

The Need to Avoid A Terrorist 'Trap'

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If the 1988 Presidential candidates draw the wrong lessons on terrorism from the Iran-contra hearings, they are likely to fall into the same terrorist trap that caught President Jimmy Carter and President Reagan.

The temptation to win votes with tough talk about terrorism will be understandably great. But it should be resisted. If the next President is to avoid the fate of the previous two.

The major terrorism lesson from the arms-for-hostages deal with Iran is not the most obvious "no negotiations with, no concessions to" terrorists or their state sponsors.

Rather, it is, "Do not let United States foreign policy become subservient to the resolution of a terrorist incident."

That's the trap.

The fact that two Presidents, so different in ideology and personality as Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, both fell victim to the terrorist trap should alert us to the need to tone down the national reaction to terrorism.

The tendency to create crises over terrorist incidents and to endlessly search for "solutions" has negatively affected our foreign policy.

Our last two Presidents allowed their understandable compassion for the fate of American hostages to color their perception of what would be best for the nation as a whole.

In Jimmy Carter's case, the search for a solution to the hostage situation in Iran led to a year-long paralysis in American foreign policy.

In Ronald Reagan's case, the desire to win the release of hostages in Lebanon led to one of the more questionable foreign policy decisions in recent times.

The harsh reality about terrorism, though, is that try as we might, there are unfortunately no solutions or ultimate victories.

The numerous terrorist groups that exist around the world, and the large pool of available American targets — civilians, diplomats, military personnel — insures that Americans will always be at risk to terrorism.

The irony of the arms-for-hostages deal is that even if it had "worked,"

on the very day the hostages would have come home, new ones could have been taken either in Lebanon or elsewhere.

Another fact about terrorism that we have ignored is that despite efforts by governments to combat this threat, it takes only a single terrorist incident — a hijacking, a bombing, an assassination — to make it appear that the terrorists are "winning."

That is why viewing terrorism as a "war," or making statements that we will ultimately defeat the terrorists, only plays into the terrorists' hands.

What, then, can be done to break out of this terrorist trap?

First, a rethinking about terrorism is in order.

Since terrorism for the most part does not pose a threat to vital United States interests, we need to shift away from the practice of designing high-level policies for what are essentially low-level threats.

We should also avoid issuing grand doctrines and principles to guide our responses to terrorism.

Principles such as "irrefutable evidence" and "no negotiations, no concessions" only serve to reduce American flexibility in responding to terrorism.

Also beneficial would be a conscious effort by Presidents and other Government officials to avoid fostering an image of crisis in Washington every time terrorists strike.

While there certainly cannot be a business-as-usual approach to terrorism, we have tended to go to the opposite extreme as illustrated by the Presidential address to the nation as soon as the hostages from the Trans World Airline hijacking were released in the summer of 1985.

The public, Congress and the news media will naturally demand strong action on the part of a President whenever terrorists attack American targets. And strong responses — including military raids — will be required at times to demonstrate American resolve.

But every terrorist incident does not require a response or deserve to be treated as a test of national nerve. Doing so only complicates the issue and gives terrorists the international platform that they so desperately want.

If there has to be "tough" talk on terrorism during the Presidential campaign, then it is to be hoped that it would be that terrorists are not going to be allowed to influence the course and direction of American foreign policy.

Otherwise, it will only be a matter of time before the next President falls into the terrorist trap. □

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