

Hostage taking, the presidency, and stress

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Hostage-taking events caused major crises for both Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. During each presidency, hostage taking became a central focus of U.S. foreign policy and an obsession of the president, and it affected domestic as well as international politics. Both presidents found themselves caught in a "damned if I do and damned if I don't" predicament, experiencing the symptoms of personal stress so often associated with decisional conflicts that are consequential for both leader and country. In this chapter we explore why hostage-taking situations have the potential for being stressful for presidents, the constraining effects that this stress can have on decision making, and some ways to help limit the impact of stress in the future.

Why hostage taking produces stress

Hostage taking has been called "smart" terrorism, because the terrorists involved maintain control over the situation, gain media attention for their cause over a sustained period of time, and force governments to recognize them in the course of any negotiations to free the hostages. In effect, the leadership of the terrorist group taking the hostages becomes the puppet master, pulling the strings—some might say jerking the strings—of the government whose people are taken hostage. The aims of the terrorist organization are to gain maximum press and television coverage for their cause and themselves and to increase their bargaining power for the next round.

Hostage taking puts a leader such as the American president in an awkward situation, presenting him with a problem over which he has

little control. He is confronted with the unexpected and must cope with adversaries perceived as irrational. The dilemma for the president becomes how to get the hostages released without giving in to the demands of the terrorists or having any of the hostages killed—and how to do so in a timely fashion, without making his administration look as if it is weak or overreacting.

In effect, the president has more than the terrorists to deal with in a hostage-taking event. The media bombard him with questions about what he is going to do about the hostages and broadcast up-to-the-minute reports on their condition, giving the terrorists an opportunity to air their complaints, demands, and the nature of their cause. Neither aspect of the media coverage falls on deaf ears as the attentive, and television-oriented, public becomes involved in what is happening. Moreover, the American people identify with hostages, often wondering what they would do if they were in their shoes. And they urge the president—through their responses to polls, letters to the White House or Congress, and discussions with opinion leaders—to do something quickly to free the hostages. As the situation wears on, public support is put on the line; the president's popularity fluctuates with the public's perception of how well or poorly he is doing in seeking the release of the hostages. Congressional leaders who see the hostage crisis as a possible election issue also put pressure on the president to act. And the families of the hostages write, call, and visit with the president as well as the media. They plead with the president to get their loved ones back for them.

At the core of the problem for the public, for many policymakers, and probably for the president himself is the significant discrepancy between their image of the nation's capabilities and the harsh reality imposed by the terrorists' successful act of taking and holding hostages. The U.S. public and government alike view the nation as the strongest military power in the free world—one of the globe's two superpowers and an undisputed leader in science and technology. How is it possible, they ask, that such a mighty nation appears incapable of protecting its people, or at least of securing their prompt and safe release, from a handful of seemingly poorly equipped men and women usually associated with an impoverished nation or group? This sense of impotence can contribute to an enormous feeling of frustration and even anger. The frustration is particularly acute for a people who pride themselves on their military and technological dominance.

Coupled with the terrorists' demands and ultimatums, the calls for

action on the part of those to whom the president is accountable can lead the president to turn what is a foreign policy crisis for the country into a personally stressful event. His administration and job are on the line; his "domestic authority and international prestige," as well as his "image and reputation," are at stake.¹ How the president handles the situation has implications for his reelection, if he is eligible for it, as well as for the interpretation of his tenure in office by history. He can become understandably concerned, anxious, apprehensive, frustrated, uncertain, angry, tentative; that is, he can experience stress. When this happens, the president, in effect, has internalized the event. He has made it a personal issue; his sense of self is under attack. No longer is it the government's problem, it is the president's problem.

Hostage taking exacerbates this tendency to personalize the issue because the terrorists, press, and hostage families act to give the victims a real and immediate identity. The hostages do not remain faceless suffering masses; they are named individuals who may plead their own case over television and whose attractive, anguished wives and children often meet with the president. The predisposition to personalize the issue is reinforced as the president becomes, in a sense, a senior member of each victim's family.

A second reinforcing factor is the usual "innocence" or "patriotism" of the hostages themselves. They typically have done nothing personally to trigger the hostile behavior directed at them except to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. And in some cases they may be dedicated employees of the government simply fulfilling their assigned duties. As a compassionate human being, the president is moved to accept their plight on his own shoulders.

Moreover, as we have learned in the Iran and Lebanese hostage-taking situations, the process of gaining release for the hostages with whom the president has personally identified may stretch over a long period of time. The pressure on the president thus continues to build, as first one tactic and then another is tried to get the hostages freed. With each failure comes a greater sense of fury and more uncertainty over future steps. If early attempts have involved negotiation, there is often the cry from the public and from some on the president's staff to escalate to a military response. And the media begin to suggest that the administration is weak and soft, that the terrorists are winning the battle.

