

Presidents and Terrorists Should Not Mix

By JOHN MUELLER

Two presidencies have now been severely damaged in efforts to deal with terrorists over hostages. One positive result of the current episode, however, is that we may now be starting to put terrorism, and particularly hostage-taking, belatedly into perspective.

Essentially, terrorism of this sort is an activity carried out by tiny bands of quite unimportant little men whose actions simply do not deserve the attention, especially the presidential attention, they have received. The attention itself, in fact, constitutes a substantial reward for terrorism.

Hostage-taking, of course, is a direct challenge to a U.S. government that likes to think it should protect Americans wherever they wander on the globe. "I happen to believe," President Reagan declared in his recent press conference, "that when an American citizen, any place in the world, is unjustly denied their constitutional rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, it is the responsibility of this government to restore those rights."

There is nothing wrong with this position in principle. But it simply does not follow that it is the responsibility of the president and other top officials to become personally involved whenever an American is taken hostage in some distant corner of the world—any more than they become involved when one is taken hostage in New Jersey. Both crimes are the acts of mi-

nor criminals and, however contemptible, these activities can and should be dealt with by the authorities at the appropriate level: low-ranking diplomatic officials in the one case, local police in the other.

There is no reason to doubt the genuineness of presidential outrage at the criminal, or of presidential compassion for the victim, when an American is taken hostage overseas. But no politician can be expected to be completely oblivious to the political potential that attends a hostage crisis either. Jimmy Carter's approval rating soared 29 percentage points when hostages were grabbed by a mob in Tehran in 1979, and he subsequently allowed the issue to become a central test of his presidency. His ultimate failure to free the hostages was of great political benefit to challenger Reagan in the 1980 election.

In the process Mr. Reagan committed himself to a set of anti-wimpisms in which he vowed he would "put an end to terrorism" or "keep the terrorists from getting away with it." But these are essentially impossible goals. One cannot "put an end" to terrorism any more than one can stop arson or drunken driving or shoplifting. Gains can be statistical at best.

Most damaging, Mr. Reagan continued the policy of tying the prestige of the presidency to the hostage issue. Therefore, when any criminal in any foreign land takes any American hostage, he can be fairly well assured that he will draw the

impassioned attention of the leader of the wealthiest and most powerful nation in history. What could be more ego-boosting?

For example, when the Rev. Benjamin Weir was released in September 1985, President Reagan insisted on announcing the release himself. That's no way to discourage terrorism. Rather it's likely to make it even more fashionable, giving the perpetrators prestige and recognition far beyond their objective strength.

This conclusion holds even when dealing with states that sponsor terrorism. The people running countries like Iran and Libya have shown that their grasp on reality is less than firm, and that their only sure talent is for added self-destruction. To feed their egos and to play to their already inflated self-importance is unwise and undignified. A dictator like Moammar Gadhafi is not an archfiend capable of acts of cosmic importance just because a few of his followers occasionally leave a bomb someplace or kidnap a hostage. It is possible for the government to apply political, economic and military pressure to these countries without lowering the U.S. to their level by directly and constantly involving the president. The soundness of this approach surely must be clear now that two presidencies have foundered in misguided efforts to influence Iran (or even to find coherent Iranians to talk to) on hostage issues.

Some argue that press and public pres-

sure on this issue is so great that the president has no realistic choice. But the reactions to the Iran-contra revelations suggest a fair amount of public sophistication on these matters.

Even though Iran has entered the public mind as a pariah state, the discovery that the administration had been secretly trying to improve Iranian relations as insurance against the future has been met with broad approval and understanding. On the other hand, the discovery that the president has essentially reversed his own sensible policy of refusing to trade goods for hostages has been met with widespread disapproval—for the elemental, commonsense reason that such rewards will encourage further hostage-taking.

The public's sophistication on these issues suggests that it is also likely to understand that the prestige and magnificence of the U.S. are not at stake whenever an American is kidnapped by a faceless little hand of foreign fanatics. The public might also be perfectly able to understand that the problem is best left to underlings while the president attends to other concerns, such as running the country.

The current crisis seems to be leading the president and other top administration officials to distance themselves from the enervating, frustrating day-to-day concerns about terrorism. No longer, for example, does Secretary of State George Schultz declare that we risk becoming the indecisive "Hamlet of nations" by not taking swift military action against acts of terrorism. This new reticence suggests that they may now have grasped the paradoxical lesson that, for top officials, dealing with terrorists is an issue at once too hot and too unimportant to handle.

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