

HOSTAGE SURVIVAL: SOME PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

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PREFACE

For approximately the past three years, The Rand Corporation, under the joint sponsorship of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency and the Department of State, has been studying various aspects of international terrorism. A major focus of this research effort has been on situations in which U.S. officials abroad or foreign officials in the United States might be held hostage by terrorists.

This paper--drawn from material reported earlier to ARPA and State--describes some preliminary observations on the experience of the hostages. It is based largely on interviews with former hostages, including both American and foreign officials, businessmen who have been kidnapped abroad, and several private American citizens who were kidnapped and held for ransom in the United States. The observations here are *preliminary*; they are being circulated in the form of a paper for the sake of timeliness. A more detailed Rand report is forthcoming.

STATISTICAL OBSERVATIONS

Between January 1, 1968, and June 30, 1975, there were 77 international hostage incidents, not counting airline hijackings or the kidnaping of business executives. The 77 incidents include kidnappings, attempted kidnappings, barricade and hostage incidents, and other attempts to seize hostages by urban guerrilla or terrorist organizations, or in some cases by lone gunmen. In 52 of these incidents, the hostages were diplomats, honorary consuls, or other government officials serving abroad.

In all, 348 hostages were taken. Of these 53 were killed; one was seriously wounded and released; 27 were wounded or injured during assaults; one suffered a heart attack after lengthy captivity and was released; 15 were subjected to a lengthy captivity and released; one remained in captivity; the remaining 250 -- approximately 72 percent of the total -- were released unharmed.

Seventy hostages were seized in four unplanned barricade and hostage situations, and 90 hostages were seized by Arab terrorists at Ma'alot. If we exclude these five incidents which account for 40 percent of the hostages, then in 62 incidents (the other 11 attempts to take hostages were unsuccessful), 208 hostages were taken, of whom 33 were killed and 175 or 84 percent were rescued or released alive.

In only nine of the 66 incidents in which hostages were taken (the remainder being unsuccessful attempts to take hostages), or approximately 14 percent, were hostages deliberately killed by their captors without provocation of any assault or shootout initiated by security forces. Of the total 348 hostages, only 3 percent were "executed" in cold blood, while 11 percent died during assaults by security forces.*

American diplomats and other American representatives abroad have been the most popular targets of kidnapers, figuring in more than a third of all international hostage incidents during the past six years. In all, between August 1968 and June 1975, 33 U.S. diplomats or other American

* This compares closely with FBI statistics on kidnappings in the United States. A total of 626 hostages were seized in 427 cases in 1974 and 1975 of whom 34, or approximately 5 percent, were killed. This, however, includes incidents involving gunfire between police and the kidnapers.

officials serving abroad have been taken hostage or have been the targets of attempted kidnappings, six of them were killed: one was killed during an attempted kidnapping and five were "executed" by their captors.* Latin America has continued to be the most "dangerous" area for American officials serving abroad insofar as kidnapping is concerned, followed by the Middle East and Africa.

THE RAND STUDY OF HOSTAGE SITUATIONS

For approximately the past three years, The Rand Corporation, under the joint sponsorship of the Department of State and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, has been studying various aspects of international terrorism. The focus of this research effort has been on situations in which U.S. officials abroad or foreign officials in the United States might be held hostage by terrorists.

We have examined both the external factors, that is, the policy and tactics of bargaining with terrorists for the release of hostages, as well as the internal factors, that is, the experience of the hostages. In this latter effort, we have tried to cover the entire hostage experience: the circumstances of capture; the period of captivity; and the post-release experience.

We were able to talk personally with a number of the former hostages. We have interviewed most of the American officials who were kidnapped and survived; we have also interviewed a number of foreign diplomats who have been kidnapped as well as several businessmen in Argentina and a number of private American citizens who were kidnapped and held for ransom in the United States. In addition to our own interviews, debriefings and interviews of other former hostages have been made available to us, and several former hostages have written accounts of their experience. In all, the preliminary observations below are based upon the collective experience of approximately 40 former hostages of whom we interviewed about two-thirds ourselves. We have also examined the existing literature describing comparable experiences of POWs, inmates of concentration camps, victims of assaults, and so on.

* These figures do not include American officials who were captured in Indochina.