¹Martha Crenshaw, "The Psychology of Political Terrorism," in *Political Psychology*, edited by Margaret G. Hermann (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1986), 400.

Signs that both presidents Carter and Reagan personalized the hostage events in their tenures and experienced stress are found in the biographies and statements of participants in these situations. From Carter's memoir we compiled the following widely scattered comments:

The safety and well-being of the American hostages became a constant concern for me, no matter what other duties I was performing as President. . . . I was worrying about the hostages. . . . In spite of many other responsibilities, the hostages were always in my mind. . . . my most pressing duty still was to secure the release of the hostages. . . . From this remark, some news reporters claimed that I now thought the hostage situation was manageable. If anyone knew how difficult it was to manage, I did. . . . Our hopes had been shattered so many times that I approached this new development with some skepticism. . . . More than anything else, it was still Iran and our hostages that gnawed away at me. . . . The release of the American hostages had almost become an obsession with me. Of course, their lives, safety, and freedom were the paramount considerations, but there was more to it. I wanted to have my decisions vindicated.²

Gary Sick, who was responsible for Iranian affairs in President Carter's National Security Council, has observed:

The crisis was highly personalized. To Washington policy makers, the hostages were not abstractions; in many cases they were friends. . . . When President Carter said, as he did on many different occasions both publicly and privately, that the fate of the hostages was on his mind at every waking moment, he was not posturing for political effect. Rather, he was expressing what was a daily reality for almost all of us who were caught up in the crisis.³

The Tower Commission Report suggests that Reagan had similar feelings about the American hostages held in Lebanon:

The President was clearly quite concerned about the hostages. Mr. McFarlane told the Board that the President inquired almost daily about the welfare of the hostages. Chief of Staff Regan is reported to have told reporters on November 14, 1986, that "the President brings up the hostages at about 90 percent of his briefings." Mr. Regan is reported to have said that each morning at the daily intelligence briefing, the President asked VADM Poindexter: "John, anything new on the hostages?" . . . By his own account, as evidenced in his diary notes, and as conveyed to the Board by his principal advisors, President Reagan was deeply committed to securing the release of the hostages. It was this intense compassion for the hostages that appeared to motivate his steadfast support of the Iran initiative, even in the face of opposition from his Secretaries of State and Defense [George Shultz and Caspar Weinberger]. . . . The President's expressed concern for the safety of both the hostages and the Iranians who could have been at risk

² Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 459, 460, 470, 480, 496, 525, 558, 580, 594.

³ Gary Sick, *All Fall Down* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 262.

may have been conveyed in a manner so as to inhibit the full functioning of the system.⁴

Several observers of President Reagan have also noted his personal commitment to the freeing of the hostages in Lebanon. "The Iran arms-dealing affair is the mistake of a President whose judgment was warped by his personal anguish at the plight of American citizens in captivity."⁵ "You have to know the President to know how strongly he feels about the release of the hostages."⁶ "The President was personally driven by that compassion for the hostages from beginning to end."⁷ Perhaps the most vivid image the American public had of Reagan's frustration over the hostages was mirrored in his face and voice when he was asked, after the freeing of an American reporter from a Soviet prison, "What about the hostages in Lebanon?" His testy answer was that he was doing everything possible to get them released; it was very important to him.

Effects of stress on decision making

What happens when a president or anyone else experiences personal stress? What is significant for understanding hostage-taking events is the effect this personal stress can have on decision making. A variety of studies in both laboratory and natural settings have found a similar general relationship between the intensity of individual stress and performance on a task.⁸ Those situations in which some stress occurs lead to better performance than situations in which the persons performing the task are emotionally detached. In other words, when stress is relatively mild, performance generally improves. The person becomes motivated to act. As the intensity of individual stress increases, however, the rate of improvement

⁴ John Tower, Edmund Muskie, and Brent Scowcroft, *The Tower Commission Report* (New York: Bantam Books and Times Books, 1987), 36, 79.

⁵ William Safire, "Ten Myths About the Reagan Debauché," *New York Times Magazine*, 22 March 1987, p. 24.

⁶ George Bush, "An Interview with the Vice-President," *Time*, 8 December 1986, p. 42.

⁷ Edmund Muskie, "Press Interview on Report of Tower Commission Report," *Time*, 9 March 1987, p. 24.

⁸ See Richard S. Lazarus, *Psychological Stress and the Coping Process* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966); Charles F. Hermann, *International Crises: Insights from Behavioral Research* (New York: Free Press, 1972); George V. Coelho, David A. Hamburg, and John E. Adams, *Coping and Adaptation* (New York: Basic Books, 1974); Irving L. Janis and Leon Mann, *Decision Making: A Psychological Analysis of Conflict, Choice, and Commitment* (New York: Free Press, 1977); and Alexander L. George, *Presidential Decision Making in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1980).

