

# Lessons Learned Five Years After the Hostage Nightmare

By JOHN MUELLER

Though the fifth anniversary of the abduction of the American hostages in Iran passed on Sunday, the event still resonates, kept in our minds by the presidential campaign that culminates in today's election. The more general issue of how to deal with terrorism, as in Lebanon, continues to generate contention and frustration. It may be useful, therefore, to reflect on a little-discussed aspect of the Iran crisis: The automatic assumption by nearly everyone then, and apparently now, that the issue was very important.

For more than a year—444 days by the exacting count used at the time—our foreign policy was bound up with this incident. In his autobiography, Jimmy Carter remains preoccupied with it and refers to it dramatically as "one of the most intricate financial and political problems ever faced by any nation." At stake, he points out, were "the lives of 52 precious human beings" as well as "almost 12 billion dollars of Iranian assets."

Looked at broadly, the crisis seems hardly to be worth the obsession. This nation loses 52 lives on its highways every 11 hours and the federal government spends \$12 billion about every four days, and, without being too cavalier about the understandable concern for the lives of the hostages, the chief foreign-policy importance of the hostage-taking was that the territorialization of diplomats was being sanctioned by a government. But this outrageous violation of traditional practices was not going to set a dangerous fashion: The situation was unique—a bizarre, pointless, self-destructive act by a fanatical government that had only a very tenuous grasp on reality, on its supporters, and on its own destiny.

Why then should the issue seem so all-consumingly important to the leaders and

the media of the most powerful nation in history? Indeed, giving so much attention to the situation had the perverse effect of increasing the Iranian regime's prestige among its supporters and probably helped harden the issue into a macho test of wills that became all but intractable.

An alternative approach was available, but it apparently was never seriously considered. Instead of imitating Iran's pettiness and hysteria, the U.S. could have acted like a great power. Treating Iran with the contempt it so richly deserved, the president could have assigned some dignified citizen to head a well-staffed commission to deal patiently with the issue and ordered the commission to report regularly. The president could then have distanced himself and his top advisers from the issue, arguing with great validity that he could not allow the daily workings of this great country to be disrupted by an act of mindless, indeed infantile, fanaticism in a distant country. In retrospect, in fact, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance has suggested that such an approach would probably have been wise.

There are probably several reasons why this somewhat circumspect approach was never considered at the time. For one thing, no one knew, of course, that the crisis would last so long. It seemed reasonable to expect that it would be resolved within a few days, or at most weeks, thus to focus the government's full attention on it for a while may have seemed a justifiable use of resources. To a degree, then, the policy makers became trapped by their own initiatives. And, as Mr. Carter's national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, reports in his memoirs, military approaches became ever more attractive out of frustration—though there was no guarantee such ventures would not cost more

"precious human beings" than they would save.

Presumably, domestic politics were not entirely irrelevant to Mr. Carter's considerations. Before the crisis, his popularity ratings were at a nadir and he was being challenged from within his own party by Sen. Ted Kennedy. The rally-round-the-flag aspects of the hostage crisis caused President Carter's popularity to soar 29 percentage points and this, together with some politically inept statements by the senator, soon assured Mr. Carter of his party's nomination. Ultimately, of course, the hostage crisis—still unresolved at the time of the election in 1980—probably contributed to Mr. Carter's defeat. But had he been able to negotiate the hostages' release during the campaign, or had his rescue attempt of April 1980 been successful, he would have been very difficult to defeat.

But it would be unfair to suggest that Mr. Carter manipulated the hostage crisis purely for his own domestic political benefit. While it is difficult to imagine he was unaware of such potential benefits, memoirs of members of his staff confirm that he soon became emotionally committed, and it seems likely he is sincere in his autobiography when he expresses how "overwhelming" his "private feelings" were on the issue, and how he sometimes felt the hostages were "like part of my own family." Such all-consuming compassion, however, while admirable in its way, may not always be entirely desirable in a chief executive.

The hostage episode was also a colossal media event. Cause and effect are a bit muddled in this case: Perhaps the Carter people gave the event crisis priority in part because the media built it up so; perhaps the media became so obsessed with the issue in part because the administration insisted it was a crisis. But to a con-

siderable extent both administration and press were reflecting and responding to a public sense of outrage.

But while this public reaction may be a strong one, it does not follow that leaders and media must constantly pander to it. Yet, as the hostage crisis dragged on exhaustingly, the president felt he had to let himself be seen devoting his full attention to the issue, and the media, increasingly desperate for something to report in the stalemate crisis, kept themselves busy by systematically interviewing nearly every relative, friend, acquaintance and grade-school teacher of each hostage.

However, just because an event is dramatic doesn't mean all opportunities for clear thinking and leadership evaporate. While the public's resentment and outrage were understandable, a dignified response to the provocation might well have been politically possible. In general, the people show a good deal of common sense and can be expected to understand a difficult situation when it is sensibly explained to them. Thus they might be persuaded to favor a mature approach, rather than one stressing sanctimonious posturing and empty bravado. It's too bad their proclivities in this direction are not exploited more often by our nation's leaders.

It is not clear what lessons the Reagan administration has drawn from the Iran trauma. On the one hand, the State Department has adopted a low-key, headline-avoiding approach to the capture of three American hostages by terrorists in Lebanon, and in his last debate with Walter Mondale, President Reagan sensibly noted that frantic retaliation for the suicidal bombings in Beirut makes little sense.

On the other hand, Secretary of State George Shultz has called for a prompt military response to terrorist acts even if innocent lives are lost, and even if we do not know the "full facts." Otherwise, he fears, we risk becoming an indecisive "Hamlet of nations." Apparently he prefers the King Lear approach. Usually, however, it is only children and lunatics who find thunderstorms something to rage about. Reasonable people tend instead to invest in lightning rods and raincoats.

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