We have deliberately avoided any attempts to "psychologically analyze" the former hostages (although three psychiatrists and one clinical psychologist have participated in our inquiry). And we have avoided any attempt to write a "field manual" prescribing the correct behavior of a hostage. The circumstances of capture, the conditions of captivity, the attitudes and aims of the captors, and the personalities of the hostages vary too much; it would be futile, perhaps dangerous, to prescribe behavior. A hostage must, we believe, "play it by ear." Our objective was simply to describe the experience and reactions of hostages so that any future hostage might be mentally armed to understand his or her own reactions and thus better maintain his or her own physical and mental well-being both during and after the episode.

The observations below are preliminary, tentative, and necessarily incomplete. Our final report on this study of hostage survival is now in preparation and should be available later this year.

CAPTURE

While the fear of being kidnapped need not become an obsession of the diplomat stationed abroad, elementary security precautions are in order, especially in areas where urban guerrillas and terrorists are active. Two prevalent notions that cause such precautions to be disregarded should be dispelled: The first is the oft-heard notion that "I can't do my job surrounded by all this security." The security procedure of a post may be inconvenient and at times annoying, but a person who is kidnapped will not be able to do the job very well either. The second, equally often heard, notion is that "If they want me, they'll get me somehow." This may be true. However, while some terrorist groups have mobilized large numbers of men and demonstrated daring in kidnapping well-protected targets, most terrorist groups do not have much manpower or are not willing to risk many men in a kidnapping. And most kidnappings are carried out not by large, well-organized groups but by small groups. If there is an easier target to get to, they will get to it, which is why in many cases kidnappers have seized lower-ranking, less-protected officials. Even a few basic security precautions may encourage kidnappers to choose another target.

In the majority of episodes involving U.S. officials, the hostage was taken from an automobile. A few were seized at their own homes, a few at their offices or at other locations. The percentages alone suggest that some basic precautions while driving or being driven--altering the times and routes of travel, locking car doors and rolling up windows, going to and from work in carpools and caravans, avoiding narrow one-way streets, etc.--could significantly reduce the chances of being kidnapped.

No one can tell a person whether or not he should resist if he is about to be kidnapped. That is a decision each person must make on the basis of his own calculations as to the immediate situation, the past record of the likely kidnapers, the policy of the local government with regard to ransom (since that government is the most likely target for ransom demands), and other relevant factors. However, a number of the factors mentioned above can be determined in advance. An individual can decide in advance whether he will allow himself to be taken or will instead resist, and under what possible scenarios he might do either. There is unlikely to be any time to think of options once an attempt is made.

It is risky to resist, but for a variety of reasons, it may in some circumstances be more risky to be taken. If an individual decides in advance to resist, it may be useful to practice doing so, that is, to think of several scenarios and then think of possible evasive actions. This can be done while driving to or from work. For example, the potential hostage may pretend that a panel truck coming up on the left is about to cut him off. What should he do? Swerve the car and jump the curb? The curbs in some cities are a foot high; a check in advance could determine that a car would not make it. Slam the car in reverse? Possibly. By playing this mental game, it may be possible to discard a number of possible actions in advance and think of several others. A totally unexpected action according to a preconceived plan by the intended victim may allow a few crucial seconds while the would-be captors think to react. It is also possible to make mental contingency plans for the home or office and advisable to walk through them.

An individual in an area where kidnappings have occurred may also want to discuss with certain members of his family what he would want them to do in case he were kidnapped. By making certain contingency plans for members of the family to follow and insuring such things as having one's personal papers in order, a hostage can spare himself considerable anxiety, during captivity.

An individual in a moving car is afforded a certain amount of protection. Evasion may still look good at this stage. On the other hand, once the vehicle is stopped, or once the kidnappers are upon their target with guns drawn, any attempt at escape is likely to be foolhardy. The captors are most nervous at this moment. They probably have rehearsed their roles, and they are exposed and jumpy. It is a bad time to run or resist. An unexpected move is likely to result in gunfire. At this stage, immediate survival appears to dictate full, visible cooperation by the hostage.