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in performance begins to slow and then to stop altogether. If the amount of stress a person experiences continues to increase, performance begins to plummet, and at some point the performance can become much worse than when there was no stress at all. Of course, the amount of stress that a person can absorb before it becomes dysfunctional varies from one person to another and with other factors,⁹ but in general the relationship holds.

Most of the research providing the bases for this pattern involves a stress stimulus of fairly limited duration. We know that hostage-taking episodes can last for weeks, months, and even years. It is interesting to speculate about how the general effect on performance might be influenced by situations of long duration in which other demands and activities (some of which may be pleasant and tension-reducing) are interspersed in the life of a person relentlessly exposed to a major source of stress. Rather than the steady, smooth decline in performance suggested in the generalized pattern, the prolonged episode with other intervening events might have a more stair-stepped decline. As the individual is momentarily diverted from the stress-inducing experience, there may be a leveling-off or plateau in the detrimental performance consequences, perhaps even some recovery if the diversion produces relaxation and satisfaction. But as the stress-inducing situation continues unresolved, performance gradually declines. Of course, diverting events of a demanding and unpleasant nature may simply compound the stress a person experiences, in which case performance of all kinds may decline more precipitously.

When does stress become so extreme as seriously to inhibit the quality of decision making and related tasks required of a president? Although it is difficult to predict how much stress a particular person can tolerate before his or her decision making begins to deteriorate, it is possible to describe various symptoms that a person under stress may display and the effects of such stress responses on decision making. In the following sections we suggest some of these symptoms and their effects on decision making, particularly as it applies to presidential behavior in gaining the release of hostages. Having established that presidents Carter and Reagan were experiencing rather strong stress in coping with the Iranian and Lebanese hostage-taking events, we use these presidents where feasible to illustrate our points.

⁹Margaret G. Hermann, "Indicators of Stress in Policy Makers During Foreign Policy Crises," *Political Psychology* 1 (1979): 27-46.

Ways of coping with stress

How do people cope with stress? The research literature suggests that people have three general ways of responding to the negative feelings they are experiencing:¹⁰ they can withdraw from the situation, "take the situation on," or panic.

By withdrawing from the situation people can psychologically distance themselves from the anxiety and other painful feelings they are having by denying any involvement in the event or by restructuring the event. Janis and Mann have described three strategies for avoiding or withdrawing from the situation:¹¹ people can simply deny that the event is occurring; they can shift responsibility ("pass the buck"); or they can rationalize that the situation is not so bad as it might seem at first glance and claim that there are positive aspects in what is happening. These authors argue that this way of coping with stress—what they call "defensive avoidance"—is more likely when the few alternative ways of dealing with the situation all have negative overtones and there is pressure to act.

To "take the situation on" means that the person becomes involved in coping with the problem, confronting what is happening and trying to deal with it. Confronting the situation may include increased problem-oriented activity. But it also can mean increasingly volatile actions (ranging from aggression to gratitude) toward others who are trying to help cope with the problem, increased rigidity in the proposals for action, or increased intentional deception. Jumping into the fray is generally easier when there are some options for action that show promise of ending the stressful situation and the policymaker perceives there is enough time to put the plan into motion before something else happens.

One way of taking the situation on involves hypervigilance—a state in which there is "indiscriminate openness to all information."¹² People perceive that there ought to be a way out of the dilemma in which they find themselves and frantically search for cues to this solution. And they tenaciously pursue feasible solutions, sometimes without careful attention to their likelihood of success, the costs that may be incurred, or the

¹⁰See, for example, Lazarus, *Psychological Stress*; Janis and Mann, *Decision Making*; M. Hermann, "Indicators of Stress"; and Alexander George, "Adaptation to Stress in Political Decision-Making: The Individual, Small Group and Organizational Contexts," in *Coping and Adaptation*, edited by George V. Coelho, David A. Hamburg, and John E. Adams (New York: Basic Books, 1974).

¹¹Janis and Mann, *Decision Making*.

¹²*Ibid.*, 205.

direct or indirect consequences that may result from their success or failure.

Some observers might detect traces of panic, a third possible response to stress, in the previous two categories. As used here, however, panic refers to a nearly complete immobilization of one's cognitive, and often physical, systems. Normal reasoning processes become adversely affected. The same ideas may be repeated over and over again or thoughts may be incomplete. In the face of physical danger, the person who is in a state of panic may be incapable of calling for help or even running away. Acute breakdowns of this sort are in some sense less of a problem in public decision making, because associates typically recognize the person's inability to function and relieve that person of the responsibility of making a decision, even if such action is not publicly acknowledged.

