

Executive Orders Short Guide

Executive Orders by Tom Clancy

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Characters

The principal villain among many villains is Ayatollah Mahmoud Haji Daryaei, the religious leader of Iran. He is not a well-developed figure: He is principally a megalomaniac who uses his religious faith as an excuse for his plans to create an empire that will encompass all Muslim nations, and some others besides. His self-serving excuses for his cruelty and crimes contrast with Jack Ryan's soulsearching; his lack of understanding of the desires and needs of his own people also contrast with Ryan's continuous awareness that he is answerable to the American people for everything he does.

Daryaei is a menacing figure, always lurking in darkness while he plans the destruction of America and the expansion of his own power. A careful and patient planner, he finds understanding from the Chinese, who also plan for the long term, but he is quick to act decisively when his carefully created plans reach fruition. For instance, when the leader of Iraq is assassinated by a mole in his security team, Daryaei is quick to use a free-lance terrorist to convey the threat of death to the leader's potential successors, who, with Daryaei's assistance, then flee Iraq, leaving it open to invasion by Iran. Within weeks, Iraq becomes part of an Iranian superstate, so that Russia to the north and all of the Middle East face a dire threat.

In contrast to Daryaei's cool confidence that he acts with the best wishes of God, Ryan is beset by self-doubt. He did not want to become President of the United States; he was to be a caretaker Vice President until the next presidential election. In spite of the terrible circumstances of his presidency, Ryan is very interesting to watch as nonpolitician trying to understand the basics of political life and statecraft. He falls back on his personal resources such as his love of his family and his belief that America must help those who have helped it. Therefore, he changes his speech at the funeral of President Durling from the statesmanlike one provided by a speech writer to a heart-felt address to Durling's children; America's enemies see it as a sign of weakness, that Ryan does not understand his new role as a world leader. Yet the man who values family life also will protect family life, and his seeming weakness becomes a strength when American's face terrorist attacks on civilians and especially on children. His personal qualities of stubbornness, physical courage, and compassion enable him to make the office of the President work; Americans see themselves in him, and America's adversaries learn of the power of cherished American values to motivate Americans to great deeds.

The Jack Ryan novels have traced his career of public service from historian to antiterrorist to CIA functionary to presidential advisor and then to President.

These successful changes in Ryan's life have presented Clancy with significant challenges in Ryan's characterization.

Given the radical shifts in Ryan's life, his characterization cannot remain stable; the man who saved the family of England's crown prince from Irish terrorists cannot remain static



in his portrayal and then be the man who figured out what Red October was up to; further, he must face challenges unlike anything he has encountered before in Executive Orders; if he does not grow, the necessities of the plot would dictate his failure in the tasks he must undertake. On the other hand, if he grows, the growth must be consistent with an impetuous, stubborn character who impulsively takes action, for instance, as he did in *Clear and Present Danger* when he hopped on a helicopter for a rescue mission in Colombia. It is a sign of Clancy's improving mastery of characterization that he succeeds in letting Ryan be Ryan while Ryan grows to understand and respect his new role and while tying Ryan's actions and personal life to the social themes of the novel.

Other characters are drawn in quick, short strokes, typical of Clancy's style.

For instance, the prime minister of India is shown play-acting at President Durling's funeral—she feigns tears while holding Ryan in utter contempt for talking to Durling's children rather than making a grand speech; she thinks too much of herself. Of the novel's multitude of lesser characters, television reporter Tom Donner stands out. He initially seems to be a stereotypical clown, making profound-sounding remarks on matters he knows nothing about. His biased and ill-informed opinions cause difficulty for the President, and he even connives to ambush Ryan and tamper with a taped interview in order to make Ryan look bad and himself look like a great newsman. Yet, Clancy does not leave Donner as a stereotype of the foolish-but-handsome television news anchorman; instead, Donner is allowed to grow. He is one of the reporters chosen from a pool to cover the military action in Saudi Arabia.

There, he learns some lessons in humanity, courage, and truth, and he ends up doing a good job. He is typical of many of Clancy's characters: from Secret Service agent to diplomat, most grow, mature a little, and end the novel more complete than they were at the beginning.



