TERRORISM, THE MEDIA, AND THE GOVERNMENT

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I t is 0622 hours on 23 October 1983 in the parking lot of Beirut International Airport in Lebanon. A large yellow Mercedes truck with a swarthy bearded man at the wheel is racing at high speed directly at the chain-link gate guarding the entrance to the 24th US Marine Amphibious Unit's headquarters compound. Passing through the gate before the guard can fire, it plunges on, finally stopping in the open atrium lobby of the commandeered terminal building where the Marines are quartered. Six tons of high explosives in the truck detonate, vaporizing the terrorist driver, collapsing the four-story steel and concrete building in a pile of rubble, killing 241 Marines, and injuring scores more.[1]

Such terroristic acts present a direct threat to the interests of the American government and its personnel. From 1980 through 1986 the US military was the target of over 250 terrorist attacks. During the same period, American diplomats and diplomatic facilities worldwide were targets in 228 attacks. Close to 5000 international terrorist attacks occurred during that seven-year period, which means that during the decade to date, a US military or diplomatic establishment was attacked about every five days and a terrorist incident occurred every 12 hours. These statistics do not include the fatal attacks in October of last year on two US Air Force sergeants and one retired US Air Force sergeant outside Clark Air Base in the Philippines.[2] While many of these terrorist attacks amounted to little more than harassment, some, as in the case of the Marines, caused catastrophic loss of life. These numbers make it clear just how pervasive terrorism has become.

For me terrorism has a personal side. There are memorial plaques in the State Department lobby listing the names of American diplomats who have died in the line of duty since 1776. When I joined the Foreign Service 21 years ago, there were 81 names on those plaques. All but seven of those diplomats died from earthquakes, plagues, and other nature-induced

causes. But in the last 21 years, 73 additional names of Americans serving in US diplomatic missions have been added, Americans who died at the hands of terrorists. In other words, for the first 190 years of our nation's existence, the Foreign Service lost a member to violent death by human agents about once every 27 years. Since I joined, we have averaged one such loss about every 90 days.

But not just diplomats and not just military and not just Americans suffer. Terrorism occurs in most parts of the world, but it is the world's democracies that suffer most. For example, in 1986, 64 percent of all international terrorist attacks were directed against only three countries—the United States, Israel, and France.

The moral values upon which democracy is based—individual rights, equality under the law, freedom of thought, freedom of religion, and freedom of the press—all stand in the way of those who seek to impose their will or their ideology by terror. The challenge to democracies is to combat terrorism while preserving these deep democratic values. A particularly sensitive issue is the relation of the media to terrorism. While virtually all players on the international stage vie for attention and public support, terrorists are unique in the way they use violence against innocents to draw attention to a cause.

Terrorism and the Media

Terrorist threats—to our people, to friendly countries, and to democracy itself—are all made more complex by the interplay among media, governments, and terrorists. The very nature of terrorism, its desire to gain the widest possible publicity for its act, makes this complexity inevitable. Terrorists have always understood that the target was not the physical victim, but the wider audience. Their goal is to terrorize citizens in an apparently random way, so that people lose confidence in their governments' policies. Nineteenth-century Russian terrorists spoke of "propaganda of the deed." Terrorists then could not imagine the power terrorist acts would have in the day of worldwide live television broadcasts.

Many of us can remember the horror of seeing the 1972 Olympic Games disintegrate into kidnapping, flames, and murder. No doubt the Black September faction of the PLO chose to attack the Israelis at the

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Munich Olympics precisely because it guaranteed them a worldwide audience. How many times since then have we all been riveted to our television sets to watch some new act of barbarism unfold? But we must not fall into the trap of confusing technology with people. The medium is *not* the message. The message is what reporters and editors decide should be aired or printed. What you and I see, hear, and read about terrorism in mass media is the result of multiple decisions made by cameramen, reporters, producers, copywriters, and editors throughout the news industry. When we explore the role of media in terrorism, we are in fact exploring the judgments of dozens of individuals.

