

Soft Target: A Cybertech Thriller

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TESTIMONIALS FOR SOFT TARGET

“*Soft Target* looks like a prize winner to me. So good luck, keep writing, and stay well....”

Tony Hillerman, outstanding novelist, gentleman, mentor, and friend,
1925-2008. Tony was one of the great ones.

"*Soft Target* opens strong and continues to grip. I often wondered if I were reading a conspiracy satire or a future history. And I kept reading."

Jerry Pournelle, Best Selling Author, Chaos Manor

“*Soft Target* stands head-and-shoulders above any contemporary SpecOps novel of my recent experience. I am standing by for sequels! As a career-long SEAL, I find it encouraging that you went to such lengths to make *Soft Target* so true-to-life.”

Captain Larry W. Bailey, USN (Retired)

“It’s a gripping tale and a dramatic depiction of what ‘civil rights as usual’ does in the face of islamofascism.”

Roger G. Smith, MD, Naval Aviator and author of *Guppy Pilot*

“Marine General Mike Mickelson reports to one person only, but if caught he cannot tell. With the help of the beautiful daughter of an old friend, who is missing, Mike is after Arab bioterrorists inside the US, but can he escape the clutches of their unwitting and willing accomplices in our own government? A military techno-thriller set in the modern day Global War on Terrorism, which is a must-read for anybody who likes suspense, intrigue, romance, and lots of action. I highly recommend SOFT TARGET, but be warned, you will be rubbing your red-rimmed eyes at 3AM, because you will not be able to set the book down.”

Don Bendell, Vietnam Vet, Green Beret officer and top-selling author of
26 books, including his 2009 novel *Detachment Delta*.

“John Trudel’s latest thriller, *Soft Target*, is his best yet. The dialogue is punchy and gives the reader wonderful insight into his characters. This is a must-read for thriller lovers.”

Joseph Badal, author of *The Lone Wolf Agenda*

“A superb governmental thriller in the flavor of Mr. Trudel’s *Privacy Wars*. This time a virus called ECP is introduced to the world and there are issues with the vaccine. Trudel has again created a novel with one thrill ride after another. This is an enjoyable read, with a fantastic winding plot and well defined characters. I give it a five-star rating only because there is not six. Trudel has done it again!

Award winning author G. R. Holton

Dedication

This novel is dedicated to Pat. Without her, *Soft Target* would not exist. As an Author's wife, she is patient with public demands, book signings, endless details, and my need to sometimes sit alone, uninterrupted, communing with imaginary friends.

Her kids gave me a T-Shirt: "*Careful, or you'll wind up in my novel.*"

Acknowledgements

Ernest Hemingway once said, "There is no such thing as writing, only rewriting." Novels are that way. I would never have made it without my small band of critical readers and editors who assiduously scanned years of drafts with eagle eyes and brutally honest criticism. Each time they touched my words, my novels got better. Kay Jewett deserves special credit.

Two departed friends deserve thanks: Captain Langford C. Metzger, a Vietnam hero who gave me early encouragement, and Tony Hillerman, who gave me advice and moral support back when I was trying to break into novels. I spoke at Tony's memorial service. His daughter, Anne, has written the next installment in the Jim Chee/Joe Leaphorn series. Her novel, *Spider Woman's Daughter*, will be released in the fall.

I've been blessed to live the American Dream, and to have a rewarding life that has touched interesting science, events and people. It was freedom, innovation, and a career in technology at the peak of "the American Century" that helps give context for my writings, and it is freedom, innovation, and technology that let me break through and get my novels published.

Over my years in High-Tech, I worked with ELINT (ELectronic INTelligence) systems and the early Spectre (AC-130) gunships. Later, as a consultant with my own company, I had assignments for technology firms dealing with computer and network architecture, including trusted/managed networks and the Internet.

The West is in crisis. Too much of what we see in Thriller novels is real, and too few know history's lessons. God bless our Vets, founders, and builders, and may God Bless America.

"In this snug over-safe corner of the world ... we may realize that our comfortable routine is no eternal necessity of things, but merely a little space of calm in the temptious untamed streaming of the world, and in order that we may be ready for danger. Out of heroism grows faith in the worth of heroism."

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Memorial Day 1895. (A veteran of Antietam and other Civil War battles.)

Many have contributed to the publication and success of this book. Thank you all for your inspiration, friendship, and support. Finally, you, my readers, are most important of all. Thank you for reading my novels. I appreciate your support, suggestions, and kind words.

If you like *Soft Target*, please post reviews on Amazon and tell your friends. There are links on my web page, www.johntrudel.com that will lead you to my author's pages and allow you to get on my (private) lists for information about my novels. Next year, expect *Raven's Run*.