However much they may have thought about the possibility of being kidnapped, no one can ever believe it is actually happening when it does. Their mind simply rejects the idea as a bad dream, or the victim fails to take into account the gravity of the situation. This may sometimes lead to some rather serious misjudgments which may jeopardize the safety of the hostage: absurd attempts to resist or hopeless attempts to escape. While shock is inevitable, the hostage should struggle to regain possession of his composure and full mental faculties as quickly as possible.

CAPTIVITY

Being kidnapped is probably one of the most harrowing experiences a person can be subjected to. No matter how short the period of captivity, it may be worse than the lengthy imprisonment of a convict. The sentence of the hostage is indefinite; it may end in release or death--the outcome is unknown, even whimsical beyond control of the hostage. No prescribed set of rules can be followed by him to avoid the punishment, yet death is not certain. A hostage has no final hour to prepare for mentally as the condemned prisoner has. Nor is the hostage a member of an organized group as is the prisoner of war. Most often, he is alone. It is not simply a matter of being deprived of one's freedom for a few days; it is an agonizing game of mental Russian roulette.

Generally, a hostage experiences the greatest anxiety during the first few hours of captivity. He has just been torn out of his normal environment and routine, threatened with guns, shoved about, and perhaps blindfolded, not knowing whether or not death is planned and imminent. For most hostages, the level of anxiety during captivity is highest at the moment of capture and might remain high for several hours; it then declines with the realization that he is not about to be killed--at least not right away--and a certain routine sets in. The anxiety level rises sharply again just prior to release, reflecting the interruption in the routine of captivity and renewed uncertainty on the part of the hostage as to whether he is about to be released or killed. The hostage's feelings of depression, however, would probably increase steadily and gradually as captivity continued.

Surprising as it may appear, the hostage often develops positive attitudes toward his captors. Many former hostages have mentioned this. How can this seemingly odd development be explained? First, the hostage is, by the nature of his captivity, placed immediately in a mode of physical cooperation. He also quickly realizes that he and his kidnapers have a certain community of interest. Both would like to see the demands of the kidnapers met. The hostage also recognizes quickly that he must not provoke his captors into precipitate action; he must not antagonize them into shooting him or treating him badly. He instinctively tries to establish some human bond with his captors, to move away from being an item to be bartered for and become instead a human being like his captors, so that they may not so easily destroy him. In talking with his captors, in deliberately trying to establish rapport, the hostage usually finds it difficult not to become somewhat sympathetic toward their dedication and resolve, if not their immediate tactics. But it is more than all this. Being kidnapped is a life-threatening experience--what the psychiatrists call a "primary experience"--in which the hostage is defenseless and helpless. His abductors control everything: whether he eats, whether he is bound, whether he lives. The dependency is like that of a helpless infant. The kidnapper is the parent but he is also more than that; he is a god, for he obviously controls life and death and there is no escape. Under

such circumstances, a process of introjection takes place. The hostage may begin to depend upon, to identify with, and eventually to develop a certain bond with his captor. In a few extreme cases, the captive may convert to collaborator, unconsciously incorporating his captor's views into his own mental set. After release, this change of attitude may be noted by the hostage's family and colleagues.

It works both ways. The kidnapper also begins to develop a certain camaraderie with his hostage, at times even comforting him, wishing him well.

As the hostage identifies with his captors, he also may begin to develop a negative attitude toward those "on the outside." As mentioned before, the hostage and the kidnappers have common interests. To the extent that the local government, the hostage's government, and the colleagues of the hostage do not readily accede to the kidnappers' demands, the hostage may begin to feel abandoned, betrayed; the "friendlies" may come to be regarded as his enemies. The hostage also fears that government security forces may locate and assault the kidnappers' hideout and that he will be killed by one side or the other in the shootout. Based on the historical record, it is a valid fear.

Diplomatic hostages have tended to adopt one of two postures toward their captors: Some have sought to establish a formally correct relationship, while trying to maintain some of the dignity of their diplomatic post, albeit in captivity. Others appear to have been more informal discarding any pretensions of rank, projecting themselves as human beings caught up in an unfortunate situation.

Most hostages feel humiliated by their captivity. The feeling is normal. It *is* humiliating to be so helpless, perhaps to be partially undressed, to be guarded constantly, to be compelled to ask permission, and be compelled to perform ordinarily private functions under the watchful eyes of guards. It is small comfort to know that others have survived such experiences, and few hostages have died of humiliation. Nevertheless, most hostages adapt surprisingly quickly.