The most difficult issue involved is media coverage of a terrorist incident in progress. Because news organizations, especially electronic media, can directly affect the outcome of a terrorist incident, journalists must exercise special care and judgment. Innocent lives can be lost by even the slightest miscalculation on the part of the media. That is why it is so vital for journalists to keep certain specific points in mind as they cover ongoing terrorist incidents, the most fundamental being one borrowed from the Hippocratic oath: *First, do no harm.*

We have to assume that terrorists have access to any information published or broadcast about them and the attack they are carrying out. The hand-held television is a fact of life; any airport duty-free shop has excellent, battery-powered shortwave receivers the size of a paperback book; two-way radios are cheap and readily available. It is now possible to put a cellular telephone, a two-way radio, a shortwave receiver, and a television receiver in one ordinary briefcase.

The ability of terrorists to track outside responses to their actions in real or near-real time means that journalists are not just narrating the passing scene. They are players; like it or not, they are involved. This involvement imposes special responsibilities on journalists during a terrorist incident such as an airline hijacking. Just like those of us on the task force in the State Department's Operations Center, journalists are making decisions which can mean life or death for specific, identifiable individuals.

During hijackings and other incidents of hostage-taking, terrorists have—as during the Air France hijacking to Entebbe on 27 June 1976 and the TWA 847 hijacking on 14 June 1985—segregated victims by race, religion, nationality, or occupation. Indeed, people have been murdered on the basis of these distinctions. Obviously, news reports saying things like "22 of the 72 passengers are American citizens" provide information which can be useful to terrorists and deadly for hostages. Even revealing the exact number of hostages can be valuable to terrorists. Six of the American employees of the US Embassy in Teheran spent several weeks hiding with our Canadian friends. Had the terrorists realized their absence they, too, could have been seized. Several news organizations learned of this situation and—to their credit—did not report it.

A wide range of people have suggested ways in which the media might address the problems inherent in covering hijackings and other hostage situations. Some have suggested that there be no live coverage of an incident in progress. Others have proposed formal guidelines, perhaps offered by the government, perhaps voluntarily set up by news organizations, perhaps by the two working in concert.

After considerable reflection, I believe that US law and custom, our country's profound commitment to freedom of the press, and the widely varying circumstances of each terrorist incident make it impractical to develop universally accepted guidelines for the media's response to terrorism. Still, given the media's involvement in terrorist incidents, it seems to me that reporters and their editors should be asking themselves some tough questions as they cover terrorist incidents. Let me suggest eight such questions:

1. Have my competitive instincts run away with me?

Journalism is a competitive business. Everyone wants to cover the story better and, where possible, sooner than the competition. Occasionally, competitive instinct has overridden common sense. One need only look at the tapes of the Damascus "press conference" with the TWA 847 hostages to see how the pressures for a better camera angle or an answer to a question turned professional journalists quite literally into a mob.

2. What is the benefit in revealing the professional and personal history of a hostage before he or she is released?

Hostages have been known to misrepresent their marital status, professional responsibilities, career histories, and other material facts in their efforts to persuade their captors not to harm them. One former hostage is certain that the lies he told his captors saved his life. It is standard American journalistic practice to report information about victims, but in many other democratic countries that is not the case. In the unique circumstances of political terrorism, facts about hostages verified by family members or coworkers and announced publicly could have deadly consequences.

3. When reporting on the statements made by hostages and victims, have I given sufficient weight to the fact that *all* such statements are made under duress? If I decide to go ahead with the report, have I given my audience sufficient warning?

We have cases where hostages appear on television tapes making admissions or other statements in the terrorists' interests—all seemingly uncoerced and unrehearsed. Only later, after the hostages' return, did we learn that the statements had been extracted by force or threat.

4. Should I use statements, tapes, and the like provided by the terrorists? How reflective of actual conditions are the materials provided by the terrorists? How much analysis should I offer? How much speculation?

US Marine Corps/DOD
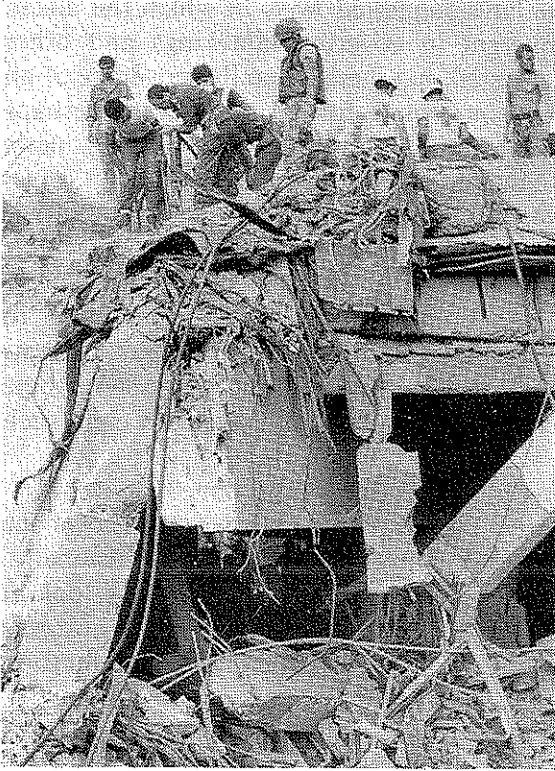
Rescue workers search the rubble of the US Marine headquarters in Beirut after the terrorist bombing of October 1983.

