

WHEN TO SPEAK OUT WHEN TO KEEP SILENT

A journalist who covered the Iran hostage drama eleven years ago wonders whether media reporting in such situations does more harm than good.

BY JEAN PELLETIER

HOSTAGE-TAKING IS POLITICAL BLACKMAIL, and ranks as one of the more primitive and barbaric forms of human conflict. It depends for its effectiveness as a political negotiation tactic on the presence of modern mass media. One must therefore ask if there would be fewer incidents of hostage-taking if members of the media refused to cover them.

The press officer of any foreign ministry would answer yes to this question. He or she would argue that without media, terrorists would lose the very tool that gives them leverage – the ability to turn a given conflict to their advantage through the use of terror. Without mass media, terrorists could not effectively influence the electorate of the hostages' home countries. Without the inquisitiveness of journalists, whose ears are always open for official reactions, hostage-takers would never otherwise get past the front doors of the White House, the Elysée Palace or 10 Downing Street.

It is true that hostage-taking is a last resort. Nonetheless, it is a very sophisticated weapon, all the more horrifying since, thanks to satellites, it reaches millions of "targets" – from ordinary television viewers (and voters) in the comfort of their homes to the most powerful heads of state secure in their bomb-proof "situation" rooms on the other side of the globe.

TO WRITE THE STORY ABOUT THE KIDNAPPING or not? To show the images or censor them? To speak up or remain silent? These are the questions for which there are no easy answers, not to mention ones that apply to all circumstances. Just as it is false to believe that journalists too become "kidnappers" when they report the taking of a hostage, it is also difficult to sustain the notion that they can remain strictly neutral about a given hostage situation when they are at the same time acting as a negotiating channel.

It was the US hostage crisis in Iran from 1979 to 1981 that, in effect, "modernized" hostage-taking – authorities of a nation state chose to hold foreign diplomats in detention in

order to achieve a political end. Iran opted to use a medieval form of blackmail as an instrument of foreign policy. But such a political calculation only made sense if Khomeini's Iran was certain from the outset that the action would have the desired effect on Jimmy Carter's America.

About this, Teheran had no doubts. After all, wasn't the regime of the ayatollahs brought to power thanks to the skilful use of the modern media? Wasn't Khomeini's calculation about the actions of the Shah, once a few gunshots were fired, right as well? The ayatollahs knew in November 1979 that in order get their own way with the United States, they would have to reach into the living rooms of America.

BY INVADING THE US EMBASSY IN DOWNTOWN Teheran and letting the TV reporters and correspondents of all the major networks and newspapers on the planet work their beats essentially without hindrance, they succeeded far beyond their own expectations. In a remarkably short time, traditional diplomacy was supplanted by the video camera; the live correspondent became the chargé d'affaires and the satellite, the only diplomatic channel that mattered.

Images of the American hostages being paraded blindfolded, hands tied, through the streets of Teheran, had a deep and lasting effect on American public opinion. One year later, the power of these images led to the election of a candidate for president – Ronald Reagan – who had but one election promise: "never again."

The US media – especially television – became active accomplices in this game. Ted Koppel is one of the most watched and respected TV journalists today, in the main, because of a nightly programme which got its start in November 1979 – "America Held Hostage." Viewed from the perspective of 1991, this seems an absurd title for a TV programme. It wasn't America, but fifty-three diplomats who were being held hostage.

Nevertheless, Jimmy Carter played the game too, isolating himself in the White House and binding his fate to that of the hostages imprisoned in the basement of the US chancellery in Teheran. Nevertheless, this inane title, no doubt dreamed up by a news editor unable to resist a sensationalist headline, was to become in just a few weeks, an objective description of the American political mood.

FROM THE MOMENT TRADITIONAL DIPLOMACY left the field, the media filled the vacuum. Journalists in Khomeini's Iran were to enjoy greater diplomatic immunity than the diplomats themselves. The US electorate, encouraged by an overheated press, began to perceive the crisis as much more significant than it actually was. And whereas the White House should have remained above all the media noise, instead it diminished itself by playing at the same level as the mass media. From that point on, only a successful military intervention could have broken the impasse between Iran and the US, but the attempt that was made ended in disaster on an Iranian desert – the political fate of Jimmy Carter was sealed.

Throughout those long months of the Iranian hostage crisis was the US media right in carrying on as it did? The simple answer is no. First of all, if certain facts had to be reported, this could have been done without all the pathos and hand-wringing. Was it necessary to play up the yellow ribbons, and the drawn-out counting of days, when all the while it was clear there was no imminent solution? Did the press have to indulge in a primitive and offensive demagoguery, effectively making Islam of the 1980s out to be the Bolshevism of the 1950s? Khomeini's Iran was not Ho Chi Minh's Vietnam, yet the hostage crisis became America's second Vietnam.

THIS KIND OF CRITICISM COULD BE HEARD eleven years ago, but it was at the time evidently much better for the networks' bottom line to sensationalize. Jimmy Carter's calculation that if he immersed himself in the crisis, he would better his chances against his Democratic Party rival, Ted Kennedy, encouraged this tendency.