Most hostages consider the idea of escape and then discard it. Once in captivity, it is extremely risky. James Bond may do it in the movies but most mortals cannot. It is essential to evaluate the situation very carefully--the local government's policy toward concessions, the kidnappers' record, if they have one, and so on. If the situation appears to be utterly hopeless, then an attempt to escape may warrant serious consideration.

The hostage may be asked to write notes to verify that he is alive. He may also be asked to write or to sign appeals to his own government or the local government urging them to accept the kidnappers' terms. He may be given denunciations of his own or the local government to sign, or he may be asked to "confess" that he or his government has been involved in certain nefarious activities. The question arises, Should he sign these? The decision is an individual one. The hostage probably can be compelled by threat of force to sign; resistance at the risk of life would appear to serve little purpose. It generally will or should be understood by those on the outside that the hostage is not a free agent. Appeals, denunciations, or confessions extracted under the threat of force have little value and can be easily denied. Some hostages, however, have refused to sign unless changes were made in the wording of a note. This may serve to bolster the hostage's morale, making him feel that he is not entirely helpless. The refusal may also serve to command a certain degree of respect from the captors.

Hostages often think of "writing between the lines," altering their handwriting or doing something that will convey some additional information to those on the outside. The idea is usually discarded on the assumption that the intended recipients of the "code" will not understand it anyway--and unless some code has been worked out in advance, this is probably correct. The possibility of coding messages deserves further exploration, however.

For the sake of his own emotional well-being, a hostage must try to think positively. The odds are truly favorable: Only a small fraction of those taken hostage have been "executed" by their captors. The vast majority survive. Several hostages have advised others facing a similar experience to keep their sense of humor, which may sound like oddly trivial

advice to one whose remaining period of life has become suddenly so uncertain. But it does help to reduce one's anxiety, and it may relieve the tensions of the captors as well, for they are probably scared too. The hostage may also gain some respect by remaining in good humor under adverse circumstances. Anyway, moroseness is not likely to save anyone.

A daily regimen of physical exercise can be important in keeping a hostage physically and mentally fit. It may also help to eat and sleep regularly. A hostage's responsibility is to survive, and he must dedicate himself wholeheartedly to this goal.

A person in captivity may be deprived of the knowledge of time. His watch may be taken away; he may not be able to determine whether it is day or night; his captors may even deliberately attempt to confuse his perception of time. Nevertheless, it is important to maintain a normal routine as much as possible.

It would help to ask for reading material and writing material if the captors will permit it. A hostage is well advised to keep a mental diary of the experience, a written one if he is permitted to do so. Many hostages have done this and found that it gives the mind something to work on. If nothing else, it can make a good book after the episode is over.

The average length of the international kidnappings considered in this study was 38 days, from capture to release or death of the hostage. The median -- probably a more accurate reflection of the normal kidnapping -- was 4 to 5 days. Five episodes accounted for 79 percent of the total captivity days. Two of these were in remote areas in Burma and Ethiopia. Three were kidnappings by the Tupamaros who had an elaborate system of "people prisons," underground hideouts in the city of Montevideo. Excluding these episodes and those incidents in which the hostages were killed, the average length of captivity was 12 days; the median, 4 days.

Barricade and hostage situations can be measured in hours rather than days. The average length of the international barricade and hostage situations that took place between 1968 and 1975 was 47 hours. If we exclude the marathon 13-day barricade and hostage situation in the Dominican Republic, the average length was 33 hours.

The opportunity may sometimes arise for the hostage to intervene in the negotiations for his own release. Several hostages have played important roles. The Japanese Consul General kidnapped in Sao Paulo, Brazil, helped draft his own ransom note, making a crucial change in the wording of one of the demands which no doubt made his release more likely. The American Consul General kidnapped in Haiti persuaded his captors at a crucial moment to accept a compromise deal instead of shooting him. The USIS Chief in Santo Domingo persuaded her captors to drop their demand for \$1 million, convincing them that the U.S. Government would never agree to paying the ransom.

POST-RELEASE EXPERIENCE

It is interesting to note that much--in some cases, most--of the former hostages' anxieties and bitterness are directed not toward the kidnapping itself but toward the post-release experience, specifically the treatment they received after their release.