Social Concerns

The action in *Executive Orders* takes place in the near future, when the United States has eliminated most of its nuclear missiles and has trimmed back its military budget. In *Debt of Honor* (1994), the predecessor to *Executive Orders*, the budget trimming has perilously weakened America's ability to defend its people and its interests and an international conspiracy starts a war between the United States and Japan—a war the United States nearly loses. In *Executive Orders*, America's enemies still perceive the United States as too weakened to respond to military crises; they try to create enough crises that the United States cannot respond to them all. In this portrayal of America as too weak to respond to its enemies, *Executive Orders* is cautioning its readers—warning them that the post-Cold War enthusiasm for trimming the size of the military can go too far, leaving the United States with few options beyond using its remaining nuclear weapons to stop its enemies.

Another important social concern of the novel is that of America's Constitution as the document that defines the role of the federal government. At the end of *Debt of Honor*, an embittered Japanese airline pilot crashed his huge aircraft into the Capitol building while Congress was in joint session to honor Jack Ryan's appointment as Vice President of the United States. This act of terrorism killed the President and nearly all of the cabinet and Congress, leaving Ryan as the President with a government in chaos. *Executive Orders* is primarily about how the nation and its constitution would function in extreme circumstances—in this case when the loss of nearly every national leader would seem to make the Constitution unworkable, even irrelevant because the people no longer have elected representatives. Throughout the novel, Clancy makes his case for the virtues of the Constitution and the kind of government it requires. Foreign leaders reasonably believe that the United States is crippled and that it will be unable to act decisively in international matters for several months; America's enemies try to ensure America's helplessness by creating several significant distractions, from Red China threatening to invade Taiwan to a terrorist attack on Ryan's daughter, as well as a plan to assassinate Ryan, leaving America without a President or anyone to succeed him.

The situation is daunting. The Constitution and federal laws require that cabinet appointments be approved by Congress, but there is no Senate to cast votes approving Ryan's choices for cabinet posts. The Constitution requires a balancing of federal powers among the President, Congress, and the federal courts, but the Supreme Court was wiped out in the plane crash. Who is to rule on the constitutionality of Ryan's actions as President? How is he to have his plans for the federal budget and federal spending approved when there is no Congress, the Constitutional guardian of the budget, to approve them?

Clancy shows how America's constitutional government might go about rebuilding itself and how the nation might participate in its rebuilding. It certainly helps the nation that the new president is modest about his own abilities, compassionate, wise, and courageous—all qualities of a hero—but the Constitution has strengths that would survive even a catastrophic loss of leadership. The posts of cabinet secretaries are filled



by underlings, mostly career bureaucrats, or by temporary presidential appointees who serve pending approval of Congress. State governors have the legal power to appoint members of the Senate in the event of vacancies, and most do, beginning the rebuilding of Congress. America's vast election machinery quickly kicks into gear, allowing for campaigns for the House of Representatives and elections to send new representatives to Congress.

Lower courts absorb the duties of the Supreme Court; most constitutional issues take years to work their ways through lower courts anyway, so such constitutional issues as questions about the extent of The President's powers to act in a constitutional emergency are argued in lower courts. In spite of the terrible pressures of terrorist attacks and wars and threats of wars on multiple fronts, Ryan takes only one action that is constitutionally questionable: To inhibit the spread of the airborne strain of the ebola virus he restricts interstate travel. In his view, the federal government can regulate interstate commerce and therefore he can halt interstate travel during a national crisis; he loses a challenge to his action in court, mostly for political and not constitutional reasons, and both the Constitution and America survive just fine. Clancy has written some extraordinary novels, but his study of how the Constitution might function without the governing bodies it regulates makes Executive Orders exceptional.

Social issues have always been important to the plots of Clancy's novels, but in each physical action has dominated events. In Executive Orders, he shifts the focus to social issues. The action all serves to illustrate the consequences of the acts of politicians; the principal drama takes place in offices, and statecraft is center stage. The world of Executive Orders is in chaos with the rules of the Cold War having been set aside; the Soviet Union no longer exists, and old enemies of Ryan, members of Russia's espionage agencies are now friends, with world events pushing Russia into a close working relationship with America. With the Cold War fading away, some national leaders take advantage of vacuums of power to build up their military and diplomatic influence, sometimes endangering America. Thus India's prime minister plots to take over Sri Lanka, drive America out of the Indian Ocean, and then to invade Australia, giving her nation's huge population a new continent in which to expand. On the other hand, China connives to weaken America so that it can seize eastern Siberia and with that region's natural resources threaten to dominate the world. In the cases of India and China, the policies that threaten world peace are matters of long-standing intentions, carefully laid out by their governments for decades. The Chinese in particular are willing to be patient, letting other nations take most of the risks.