Chapter One – Never Say Anything

Washington, DC

Mike studied the serious young woman in his office. She was taller than he was, maybe six feet in her short heels, and perhaps ten years younger. Contrary to the scantily clad starlets in Hollywood spy movies, most of the female spooks he'd met were unattractive, Valerie Plame being the exception.

She was good looking, but dressed conservatively in a dark blue skirt, white blouse, and matching jacket. No jewelry, except for a gold watch on her left wrist. She looked fit, but not athletic. Short hair, but still feminine, just touching her shoulders and almost matching the color of his, light brown.

He glanced down at his desk where he'd placed her card. "Gerry Patton, Special Programs, National Security Agency," with a holographic image of the NSA seal – an eagle holding a large key in its talons – embossed in its upper right corner. All of which told Mike exactly nothing he didn't already know.

He was mildly amused that she felt no need to speak. She was sitting there politely, watching him watch her. The silence lengthened.

She was revealing nothing, making it subtly obvious she was waiting for him.

Typical, he thought. *They never tell you anything.*

Mike occasionally liked to drink a beer with people from Langley, but NSA didn't socialize much. The intelligence community was compulsively paranoid, but even by those standards NSA was over the top. They'd made "deep black" into an art form. Not a hint of light leaked out.

NSA never asks for help, Mike thought. *They run their own programs and avoid the*

Pentagon like it was a leper colony. But this woman bulls her way in here unannounced, demands to see me, then hands me a note from the President, marked "personal," and to hell with protocols and the chain of command.

He felt a twinge of discomfort as he read the note for the third time. It said, "Problems at home. I need a favor, Mike. Talk to Ms. Patton. Then burn this yourself." It was signed with the initials he recognized, a scrawled "CH," and "yourself" was underlined.

We're wasting time sitting here looking at each other, he thought. How the hell can I "talk to Ms. Patton" when she won't say anything? I don't have a clue what's going on, I can't read her mind, and I don't have anything to say. I need to get rid of her diplomatically so I can get back to work.

"I'm sorry." Mike spread his hands in a placating gesture. "Obviously there's been a misunderstanding. I'm hardly an expert on satellites or codes."

"That doesn't matter," she said.

Her eyes were a vivid blue, and her gaze was appraising. It triggered a vague memory. Those eyes were familiar, but he couldn't place why. It bothered him.

"I don't know much about NSA. I'm just a mud marine they cleaned up and put behind a desk."

"The sign on the door says Director of Intelligence."

"For Marine Headquarters. I push papers around and give briefings. I go to embassy parties and try not to hurt anyone with the salad forks. I can't help you."

"Why not?" Her voice was a perfect contralto: Crystal clear, powerful, and vivid. She enunciated her words carefully. An opera singer or actress would be envious.

Mike shrugged. "I'm not a spook. I'm not involved in agency matters." After the fall

from grace of Petraeus, senior officers were more careful about boundaries.

“It’s not that simple, General.” Emotion ghosted across her face. It might have been a smile, but it was hard to tell. “May I speak frankly?”

Mike nodded carefully, doubting she would. The notion of someone from NSA speaking frankly was out of character.

“I need your help in Oregon.”

Mike frowned. “Oregon was in the United States the last I checked.”

“It still is. Barely.”

“That’s within the jurisdiction of the FBI, or perhaps the Office of Homeland Security, not mine.”

“Your expertise is in the Middle East. Indonesia. Asia.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“The President said to call you ‘Twenty Mike.’ Why?”

“It was my radio call sign in Yemen.”

“Why’d you pick that?”

“I didn’t. My commander said at the time it was to remind me I was a pain in the ass.”

She looked surprised. “You were reprimanded?”

“No, cautioned. When he promoted me later, he gave me his stars to wear and said they’d brought him luck.”

“So why ‘Twenty Mike’? The caliber of a small cannon? I don’t get it.”

“I preferred gunships and tactical air with rapid-fire 20 millimeter guns – twenty-mike-mike – and antipersonnel lasers to conventional fire support.”

“Why?”

He looked at her.

“Humor me,” she said. “I want to know your reasoning.”

He shrugged. “Flexibility, security, mobility, resource conservation, and intensity. Why lug the bloody artillery and its supply train around hostile territory? It’s a lot of work, and then you have to tie troops up to keep your own equipment from being overrun.”

“But you did. Get overrun.”

Mike winced. “That was later. The call sign wasn’t a censure. It was a cautionary reminder.” *My command post got overrun, lady, but our TAC Air was still coming in hot and on target. They were there when I needed them.*

She blinked and shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

“Close is dangerous, like a knife fight in a telephone booth. The Air Force’s AC-130 Spectres haven’t used guns that light since Vietnam, because they are not considered to be expendable. They prefer to stand off, stay out of range, and lay down surgically precise fire with long range guns. Mostly 40 MM and up these days. Way up. 105 MM.”