People often have characteristic ways of dealing with stress. Some generally deny that anything is wrong, others consistently pass the buck, and still others bolster their own position when under stress. One way to gain information about a policymaker's typical coping behavior is to learn about the person's usual decision style. Stress accentuates a person's decision style.¹³ A policymaker who has a general tendency to delegate may, under stress, tend to shift responsibility; a policymaker whose decision making is guided by an ideology may, under stress, tend to enhance the importance of the ideology; a policymaker who takes pride in always tackling problems head-on, under stress, may insist on solving the problem personally, often to the exclusion of other, more pressing tasks.

Each means of coping with stress discussed here has implications for how a policymaker such as the president will search for information and engage his staff and advisers in the decision-making process. Because there is evidence to suggest that President Carter was hypervigilant in dealing with the Iranian hostage crisis and that President Reagan shifted responsibility in attempting to free the Americans held captive in Lebanon, we illustrate the relationship between coping behavior, information search, and the decision-making process for these two ways of dealing with stress.

HYPERVIGILANT INVOLVEMENT IN THE SITUATION. A policymaker who copes with increasing stress by becoming hypervigilant becomes very sensitive to contextual information but loses his ability to discriminate among the cues being received. The negative feelings the policymaker experi-

ences drive him to try all alternatives, "relevant or irrelevant, reliable or unreliable, supportive or nonsupportive."¹⁴ It is important to be doing something, because in the process he is likely to stumble onto the most viable alternative and, in any case, he feels better when he has taken some action—disaster is put off for the moment. This thrashing around can lead the policymaker to try hastily contrived solutions that are as apt to fail as succeed in addressing the problem because their applicability has been poorly evaluated. Everyone gets into the act as the policymaker enlists the help of experts and nonexperts alike—anyone with an idea, new angle, or new piece of information. As a consequence of the focus on present information, the policymaker's time perspective becomes collapsed and he tends to neglect consideration of the future consequences of any action.¹⁵ The immediate danger is so intense, the future seems almost irrelevant. Moreover, while an approach is showing some success, the policymaker develops a fixation on it to the exclusion of other options. But the policymaker is quick to engage in undoing, moving rapidly to change his approach when a decision appears to be going sour. As a result, the policymaker may appear to the public as if he has no firm policy and is indecisive and weak. To rationalize the need for change in tactics and strategy, the policymaker simplifies the adversary and, more important, the limitations on the adversary. Such behavior means that the ability to control events lies with that adversary.

Sick has described Carter's hypervigilance during the Iranian hostage crisis: "One of the consequences of this intense personal commitment [to free the hostages] was a strong impulse to do something, almost as if that was a necessary end in itself."¹⁶ During the course of the 444 days that the hostages were held, Carter tried a "battery of policy initiatives"; when one was perceived to have failed, he moved to try something else. Each failure was blamed on Khomeini for once more failing to give his support. As Carter noted in his diary, "Every time one of the Iranian government officials shows any sign of rationality, he is immediately incompatible with Khomeini and is replaced."¹⁷

Carter's general decision style, in which he took a personal interest in being a part of the policy-making process by educating himself in the

¹⁴ Janis and Mann, *Decision Making*, 205.

¹⁵ See Charles F. Hermann, *Crises in Foreign Policy: A Simulation Analysis* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969); and Ole R. Holsti, *Crisis, Escalation, War* (Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1972).

¹⁶ Sick, *All Fall Down*, 260.

¹⁷ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 467.

¹³ M. Hermann, "Indicators of Stress," 27-46.

details of the problem under consideration and processing the information needed for analysis and decision, became accentuated in the Iranian hostage affair. As Carter notes, "There were so many conflicting questions and ideas during this time that we took extra steps to insure maximum harmony among the many agencies involved. At least once a day my top advisers . . . met in the Situation Room at the White House to discuss Iran. When I did not meet with them, they prepared written minutes almost immediately after they adjourned. Any questions of policy were referred to me. . . ."¹⁸ He and his staff gave credence to the adage, "Our job is to take a ten percent chance of success, try to turn it into a twenty percent chance, and hope for a break," as they tried "dozens if not hundreds of channels" during the course of the crisis.¹⁹ In one period that spanned several months, they even relied on "two adventurers" as Carter dubbed them,²⁰ a French lawyer and an Argentine businessman. Each channel and option was pursued until it became clear failure was in sight, then another was chosen. With each change in action came domestic pressure for even more severe actions. The dilemma became, "To what extent should a great nation be prepared to accept short-term humiliation in the interest of long-term strategic objectives that are themselves uncertain? At what point does such humiliation itself begin to produce strategic consequences?"²¹

When a president becomes hypervigilant and immerses himself totally in the decision process, he may well accept advisers as colleagues and set the stage for "groupthink."²² People who join him in the inner circle become partners in the search for a solution. In the process, such advisers often show the symptoms of excessive concurrence seeking that are characteristics of groupthink. Among these symptoms are a strong sense of vulnerability that requires members to stick together and support one another; a fixation on only one reasonable way of dealing with the situation at any point in time; selective perception and attention to information that validates the chosen option; a high sense that what is being done is right; a stereotyped view of the adversary as irrational; and pressure on all members to go along with the consensus. Groupthink becomes more likely if the task must be performed in the utmost secrecy, because those involved remain even more insulated from sources of in-

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 462.

