

HOSTAGES AND THEIR CAPTORS -- FRIENDS AND LOVERS

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"DO WHAT THEY ASK. AND
DON'T WORRY. THEY MAY
KILL ME BUT THEY ARE NOT
EVIL MEN."

Brian M. Jenkins

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French archeologist Francoise Claustre stared into the camera, desolate. For 17 months she had been a hostage of rebel guerrillas in Chad. Whether she lived or died depended on whether the government of France acceded to their demands for \$2 million worth of arms and aid.

The government of Chad was understandably opposed to any concessions and angry with France for even negotiating with the rebels. Much was at stake. With oil and uranium reserves, Chad is strategically important to France. France feared that Chad might retaliate if she paid the guerrillas. But abstract concepts like national interests count little against the genuine human drama of the episode. France has agreed to pay.

The Chadian affair is only one of a growing list of hostage incidents. As long as we place a high premium on human life -- and it is difficult to argue for its devaluation -- governments will be at a disadvantage in dealing with political kidnapers. Guerrillas and terrorists will continue to seize hostages: diplomats, corporate executives, tourists, sometimes just anybody handy.

Surprisingly, few hostages bear any grudge against their captors for turning them into human pawns. Indeed, they frequently develop positive relationships with them. They chat and share sandwiches inside embassies surrounded by soldiers and policemen. Upon release, they often part company amiably, wish each other well. Some former kidnap victims recall their "hosts" almost fondly -- "They were exceptionally polite -- especially for terrorists."

* A similar version of this article appeared in *The New York Times*, October 3, 1975.

A United States consul said after having been held for 95 hours by Japanese terrorists, "I hope they might someday be people with whom I can sit down and have a cup of coffee and talk about politics." Others speak of their captors with begrudging admiration. "They were dedicated men." And, "Their sincerity should be respected." Some develop something close to affection for their captors. A few fall in love.

Sometimes the hostages go beyond compliance at gunpoint and actively collaborate. They may even try to protect their captors. Several years ago, when police stormed a bank vault in Stockholm, one hostage held by two bank robbers shouted to police, "I won't let you hurt him."

For most, the effects wear off quickly after release, but not always. A stewardess, once held at pistol point by a hijacker, continued to bring him gifts in prison long after his arrest. Grateful for having been spared? Fearful of retribution? Uncommonly compassionate? Latently sympathetic toward the political aims of their captors? Brainwashed?

None of these fully explains why hostages and captors may become temporary comrades. Some elements of brainwashing are inherent in the situation: fear, fatigue, disorientation in space and time, sensory deprivation -- the hostage may be isolated, blindfolded, or locked in a dark room, unable to hear more than muffled voices.

Political extremists may lecture hostages on their political goals, but seldom make any serious attempt to indoctrinate, convert, or recruit them. More often, the hostages are informed that they are simply pawns, bargaining chips, against whom the captors bear no personal malice, but who, unfortunately, may have to be killed if the demands are not met.

These are hardly ideal conditions to forge even temporary friendships. How do we explain it? Some of the reasons are simple and obvious. Others reveal how the human mind deals with the maximum threat.

The hostage instantly tries to establish his own identity, some human bond with his captors. He knows he must move out of the category of human item to be bartered and become a human being whom, he hopes, it must be harder to kill. He may ask the captors about their lives, how they became terrorists, what they want to achieve. Or he may tell them about himself.

"I talked as hard as I could," wrote one former hostage, "explaining that we didn't share political philosophies but I ought to hear his side of the story."

While the hostage probably does not share the political goals, certainly not the tactics of his captors, and least of all their choice of victim, it is difficult to talk with anyone for hours or days without seeing at least something of their point of view. The hostage also quickly recognizes that his interests and those of his captors coincide. Both would like to see the demands met. The hostage's life depends on it.

But these obvious reasons alone do not account for a change of heart. Another process is taking place that the hostage may not be aware of. Its essential ingredient is the inescapable threat of death, with the outcome a mere matter of whim from the hostage's point of view. The captors may kill him whether their demands are met or not. It is entirely up to the captor, omnipotent, a virtual god, with absolute power over life and death before whom the hostage is helpless, frightened, humiliated, virtually an infant. Under these circumstances, the hostage unconsciously begins to assimilate -- and even imitate -- the attitudes of his captors.

Terrorists may seize hostages tomorrow in any part of the world. While it is always hazardous to predict a person's emotional responses under extreme stress, we should not be surprised if in the future some hostage says, on emerging from the custody of terrorists who most certainly would have killed him, "Really, they were very reasonable terrorists."