Former hostage David Jacobsen recounts the beatings he received when US media reported that messages made at the direction of his captors were said to contain "hidden messages."[3]

5.   How often should I use live coverage? Should I put a terrorist on TV live? Should I run an unedited statement on the air or in print? To what extent will I serve the terrorists' purposes by so doing?

One of the things that distinguishes terrorism from other crimes is the use of real or threatened violence to amplify and advance a political position. Few news organizations run more than brief excerpts of statements by anyone but the President of the United States. Even then, reporting full texts of presidential remarks is limited to special occasions. Yet, ironically, when a terrorist speaks to the world, some news organizations have tended to air or print every word, every gesture, every inflection. Giving extensive coverage to terrorist statements may well encourage future acts of terrorism.

6.   Am I judging sources as critically as I would at other times?

Devoting major chunks of space and time to a terrorist incident can create a situation in which it becomes difficult to generate enough solid material to "fill the hole." During terrorist incidents we have all seen reporting of what amounts to nothing more than rumor. Information based on sources responsible news organizations would not normally touch has

been given broad circulation during incidents. I have seen stories which should have read something like: "According to the reports of a wire service known to be careless, a newspaper noted for its irresponsibility has reported that anonymous sources in a rumor-plagued city have said . . ."

7. Should I even *try* to report on possible military means to rescue the hostages?

A particularly reprehensible practice by some news organizations is trying to discover and publish reports on the movements of military forces during a terrorist incident. Such reporting can only end up one of two ways: either the report is correct and the news organization runs the risk of having served as an intelligence source for the terrorists; or the report is wrong, in which case it may unduly complicate the resolution of the incident. This subject deserves special attention. Reports on military activities designed to surprise or thwart an armed foe should be just about as secret as things get.

8. What about honest consideration for the victims' families?

One former hostage recounts how his teenage son received a telephone call in the middle of the night. The journalist calling had a question: "The latest reports indicate that your father will be executed in two hours. Any response?"[4]

It is encouraging to report that responsible journalists are paying increasing attention to the effects their actions have on terrorism. I know that some major news organizations have set up specific internal guidelines for handling terrorist incidents. It was gratifying also to note that major networks declined to broadcast a videotape made last spring by one of the hostages in Lebanon. The substance of what was said was reported, but the tape itself—obviously a cynical attempt by the kidnappers to advance their demands—was not aired.

Just as we in government must defend our Constitution without abandoning our traditional values, journalists must exercise their judgment in ways that do not jeopardize their traditional role as an independent watchdog. The media need no prompting to resist efforts at manipulation by government. One can only urge they exercise the same care at resisting manipulation by terrorists.

How then are we to thwart terrorism? What can we as citizens, as military members, as government officials do to protect ourselves from the multiple threats of terrorism?

Our Government's Strategy Against Terrorism

Our government has essentially turned to a commonsense strategy to combat terrorism. Despite some setbacks, this program is beginning to show successes. This strategy rests on three pillars:
- First is a policy of firmness toward terrorists;
- Second is pressure on terror-supporting states;

- Third is a series of practical measures designed to identify, track, apprehend, prosecute, and punish terrorists.

The first of these pillars, no concessions, is designed to avoid rewarding terrorists. Behavior rewarded is behavior repeated, as any parent can attest. This element of our policy is sometimes misstated or misunderstood. Some believe that this policy means we will not ever talk to terrorists. That is not correct. To be precise, our policy is that we will not make concessions to terrorists, nor will we negotiate with them. But we will talk to anyone, to any group, to any government about the safety and well-being of Americans held hostage.