¹⁹ Sick, *All Fall Down*, 297, 313.

²⁰ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 485.

²¹ Sick, *All Fall Down*, 355-6.

²² See Irving L. Janis, *Victims of Groupthink* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1972).

formation outside the group. Descriptions of the decision-making process during both the negotiation and military-rescue phases of the Iranian hostage situation show evidence of this dysfunctional process.²³

DEFENSIVE AVOIDANCE: SHIFTING RESPONSIBILITY. Janis and Mann use a cartoon to depict the defensive avoidance of a stressful situation they call shifting responsibility. An exhausted woman surrounded by children says to her friend, "Lou makes all the big decisions . . . like should we have a trade agreement with China, should we set up a space station on the moon. He leaves all the little decisions to me . . . like where we should live, where we should send the kids to school."²⁴ Unlike Harry Truman, whose desk carried the sign, "The buck stops here," the policymaker who shifts responsibility under stress delegates difficult decisions to someone else. Often the person wishing to shift responsibility gives it to people who promise that they can resolve the situation with benefits for all—"outside agents of dubious reputation who promise a less painful solution than the genuine experts, who insist that the person himself must take responsibility."²⁵ In effect, the policymaker reduces his own stress by leaving the field, putting the stressful situation into someone else's hands—someone who knows what the policymaker wants and insists that he or she can resolve the problem.

If the policymaker cannot escape responsibility completely, he will tend to minimize his personal accountability by blaming what is happening on the situation, on luck or fate, on the manipulations of an adversary, or on the constraints inherent in his job. More than ever, successes are viewed as one's own doings; failures are attributable to outside forces.²⁶ As Alexander George has observed, it is in the nature of the presidential role "that there will be many occasions on which one simply cannot make a good decision without some sacrifice to one's own interests or those of some significant others."²⁷ The role, not oneself, is to blame for any failure. In the hostage-taking situation, the terrorists also become a target for attribution of blame. They are forcing the policymaker to take countermeasures. This declining sense of responsibility makes aggressive and

²³ Carter, *Keeping Faith*; and Sick, *All Fall Down*.

²⁴ Janis and Mann, *Decision Making*, 5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

²⁶ See Susan T. Fiske and S. F. Taylor, *Social Cognition* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1984); and Donald R. Kinder and Susan T. Fiske, "Presidents in the Public Mind," in *Political Psychology*, edited by Margaret G. Hermann (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1986).

²⁷ George, "Adaptation to Stress," 186.

should have ensured that the NSC system did not fail him. He did not force his policy to undergo the most critical review. . . . At no time did he insist upon accountability and performance review. . . . The Board found a strong consensus among NSC participants that the President's priority in the Iran initiative was the release of the U.S. hostages. But setting priorities is not enough when it comes to sensitive and risky initiatives that directly affect U.S. national security. He must ensure that the content and tactics of an initiative match his priorities and objectives. He must insist on accountability. For it is the President who must take responsibility for the NSC system and deal with the consequences.²⁸

President Reagan shifted responsibility; he magnified his usual decision style of delegating authority during the Iran-contra affair by transferring authority. And in the process he unleashed what Apple has called the "reckless cowboys, off on their own on a wild ride."²⁹ The National Security Council staff believed they were given authority to get the hostages released and acted on that authority. They formed a cohesive unit and worked to keep people who disagreed with what they were doing, such as Shultz and Weinberger, out of the process.³⁰ Given the need for the utmost secrecy, this group led a covert operation that "functioned largely outside the orbit of the U.S. government"³¹ and thus was never challenged by the normal checks and balances of bureaucratic politics.

Strategies for reducing stress in hostage-taking events

Are there strategies that can help American presidents cope with hostage-taking situations more effectively? Can we reduce the dysfunctional and disruptive effects of stress on presidents' behavior? Considering that terrorism, particularly the taking of hostages, is unlikely to cease in the near future, can we strengthen our government's hand by diminishing the stress on those who have to make a response? We believe there are at least five strategies that could limit the effects of stress during hostage-taking situations: (1) humanizing the enemy, (2) depersonalizing the situation for the president, (3) "emotionally inoculating" the people involved in the decision process, (4) encouraging dissent among the president's advisers, and (5) continuing the study of how presidents manage stress.

HUMANIZING THE ENEMY. Just as terrorists tend to see all people and governments as either for or against them, government leaders faced with dealing with terrorists often do the same. As Holsti has observed, one of

²⁸ Tower, Muskie, and Scowcroft, *Tower Report*, 79-80.