The former hostage feels that he has gone through an experience which no one, save perhaps another former hostage, can understand. The experience is frequently cataclysmic. It may change the hostage's outlook on life itself. Some hostages have undergone profound religious experiences or a deepening of religious faith.

Most hostages feel embarrassed both during and after the episode. A hostage may feel he has been an embarrassment to the host government and to his own government. The trouble, and perhaps considerable expense, that the episode has caused friends and relations usually add to these feelings. The hostage's sense of embarrassment may also be increased by the treatment he receives from his colleagues after his release.

As mentioned before, being kidnapped is a harrowing, a frightening experience. It is only natural that most hostages have had some problems coping with the experience. Some may have discovered that they did not perform as bravely as they expected they would. Rightly or wrongly, the hostage often feels he has done something about which he should feel guilty. In retrospect, he may feel that he was too

frightened or too docile, or that he "collaborated" with his captors to a greater degree than was necessary to survive. He may feel guilty because he found himself identifying with his captors during captivity and still may do so. He may ask himself if he has been "brainwashed."

Being critical of his own performance in captivity, the hostage expects to be criticized by others. He did not evade capture. He did not heroically escape. He really believes that others do not think well of him. It is a natural reaction noted in young men who suffer heart attacks. The victim may write himself off, as he believes others will, as "damaged merchandise" whose career is through.

The former hostage may also feel uncomfortably indebted to his colleagues or family, especially if a ransom was paid for him. And friends and relatives may unwittingly add to this feeling of indebtedness, saying without saying, "We paid a lot for you."

Most hostages feel a strong need to tell the whole story. Sometimes they are told not to by well-meaning friends or relatives who are concerned that relating the whole episode will be painful and embarrassing for the former hostage and perhaps for them, too. It is interesting to note that a number of hostages we interviewed told us that we were the first persons to whom they had told the whole story, and while our interviews were not at all intended to be therapeutic, many of the former hostages felt better having gotten the whole thing out.

The well-meaning intent of relatives and colleagues of the former hostage to protect him from reliving the episode may in fact reflect their own embarrassment and accentuate the feelings of embarrassment he is already experiencing. It appears in some cases that the former hostage is treated in much the same way as a rape victim. Both of them are told not to talk about it; the entire episode is to be swept away, kept in the closet. Both kinds of victims also tend to feel that *they* are on trial.

With time, the former hostage begins to build up certain defenses against the criticism he expects to receive. He may begin to reconstruct his memory of the episode; certain parts are left out; self-deprecating humor may be injected into the account to mask the painful parts; the

humor has an edge; the listener is challenged. Sometimes the whole episode is reduced to minor importance. Some former hostages recounted their kidnappings as if they had been tea parties, although their colleagues recall that at the time of their release they were too emotionally shaken to even speak.

The emotional problems of a former hostage may not appear immediately. In some cases, they may appear much later. One former hostage broke down months later when a close colleague was also kidnapped, another on the anniversary of his own kidnapping.

The hostages we spoke to were not kidnapped because of their personal wealth or actions. They were chosen because they were symbols of the U.S. Government and therefore were good bargaining pieces. The hostages suffered the experience not because of anything they did but because of their official position. They know this. Whether or not a former hostage "volunteered" to be kidnapped, he *was* kidnapped, and therefore he may rightfully expect some official recognition for his unique experience. No one feels that being kidnapped is simply part of the job, and many resent the somewhat cavalier attitude they feel they may have received upon their return.

Many former hostages complained that they were treated like "social pariahs, as if they were lepers." These are their own words. Initially, we thought that this might be a reflection of some kind of oversensitivity, but in talking to colleagues of former hostages and to other officials concerned with the incidents, we heard comments such as, "We had to get him out. He would have destroyed morale." One senior official talked about the "contagion of the kidnappee." We must conclude from this that these feelings of the former hostages are not entirely imaginary.

A number of hostages appear to have a great fear of their former captors and all other terrorists. Even years later, thousands of miles away, some mentioned that they still had to be careful of what they said. Some also attribute vast, worldwide power to underground groups, and continue to be jumpy and frightened any time they are approached suddenly by strangers.

