still the main attraction.

HALEY

What are you guys talking about?

ERIC

Just trying to sort everything out.

(pause)

Sam and we were very open with each other.

STAN

Sure. We know each other's voting preferences and even our religions.

SUE

(with a searching glance)

Sam's not a Muslim, but you probably know that.

STAN

You're not a Muslim, are you?

(pause)

Just general interest.

SUE

Stan, he's Irish. Irish ancestry.

STAN

So? Can't there be Irish Muslims?

ERIC

More significantly, Sam didn't think American Muslims shouldn't have to sign a special loyalty oath. Do you agree?

SUE

One of our game questions. You know about our game?

HALEY

This will work better if I ask the questions.

STAN

So what's the problem?
Why are you here?

SUE

I believe our records are clean

STAN

Not even a parking ticket between us.

SUE

Three respectable citizens.

HALEY

And so you'll be treated.

ERIC

(dubiously)
Just getting to know us, eh?

(Stan hums the tune to "Getting To
Know You" eliciting a frown from Haley)

SUE

Is everyone treated to a visit like this?
I don't think so.

HALEY

Hey, you invited me up here.

ERIC

True. But why were you outside our
building?

SUE

Slumming?

STAN

Do you want to interview us separately?

SUE

We don't mind.

HALEY

Do you guy always speak in tandem?

SUE

(to Eric and Stan)

Is that what we do?

(pause)

And so obviously. It's embarrassing.

STAN

(sympathetically to Sue)

Don't be embarrassed.

(gives Haley an irate look)

ERIC

Okay. Enough of this.

HALEY

(derisively)

Thanks.

ERIC

You're here. Do your thing.

HALEY

(waits a beat to establish his own rhythm)

So it's just the three of you here?

ERIC

Give or take an occasional guest of appropriate gender.

(pause)

And Stan has a succubus?

HALEY

A what?

SUE

(helping Haley who frowns at her aid)

Female nighttime companion, but quite

imaginary.

STAN

(smiling)

So is their accusation. I'll have you know
I'm succubus-free.

(pause as Haley looks a bit astonished)

No documentation though.

SUE

There's no federal restrictions against
succubi, are there?

ERIC

Or being visited by an incubus?

(when Haley seems irritated)

All this should be clear. We want
you to know everything about us.

SUE

Nothing to hide.

HALEY

(shaking his head)

There's nothing on your records
as being comedians.

ERIC

(to Stan and Sue)

We've missed our collective calling.

SUE

Can I get you something else?

Are you hungry? I could make
you a sandwich.

HALEY

(ignoring Sue)

Okay, boys and girls, let's play.

(he stands and moving around the room
inspecting things)

So which of you is the farting historian?