Techniques

Clancy structures *Executive Orders* much as he has his other novels. He uses an episodic narrative that leaps from place to place around the world to create a sense of vast intrigue and great international movements. Suspense is built by one moment showing the ebola virus being prepared to showing Ryan coping with political confusion to representatives of Iran, China, and India plotting America's downfall. Events from Africa to Asia seem to be conspiring to kill Americans and to humble the United States.

Themes

Clancy does not take a sanguine view of America's place in the modern world.

For the second novel in a row, he argues that America has been weakened by cutbacks in its military and espionage budgets; in both novels the American government is unable to protect American citizens on American soil. In *Debt of Honor*, America's military is spread too thin to rebuff the combined military threats of Japan, India, and China; in *Executive Orders*, not only has America weakened its military too much, but its spy agencies lack the resources to discover and prevent terrorist attacks such as the planting of a strain of the ebola virus in the United States. Further, in the two novels, America has gone too far in eliminating its nuclear weapons; without its missiles on land and in submarines, America is not a credible threat to many of the nations of the world that are bent on harming America and its allies. America retains nuclear bombs and the aircraft to deliver them, which is just enough of a threat to make India blink at a crucial moment and to make Red China back away from its demands for Taiwan.

Plainly, Clancy regards nuclear weapons as crucial to America remaining a superpower and to protecting America's vast international interests and America's friends such as Saudi Arabia. Within the context of *Executive Orders*, a credible nuclear defense might have deterred much of the villainy of the narrative, and the unleashing of a "weapon of mass destruction"—biological warfare, in this case—within the United States might not have happened. America triumphs not from the good planning of its leaders who have diminished its capacity to defend itself, but from the supreme professionalism of its armed forces, the courage of its allies, and good luck. The implication throughout the novel is that America's position in the world is defined not only by its great economic power and its diplomats but by its ability to foresee events, by using information gathered by its espionage agencies, and by maintaining a large military presence around the world. Also implied is the idea that America's position in the world matters not only to the interests of Americans but to the freedoms of people all over the world. A strong America deters aggression and protects even small nations.



Key Questions

Executive Orders portrays a world in which political relationships among nations are rapidly changing. One way to begin discussing the novel would be to ask which of the changes in relationships are credible and which are improbable.

For instance, would India really be likely to want to drive the United States out of the Indian Ocean and to want to annex Australia? The invasion of Sri Lanka is taken from actual events: Does this mean Clancy's speculations about India's designs have validity?

For those who are interested in figuring out what makes a work of fiction tick, a discussion could begin with the question of the novel's genre. Is it a thriller the way *The Hunt for Red October* is a thriller, or has Clancy crossed the line between thriller and moved into science fiction?

1. Is *Executive Orders* a cautionary tale?

Is its author trying to warn his readers about anything?

2. Is the novel about politics, about technology, or about war?

3. Why does Japanese Prime Minister Koga wonder "if America realized her good fortune"?

4. How does the war in Saudi Arabia fit into the narrative of *Executive Orders*?

Does it contribute to any of the novel's themes?

5. Why is the subplot of two men trying to blow up President Ryan in the novel? Does it add suspense? Does it illustrate some of the problems Ryan needs to face?

6. Why do the enemies of the United States believe themselves to be superior to Jack Ryan? Are they actually superior in some ways?

7. How does the attempt to kidnap Ryan's daughter figure in the plans to cripple the United States so that it cannot respond to a crisis in the Middle East?

8. Does Clancy rely too heavily on his readers already knowing the character Jack Ryan, or does he provide a fully fleshed-out portrayal of Ryan in *Executive Orders*?

9. Much of the plot of the novel focuses on whether or not Ryan is a follower or a leader. Which is he? Does he change during the novel? What is his attitude toward being President of the United States? Does that change during the novel?

10. Ryan's wife is a prominent surgeon.



How might such a spouse change people's perception of the presidency?