The second pillar, maintaining pressure on terror-supporting states, is of real importance because of the special danger posed by the state-supported terrorist. Our aim is to raise the economic, diplomatic, and—if necessary—the military costs to such states to a level that they are unwilling to pay. The US air strike against Libya was in part intended to raise the costs to Libya of supporting terrorism. The withdrawal of our ambassador to Syria in the aftermath of proven official Syrian complicity in the attempted bombing of an El Al 747 in London demonstrated to Syria that we will not conduct business as usual with states that use terror as a foreign-policy tool.

Over the past year, there has been a growing political consensus among European governments that more has to be done to show states that supporting terrorism is unacceptable to the international community. In the late spring of 1986, several European nations imposed sanctions on Libya for supporting terrorism. Then Western European governments expelled more than 100 so-called Libyan "diplomats" and businessmen. This heavy blow to Libya's terrorist infrastructure in Europe, combined with the tightened security measures at airports and elsewhere, doubtless played a role in reducing sharply Libyan-related terrorist incidents after May of 1986. In the fall of that year, the Europeans announced a series of economic, political, diplomatic, and security-related measures against Syria, in response to which that nation has improved its behavior in several important ways.

We regard terrorists as criminals. They commit criminal acts. And this brings us to the third pillar of our strategy: our effort to find and implement practical measures to identify, apprehend, and punish terrorists. These measures involve improving cooperation among countries in intelligence, police, and law enforcement matters. For example, we are finding ways to improve the collection and sharing of information on terrorists' locations, movements, and affiliations. We are now working with key allies to develop agreed "lookout" lists of known or suspected terrorists. As terrorists are identified, we can begin to track them, especially as they attempt to cross international borders. Even democratic states can require detailed identification and conduct thorough searches at border points. This is a terrorist vulnerability we are trying to exploit with some success.

We have also developed an aggressive program of cooperating with our friends and allies in the apprehension, prosecution, and punishment of terrorists. Over the past year, our cooperation has gotten closer, and we are seeing results. European courts have convicted and sentenced terrorists to long prison terms. Attitudes among political leaders are changing.

Finally, we have dramatically upgraded our military capability to respond directly to terrorist activities in a wide variety of international settings. The US Special Operations Command, a unified command under the leadership of General James J. Lindsay, USA, was activated on 1 June of last year, with headquarters at MacDill Air Force Base, Florida. Designed to deal with low-intensity conflict, including terrorism, this command has components from each of the services, including the Army's 1st Special Operations Command headquartered at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina. This Army command embraces a Special Forces group, Ranger regiment, Civil Affairs battalion, Psyop group, Military Intelligence battalion, the 160th Aviation Group (the "Night Stalkers"), and the highly secret Delta Force. The 160th Aviation Group's superspecialized helicopters have already proved their mettle in the Persian Gulf in operations against the Iranians. The Army component, in combination with elements from the Navy's SEAL teams and the Air Force's 2d Air Division, constitute a formidable counterterrorist capability indeed.[5]

In my many trips to Europe during the last year, both before and after the Iran/Contra revelations, I have encountered no diminution of enthusiasm for working together to counter terrorism. There is a palpable sense of dedication among the intelligence, police, airport security, customs, and immigration officials involved in fighting the terrorist threat. I believe that this growing cohesion in the world's democracies is having an effect, that we are in a position to carry out our strategy and reduce the level of terrorism around the world. No one, of course, can promise a world free of terrorism. History makes it clear that the use of violence to intimidate others is not likely to disappear. What we can confidently state, however, is that we have a concrete plan for dealing with terrorism and that we are seeing some heartening results.

NOTES

1. Eric Hammel, *The Root: The Marines in Beirut August 1982-February 1984* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), pp. 287-95.
2. Marc Lerner, "3 Americans murdered in Philippines," *The Washington Times*, 29 October 1987, pp. A1, A12.
3. Remarks by former hostage David Jacobsen, 4 March 1987, during conference titled "The Hostages—Family, Media, and Government," at Hotel Washington, Washington, D.C.
4. Ibid.
5. Kenneth Brooten, Jr., "U.S. Special Operations Command," *Journal of Defense & Diplomacy*, 5 (No. 10, 1987), 21-23; John M. Collins, *Green Berets, SEALs, and Spetsnaz* (Washington: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1987), pp. 21-23, 32-37; Eric C. Ludvigsen, "The Army's 'Night Stalkers' in the Persian Gulf," *Army*, 37 (November 1987), 14, 16.