²⁹ R. W. Apple, Jr., "Introduction," in *ibid.*, xv.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 81. ³¹ *Ibid.*, xv.

hostile behaviors toward the terrorists more feasible, because the policymaker cannot be held accountable for the consequences.

When a policymaker shifts responsibility, the individual or group (the latter is more likely in a major crisis) to whom the task is delegated must, nonetheless, develop a working relationship with the policymaker. Basic management procedures specify the initiation of practices that are widely accepted as necessary if the organization is to be expected to cope effectively with the problem. The objectives of the delegated task must be clear and agreed-upon between the policymaker and the task group. If trade-offs become necessary among the objectives, a shared sense of priorities must exist. Some consensus on what constitutes success—and, even more critically, failure—must be established, along with deadlines for reporting progress. The entire operation depends on careful monitoring, with balanced reporting to the policymaker or his representative, who remains detached from the operation and able to assess its performance and ask critical questions.

When a policymaker elects to deal with stress by distancing himself from the problem, however, these necessary elements may not be created and maintained. Potential indicators of failure tend to intensify the policymaker's experience of stress, which he is trying to reduce. Even periodic monitoring reengages him with the problem, foiling the self-imposed stress-reduction technique of shifting responsibility. Under these conditions, perhaps more than normally, the temptation for his staff to tell the policymaker what he wants to hear is extremely strong. But denying subordinates the chance to discuss the problem candidly with him and to obtain his judgment on the appropriateness of a particular path greatly increases stress and the possibility of group pathology.

Once again the Tower Commission Report is revealing about how President Reagan dealt with the stress he experienced in considering the release of the American hostages in Lebanon. In a section titled "Failure of Responsibility," the report concludes:

In his obvious commitment [to freeing the hostages], the President appears to have proceeded with a concept of the initiative that was not accurately reflected in the reality of the operation. The President did not seem to be aware of the way in which the operation was implemented and the full consequences of U.S. participation. The President's expressed concern for the safety of both the hostages and the Iranians who could have been at risk may have been conveyed in a manner so as to inhibit the full functioning of the system.

The President's management style is to put the principal responsibility for policy review and implementation on the shoulders of his advisors. Nevertheless, with such a complex, high-risk operation and so much at stake, the President

the casualties of high stress is the ability to enter into the frames of reference of others.³² Instead, people experiencing stress tend to dehumanize the enemy, enabling them to deal with the enemy without any sense of remorse. The enemy is irrational—he deserves what he gets.

Studies of terrorists, however, suggest that terrorism does not appear to be the result of mental pathologies.³³ "A general psychiatric explanation of terrorism is impossible. To define all terrorists as mentally ill would be an easy way to solve the problem, simply by invoking evil spirits in order to exclude from normality those from whom we want to be as different as possible."³⁴ People who join terrorist groups have needs, beliefs, and grievances not utterly unlike those of other people; people who lead terrorist groups are motivated by drives for survival and image-maintenance similar to those that motivate governments. To deal effectively with people who take hostages, we need to be able to put ourselves in their shoes, to understand what they want, and to consider what it would take to help them save face and release the hostages.

But putting ourselves in the shoes of the terrorists cannot mean simply assuming that they have the same values or motives as we do. As Crenshaw notes:

Appropriate countermeasures must be tailored to accurate assessment of terrorist behavior. How terrorists perceive the threat of government coercion may determine whether or not policies of deterrence will work. How terrorists interpret success and failure may be critical to policy effectiveness, since what the government regards as a threat of punishment may be considered by the terrorist as a reward. Policies intended to inhibit terrorism may instead lead to its escalation.³⁵

During hostage-taking situations presidents need people on their decision-making team who are acquainted with the groups who have taken the hostages. Although it would be better if such persons could remain on assignment with the president throughout the emergency, periodic consultation with these experts would be preferable to none at all.

³²Holsti, *Crisis, Escalation, War*, 199.

³³See, for example, Crenshaw, "Political Terrorism"; R. R. Corrado, "A Critique of the Mental Disorder Perspective of Political Terrorism," *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry* 4 (1981): 293-310; K. Heskin, *Northern Ireland: A Psychological Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980); H. Jäger, G. Schmidchen, and L. Süllwold, *Analysen zum Terrorismus* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1981), vol. 2, *Lebenslauf-Analysen*; and W. Rasch, "Psychological Dimensions of Political Terrorism in the Federal Republic of Germany," *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry* 2 (1979): 79-85.

³⁴Franco Ferracuti and F. Bruno, "Psychiatric Aspects of Terrorism in Italy," in *The Mad, the Bad and the Different: Essays in Honor of Simon Dinitz*, edited by I. L. Barak-Galant and C. R. Hurt (Lexington, Mass.: Heath, 1981), 206.