11. In discussions of Clancy's writings, his prose style often arises. It does not require a literary critic's eye to notice that Clancy's prose style is superior to that found in most novels of espionage and political intrigue, and many readers notice the difference Clancy's prose style makes for reading pleasure. Readers of books in the Tom Clancy's Op Center series often notice that the style is not that of Tom Clancy (the novels are written by other authors); it is workmanlike, but not as elegant as Clancy's. It may be worth comparing a novel in the Tom Clancy's Op Center series to Executive Orders for the sake of reflecting Tom Clancy's style in an effort to discover why it is good and entertaining.

12. Does the United States let Japan off too easily for its treachery? What should the United States have done under the circumstances?

13. Why would the United States and its allies break up the union between Iran and Iraq?

14. Is Clancy correct in his view that the world's present circumstances pressure Russia to be America's supporter in international affairs?

15. At the end, President Ryan indicates that he will run for president in the next election. What about him has changed so that he would want to keep a job he seemed to detest?

16. In the next installment of the Jack Ryan series what might happen? Would Clancy portray Ryan's campaign for President? What difficulties would Ryan likely encounter? Do you have any thoughts about what international problem Clancy might focus on next?

17. In the course of the novel, does Ryan become just a run-of-the-mill politician?

Literary Precedents

Clancy's Jack Ryan novels have as their foundation the subgenre of espionage novels, emphasizing sinister plots and heroic derring-do. Clancy's device for creating a sense of epic scope for a vast plot of worldwide proportions may be found in other works that try to convey a narrative of widely separated events progressing toward a dramatic confrontation. Perhaps the most notable of these is *Seven Days in May* (1962) by Fletcher Knebel and Charles W. Bailey II. The novel uses an episodic structure to show geographically separated events occurring simultaneously, building suspense as America's political leaders move toward a dramatic showdown with traitorous American military leaders.



Related Titles

The Jack Ryan novels begin with *The Hunt for Red October* (1984; see separate entry), the surprising best seller from an obscure academic publisher that portrayed life in modern submarines. In it, Ryan is a CIA operative who divines Captain Ramius' plan to defect with the submarine *Red October* to the United States. The novel features many dynamic characters, including Ryan, but Ryan is not the novel's main character: Ramius is.

In *Patriot Games* (1987; see separate entry), Clancy fleshes out Ryan's history as a former marine and a man of action; in it, Ryan battles Irish terrorists who intend to murder his family. The novel exemplifies one of the dominant concerns of Clancy's fiction, that of terrorism.

The Cardinal of the Kremlin (1988; see separate entry) shows Ryan saving the life of an important spy and engineering the defection of the leader of the Soviet Union's KGB. *Clear and Present Danger* (1989; see separate entry) is somewhat more political than its predecessors, with bureaucratic fools and a president who wants "deniability," placing American soldiers in harm's way and then abandoning them when they become political liabilities. In *Clear and Present Danger*, Ryan again shows himself to be a man of action by manning a gun on a helicopter sent to pick up some of the soldiers. The events in *Patriot Games*, *The Cardinal of the Kremlin*, and *Clear and Present Danger* come back to haunt Ryan in *Executive Orders* because they make him seem to be a shadowy figure involved in suspicious killings.

In *The Sum of All Fears* (1991), Ryan is involved in the tracking of terrorists who set off an atomic bomb at the Super Bowl in Denver. In it he shows some of the leadership traits that develop further in *Executive Orders*, refusing to acquiesce to the President's demand that he go along with ordering a nuclear strike against Iran; Ryan blocks the Presidential order, preventing a mass murder and showing the same reticence to use nuclear weapons that he displays in *Executive Orders*.

In *Debt of Honor* (1994), he finds himself placed in a position of authority by the new President Durling, and he uses his considerable acumen in espionage and international affairs to help engineer the defeat of Japan and its allies when Japan murders American sailors and seizes American territory in revenge for the defeat in World War II and in an effort to end America's influence in Southeast Asia. It is his conduct in this novel which best presages how he will handle the crisis created by Iran's invasion of Iraq and plans to invade Saudi Arabia; recognizing Ryan's leadership skills, even if Ryan does not, Durling persuades him to accept appointment as Vice President after the previous vice president resigns because of charges of sexually harassing subordinates. Then a vengeful Japanese airline pilot crashes his craft into the joint session of Congress, decapitating the United States government and setting up the events of *Executive Orders*.



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