“He was telling you to be careful? That the range of a gun that small is working too close?”

“Pretty much. Indirectly.” Mike shrugged. “It was a metaphor, not an order.”

“But you got close anyway?”

“Sometimes you have to. That’s what we do. The Marines are big on tradition.”

She sighed. “The Agency *never* gets close. Not to anyone. We’d rather crawl on our bellies over broken glass than ask for outside help.”

“Washington is like that,” he said. It wasn’t a value judgment, just a statement of fact.

“Yes.”

He looked at her directly. “Why are you here?”

She met his eyes. “Your unconventional methods work, General, and you have a reputation for taking good care of your people.”

She’s talking about combat. I’m not ready for this, Mike thought. His body was coming back, but it had been too close. He’d been too close. *Senior officers do not belong in foxholes. Remember the lesson.*

Her eyes were like laser beams.

Mike shook his head. “You need to do more research. I lost eighty-three out of six hundred in Yemen. Over sixty percent of my force was wounded. That was my last combat command.”

“I’ve *done* the research,” she said. “I remember when your picture and story was the lead on the nightly news, and on front pages all over the world.”

Mike sighed. Some reporter had even won a Pulitzer. The media frenzy had mostly passed by the time he got out of intensive care. By then, the media was on to the next story.

She was still staring at him, her eyes demanding a response.

Silence lengthened. Finally he said, “You should know better than most not to trust the media.”

“I also reviewed the classified action reports from Yemen and your medical records. The Marines said you’d never walk again.”

“They were mistaken.”

“The Army teaches your Yemen action at the War College. They say it’s the best example of a small force defeating hopeless odds since the Chosin Reservoir.”

“War stories are often exaggerated, Ms. Patton. I had good people. They prevailed after I

went down.” He didn’t like talking about Yemen. “You’ve dug up a hell of a lot about me.”

She nodded. “You were at Bethesda Naval Hospital in rehab for quite some time after Yemen. You passed the time getting a Ph.D. from Georgetown in Mideast studies.”

“Do you know where you’re going with this?” *It had actually been a doctorate in government, with a focus on security and the Middle East, but he got the point: He wasn’t the usual Marine. So what?*

“I do my homework, General. You know the Mideast academically, militarily, and diplomatically. You were President Hale’s Mideast interpreter. You speak the Egyptian dialect of Arabic like a native.”

“I’m adequate.”

“You’re proficient, and you speak Farsi too. You know the culture. Your most impressive accomplishments are classified and you have Arab friends in high places who trust you.”

“Not really.” He shook his head. “There’s not a lot of trust in the Mideast.”

“No, there isn’t,” she agreed. “That makes you rather special, don’t you think?”

He didn’t reply. He waited to see where she was headed.

“Your job goes beyond being a soldier. The Marines are the best force we have for low intensity operations. You’ve got brains, and you use them. You’re not afraid to innovate, to embrace new technology. That’s why I’m here. I need your help.”

Interesting, he thought. “Did the agency send you?”

She shrugged. “I have a certain latitude of action in my current assignment.”

That wasn’t an answer. She means, “*No*,” he thought. *That’s curious.*

“Are you here on personal business?” Mike said.

She nodded. “Yes.”

He didn't believe it. "What else?"

"Let's just say the President, our mutual Commander in Chief, suggested I should talk to you."

"And your current assignment is exactly what?"

She shook her head. "That's restricted information, General. Let's just say we're doing a special project for the President. If I can persuade you to help, he said you'd have a 'need to know' and he'd brief you personally."

"This somewhat limits our conversation." Mike frowned and thought for a moment. "When the agency straps you to a lie detector, which I presume they do regularly, you'll be able to say you didn't talk to me about your work."

"That's right." She smiled wryly. "Do you know why we call it NSA?"

He shook his head, wondering what she'd say.

"For the policy, of course – 'Never Say Anything.' We *never* talk about our work to *anyone* without specific authorization from our direct superior, and we never request such permission. I'm here to pay you a social visit because of a personal request from the President."

In a pig's eye, Mike thought. Translation: her boss would have her ass on a platter if she talked shop with me, much less asked for help. I'm ordered to talk to a woman who can't say anything, and she's risking her job to be here.

Mike considered her. It was obviously his move.

I suppose I can live with the facade. I'm just having a personal chat with an attractive woman. He smiled to himself. Just like real people. It has nothing to do with the twilight zone these spooks live in.

"Okay, Ms. Patton, if we can't talk about business, let's discuss personal things," he said

tentatively. “Perhaps I should try to get to know you better....”

She nodded, watching him carefully. He decided to take it as approval.

“Just who the hell are you, lady?”

Surprisingly, she smiled. “My father is Colonel John Giles. He and President Hale are personal friends.”

“Iron John?” he asked, surprised.

She nodded.