³⁵Crenshaw, "Political Terrorism," 408.

Such a need suggests it is important to have within the intelligence community people who are knowledgeable about various terrorist groups and a roster of people around the world who have dealt with or studied particular terrorist organizations. And in the event of a terrorist incident, the president and his top advisers should have ready access to these specialists.

DEPERSONALIZING THE SITUATION FOR THE PRESIDENT. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, hostage-taking events abroad that involve American citizens have all the ingredients for producing stress in presidents. They, in effect, become domestic as well as foreign policy crises as the media, the families of the hostages, the public, and Congress seek action and criticize how the president behaves. Such situations threaten the president's self-image as well as the reputation and image of his administration. Presidents appear to personalize the event—to take it on as a personal problem, not just as a foreign policy problem that the government must solve. The issue becomes how to reverse this trend and help presidents keep the problem at the policy level rather than making it personal. How can we help the president depersonalize hostage-taking situations?

Several possibilities exist. The first involves educating the media concerning the role they play in making hostage-taking events stressful for the president; a second is to keep the hostages' families at a distance from the president; and a third involves setting up a standard operating procedure for dealing with such events that would include the president but not consume him. Each of these proposals enhances the potential for helping the president keep the situation at arm's length—of depersonalizing the event.

The media are a critical part of any hostage-taking situation, particularly on the international scene. Rubin and Friedland have used the analogy to theater in describing how terrorists use the media when they have hostages. The media enable the terrorists to "make all the world a stage"—"to attract an audience and deliver a message."³⁶ And the action involved in the kidnapping of hostages makes good copy. The question is, do members of the media understand the difficult position they put the president in when they dwell on the sufferings of the hostages and their loved ones, or when they ask repeatedly what the president is going to

³⁶Jeffrey Z. Rubin and Nehemia Friedland, "Theater of Terror," *Psychology Today* (March 1986): 22.

226 MARGARET G. HERMANN AND CHARLES F. HERMANN do and when he is going to act? "The media are important to terrorists because they not only relay information but, like good drama critics, interpret it as well. The slant they give—by deciding which events to report and which to ignore, by intentionally or unintentionally expressing approval or disapproval—can create a climate of public support, apathy, or anger."³⁷ The media need to continue their recent considerations of what the responsibilities of a free press are in covering hostage episodes, including the distinction between reporting new developments and rekindling a story that for the moment has not changed. Some guidelines, even if unevenly applied, might heighten their sensitivity to the role they can play in enhancing the stress of the president.

Probably the greatest push for personalization of the crisis comes from the families of the hostages who, understandably, put pressure on the government to get their loved ones freed. Interacting with the families and receiving letters from the families provide great image-making events for the president. But they also increase the identification of the president with the victim—the victim becomes more real and the pressure to do something grows more intense. We need mechanisms to keep the victims and their families at a distance from the president. In some sense they need to remain just another constituent who needs some help—not the next-door neighbor or part of his extended family. The more agencies outside the president's staff that can deal with the hostages' families and control the information the president receives, the less likely the president is to personalize the situation. In effect, the president needs to be helped to dehumanize the victims.

One last proposal to depersonalize the situation involves the further development of standard operating procedures for dealing with the terrorist kidnapping of American citizens abroad. In his examination of the American search for a policy on terrorism, Lynch observes that there is a proliferation of agencies with counterterrorism responsibilities:

The proliferation of agencies . . . is due in part to greater awareness of the growing terrorist threat. However, this raises the danger that bureaucratic complexities will encourage less than complete cooperation among the agencies. The lines of authority will be vague, responsibilities uncertain, and accountability impossible. Additionally, strategies to deal with terrorism may never be fully developed because decision makers will respond to each new crisis on an ad hoc basis, as a discrete event, unrelated to those which have gone before.³⁸

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁸ Edward A. Lynch, "International Terrorism: The Search for a Policy," *Terrorism: An International Journal* 9 (1987): 3.

To the extent this characterization is accurate, it suggests the existence currently of ad hoc coordinating mechanisms for dealing with hostage-taking events that necessarily increase the involvement of the president. In the absence of an established interagency group with strong authority and leadership, the president is the logical person to coordinate policy or set up a coordinating group. Thus, he is more likely to become personally caught up in what is happening because nothing will get done unless he sets it in motion. Were stronger standard operating procedures for such situations in place, the president would have less of himself on the line. Moreover, the situation might not automatically assume crisis proportions, because persons with expertise and previous experience would be available to help the president, and there would be proven working procedures.

"EMOTIONALLY INOCULATING" THE PEOPLE INVOLVED IN THE DECISION PROCESS. Janis and Mann describe a technique to help decision makers deal with the buildup of stress in situations in which a sequence of decisions are being made. They call the procedure emotional inoculation—something analogous to the increase of antibodies in the body in reaction to an injection of a small amount of a virus or bacteria. If the policymaker considers not only the positive consequences of his decision but also thinks about the negative things that may happen, he is better able to deal with the negative results if they do happen. In effect, the policymaker prepares himself for setbacks and thus is less overwhelmed if they occur. The individual has "an opportunity to anticipate the loss, to start working through the anxiety or grief, and to make plans that might enable him to cope more effectively with the subsequent crisis."³⁹

The research that Janis and Mann muster to support the notion of emotional inoculation suggests that the resulting reduction in the buildup of stress is worth the investment of time and effort. Consideration of how our policy might fail (as well as succeed), and what happens if it fails, encourages forward planning and the assignment of people to think about next steps. Having some ideas about next steps in the face of setbacks, in turn, helps to limit the stress that is experienced. Here is where a catalogue of previous dealings with international hostage-taking situations becomes important. If we were to plot the chronology of events in previous hostage-taking episodes, which types of decisions would we find to

³⁹ Janis and Mann, *Decision Making*, 389.

have been followed by failure, and which by success? Are there any patterns in the reactions to the decisions that might provide us with information to use in an inoculation procedure for the next time? Because we are dealing with people's lives in a hostage-taking event, there is a need for policies to succeed. But experience tells us that there are often many failures before a success. Can we prepare policymakers to deal with failure through an inoculation procedure?

ENCOURAGING DISSENT AMONG ADVISERS. When we are ready to act, dissent is the last thing we want to hear. We have discussed enough; it is time to do something. Yet as George, C. Hermann, and Janis have observed, this tendency to cut off or limit debate on an issue to only those in favor has serious repercussions for the effectiveness of the resulting decision.⁴⁰ When policymakers are under stress, this tendency often leads to premature closure or fixation on only one reasonable option and increased concurrence seeking or groupthink. As C. Hermann has shown, generally the exclusion of alternatives and challenges from the decision-making process prompts policymakers to engage in more extreme behavior than would have been the case if the process had not been disrupted.⁴¹ The Tower Commission Report suggests that the isolation of dissent in the Iran-contra affair permitted the NSC staff members to conduct the operation without oversight and caution.⁴²

Many techniques for encouraging the expression of dissent have been proposed in the literature, ranging from the appointment of a devil's advocate and the institutionalization of multiple advocacy⁴³ to systematic use of a balance sheet⁴⁴ to the training of a member of the president's staff in stress management.⁴⁵ As important as adopting some technique for assuring dissent is the need for openness to other options and to es-

⁴⁰George, *Presidential Decision Making*; Janis, *Victims of Groupthink*; and C. Hermann, in *Why Nations Act*, and "Decision Structure and Process Influences on Foreign Policy," Hermann (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1978).

⁴¹Charles F. Hermann, "The Effects of Decision Structures and Processes on Foreign Policy Behavior," paper presented at the International Society of Political Psychology meeting, Washington, D.C., 24-26 May 1979.

⁴²Tower, Muskie, and Scowcroft, *Tower Report*.

⁴³George, *Presidential Decision Making*.

⁴⁴Janis and Mann, *Decision Making*.

⁴⁵Margaret G. Hermann and Charles F. Hermann, "Maintaining the Quality of Decision Making in Foreign Policy Crises: A Proposal," in *Towards More Soundly Based Foreign Policy: Making Better Use of Information*, edited by Alexander L. George, Report to the Commission on the Organization of Government for the Conduct of Foreign Policy (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), Appendix D.

timates and evaluations of consequences. Moreover, dissent is a two-way street; if people who feel differently decide it is inappropriate to express their opinions, they are as guilty as the leadership when premature closure and groupthink occur. As the Tower Commission Report observes about Shultz and Weinberger, who both distanced themselves and were excluded from decision making on the Iran-contra affair: "Their obligation was to give the President their full support and continued advice with respect to the program or, if they could not in good conscience do that, to so inform the President. . . . They were not energetic in attempting to protect the President from the consequences of his personal commitment to freeing the hostages."⁴⁶

CONTINUING STUDY OF THE EFFECTS OF HOSTAGE TAKING ON THE PRESIDENCY. A survey of research on terrorism reveals that there has been little examination of the pressures such events put on those government authorities who must cope with them. Yet this piece of the puzzle is crucial to understanding policy in dealing with a terrorist situation. It is as if we were interested in learning about only one side of the issue—the terrorists and what they do. But as this essay suggests repeatedly, terrorist events create problems that affect the policymakers who confront them and who, in turn, affect the outcome of the crises. To deal effectively with the phenomenon of terrorism, policymakers must understand their own reactions and how these reactions affect their decision making. Only then will they be equipped to deal adequately with the hostage-taking event.

⁴⁶Tower, Muskie, and Scowcroft, *Tower Report*, 82.