He glanced at her left hand, but saw no wedding ring. He looked at her more closely. She had John’s ice blue eyes. “You’re John’s daughter?”

“I’m afraid so,” she said. “Dad’s a little controversial at the agency, and I wanted to make it on my own. My marriage failed. Afterwards, I had my name legally changed. Patton is my mother’s maiden name.”

“Your father’s controversial at NSA?”

She nodded. “He is. Definitely.”

“Changing your name is a pretty thin cover.”

“It’s not a cover; it’s a symbol,” she said. “I’m not my father.”

“Your dad retired and went into business,” Mike said musingly. “They say he makes crypto gear even NSA can’t break.”

“Actually, my brother Will is the mad scientist who invents things. Dad runs the company. It’s called Cybertech.”

“I’d expect having competition from a private firm might drive some of your bosses to distraction. I’d guess they’d be annoyed.”

“It’s a matter of public record that there was litigation between Cybertech and the

government over technical matters relating to COMSEC,” she said. “It was some time ago.”

“Meaning NSA backed down.” Mike was watching her carefully. “Interesting. I’ll change my speculation to ‘highly pissed.’ Is that more accurate?”

She shrugged.

“Someone high up didn’t want communications security discussed in an open court. I’ll bet there are people at the agency who’d like to string John up for treason.”

“If you say so.”

“Are you telling me President Hale has a project running that somehow involves Cybertech as a contractor to NSA?” he asked, pointedly. “Why would he be involved in operational matters?”

“No comment.” She shook her head. “I’m not telling you anything, General.”

Meaning, “Yes,” he thought. For a lady who says nothing, she’s telling me a lot. Iron John must have access to some killer technology, and the President must have banged some heads to get John and the agency to play nice and work together.

“Your dad saved my ass once.”

“I know. I hope you might want to return the favor.”

“What exactly do you want me to do, Ms. Patton?”

“My friends call me Gerry. If you talked with the President about my visit, I’d be very grateful.”

“Don’t expect much,” he said. “NSA doesn’t take orders from the military.”

She smiled demurely. “They do from the President.”

He looked at her speculatively, nodding slowly. “As do I.”

“Well, there you are,” she said. “I knew we’d find something in common if we chatted

long enough.”

He took a deep breath, letting it out slowly, and making a decision. *I need to find out what the hell is going on.*

“You intrigue me, Gerry. I’ll look into it and do what I can,” he said. “How should I contact you socially?”

“When is more important than how. Soon would be good. It’s best if you called me at home. My number is unlisted, so I took the liberty of writing it on the back of my card.” Her smile increased by just a notch. Her face was pretty when she smiled.

“I didn’t think you’d want to get involved,” she said. “Was it the note from the President?”

“It got my attention,” Mike admitted. “Let’s just say I’m curious, and, like you said, I owe your dad.”

“Thank you, General.”

“Please call me Mike. I’ll be in touch, but I can’t say when. I have access to the President, but it usually takes several weeks to get on his calendar. Sometimes longer. Maybe we could get together for dinner afterwards and continue our social chat?”

“I’d like that.” She stood and extended her hand. “I think you’ll find he has an open slot for you tomorrow at 4 pm.”

Mike took it, peering carefully to see if she was serious. Apparently she was. He escorted her to the door and stood watching as she walked away. *Nice legs*, he thought.

Chapter Two – The Best Strategy

Portland, Oregon

Ahmed Mahmoud Muhammad peered out the aircraft window, trying to see through the mist and the rain-streaked Plexiglas. For a time, he watched the driving rain in the powerful beams of the landing lights, but then they dropped into denser clouds and all he saw was a diffused glow through the fog.

What a horrible place, Ahmed thought, remembering his briefing. *Oregon. Why would people choose to live in a land of constant rain?* He shook his head in disbelief.

The plane lurched uncomfortably as the landing gear thumped into place. Flying was always a miserable experience for him, and this mission made it worse.

He'd been traveling for more than thirty hours. His mind was sluggish. *When you get tired, you make mistakes*, he thought. He couldn't afford any mistakes.

The cabin lights came on, and the attendants started their litany about seats and tray tables. Ahmed shoved the tray into place, keeping his face turned to the window.

It seemed like a very long time passed before the fog thinned and he saw lights on the ground, but his watch said it was only a few minutes. They hit the runway hard, the engines roared in reverse, and the aircraft slowed.

Ahmed suppressed a sigh of relief. *Stay with your cover*, he thought. *Don't attract attention*. He wiped his sweaty palms on his pants.

Ahmed took a deep breath and turned his thoughts to the operation at hand. He needed to come to Portland himself. He didn't *want* to come, but he needed to come. The planned operation was basic, but there would be serious repercussions if anything went wrong. That was how things worked in his world.... <www.johntrudel.com> <[John's Amazon Page](#)>