

# **THE WASHINGTON POST**

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**Chairman of the Board**

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**The Churchill Lecture**

**Guildhall**

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Good evening. It's an enormous honor for me to be here, and I'm grateful that many of you braved the rain and delayed a mad dash to the country to attend this lecture. Ever since the Treasure Houses of Britain opened in Washington, we know all about the pleasures of country life here.

As I looked over the list of distinguished speakers who have preceded me -- and as I contemplated the monumental and intimidating legacy of the man in whose honor these lectures are named -- I felt only too keenly my own inadequacies.

Churchill was the only journalist who later became a world leader. I remember his inspirational voice on the radio from across the ocean during the war. His heroic leadership, articulated though his majestic command of the English language, inspired embattled people to fight for democracy and preserve our way of life.

I would not presume to address these cosmic issues of war and peace or the future of the English-speaking world. My background and my work equip me to speak of only one subject with which Churchill was familiar: the press. Fortunately, as he once said, "The press is an inspiring theme, especially to those who get their living by it."

This evening I propose to speak of the press and its role in one of the most challenging and dangerous phenomena of our time: terrorism.

Hall, killing a radio reporter in the process. Altogether, the terrorists take 134 hostages in three buildings by gunpoint, force them to the floor and threaten to kill them unless their demands are met.

The police and FBI surround all three buildings. And, as could be expected, the media descend on the scene en masse. Live television pictures carrying the group's warnings and demands soon go forth over the airwaves. One hundred and thirty-four lives hang in the balance.

Before proceeding, let me assure you that this crisis actually happened. On March 9, 1977, the Hanafi Muslims did indeed carry out this terrorist attack, on the very day Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was meeting with President Jimmy Carter.

This incident, which fortunately ended with the surrender of the terrorists and no further loss of life, reveals a number of important characteristics of terrorism.

To begin with, it helps us define terrorism as goal-oriented. It is violence against innocent people in order to achieve generally political objectives. This distinguishes terrorism from other forms of civil disturbance, including urban riots. As we have found out in the United States and, alas, as you are discovering here, urban riots express frustration and rage. They rarely have specific objectives.

Even when terrorists issue no specific demands, as in the recent hijacking of the Egyptian plane, the goals remain, no matter how incoherent, vague or extremely broad they may be. The random bombings of the IRA are designed to drive Britain from Northern Ireland by, in effect, holding an entire nation hostage. And surely the hijackers of the Egyptian plane

The success of terrorism in forcing political change has led some observers to conclude: terrorism is war. It is a form of warfare, moreover, in which media exposure is a powerful weapon.

As a result, we are being encouraged to restrict our coverage of terrorist actions. Mrs. Thatcher has proclaimed: "We must try to find ways to starve the terrorist and the hijacker of the oxygen of publicity on which they depend." And many people, including some reporters in the United States, share her view.

Most of these observers call for voluntary restraint by the media in covering terrorist actions. But some go so far as to sanction government control -- censorship, in fact -- should the media fail to respond.

Of course, the British and American governments have far different abilities to limit news coverage. American journalism operates under the First Amendment to our Constitution. The First Amendment forbids any laws abridging freedom of the press. We have no prior restraint, nor any censorship by the government except during actual wartime.

Moreover, our media consists of four private, national television networks, three national newspapers, countless magazines and thousands of local newspapers and television stations -- all independent of the government.

Britain is different in certain important respects. The BBC is a publicly funded entity that can be influenced by politicians. Even ITV is regulated by a board appointed by the government. There are D notices and an Official Secrets Act by which the state can control the news to some extent.

CIA, though acting without its authorization, had planted a car bomb in Lebanon that killed 80 people.

At the same time, I believe that the media can help the government resolve terrorist crises and save lives, even though it is not our role to do so.

Media coverage of terrorist events can be an insurance policy for hostages. The minute hostages appear on television, they may be somewhat safer. By giving the terrorists an identity, we make them assume more responsibility for their captives.

The government also relies, to some extent, on the news media for information about certain crises, information that can be used to resolve them. One government official acknowledged to me that American news organizations have more resources to devote to these crises -- in money, people and technology -- than does the State Department. We also sometimes have greater access to the perpetrators. In the Middle East, government officials are often sealed in their bunkers. Frequently terrorists refuse to speak to them. The terrorists want to talk to reporters.

I believe these factors are important. They have contributed to the resolution of terrorist crises and have helped save lives.

But I would quickly add that covering terrorist acts presents very real and exceedingly complex challenges as well. There are limits to what the media can and should do.

Three critical issues, in particular, must be addressed. They relate to covering terrorism, and they also apply to reporting urban violence, such as we both have experienced. All touch the central question of how the press can minimize its role as

And the media, knowing that the authorities intend to help them obtain the information they need, are much more willing to cooperate.

In particular, the media are willing to -- and do -- withhold information that is likely to endanger human life or jeopardize national security.

During the American Embassy crisis in Iran, for example, one of our Newsweek reporters became aware that six Americans known to have been in the embassy were not being held captive by the Iranians.

He concluded these men must have escaped to the Swedish or Canadian Embassies. This in fact had occurred. However, we and some others who also know it did not report the information because we knew it would put lives in jeopardy.

And in the recent crisis in which a group of Lebanese Shiites hijacked TWA Flight 847 with 153 hostages aboard, the media learned -- but did not report -- that one hostage was a member of the U. S. National Security Agency.

Tragically, however, we in the media have made mistakes. You may recall that in April 1983, some 60 people were killed in a bomb attack on the U.S. Embassy in Beirut. At the time, there was coded radio traffic between Syria, where the operation was being run, and Iran, which was supporting it.

Alas, one television network and a newspaper columnist reported that the U.S. government had intercepted the traffic. Shortly thereafter the traffic ceased. This undermined efforts to capture the terrorist leaders and eliminated a source of information about future attacks.

We often think of terrorists as unsophisticated. But many are media savy. They can and do arrange their activities to maximize media exposure and ensure that the story is presented their way. As one terrorist is supposed to have said to his compatriot: "Don't shoot now. We're not in prime time."

Specifically, terrorists have done all of the following to influence media coverage:

- Arrange for press pools.
- Grant exclusive interviews during which favored reporters are given carefully selected information.
- Hold press conferences in which hostages and others are made available to the press under conditions imposed by the captors.
- Provide videotapes that portray events as the terrorists wish them to be portrayed.
- And schedule the release of news and other events so that television deadlines can be met.

There is a real danger that terrorists not only hijack airplanes and hostages, but hijack the media as well.

To guard against this, the television networks in our country rarely -- almost never -- allow terrorists to appear live.

They also resist using videotape provided by terrorists. If there is no alternative, our commentators continually report that the material is "terrorist-supplied" so that viewers can evaluate its veracity and meaning.



Over the years, the media constantly have been confronted with attempts at manipulation. In the days of the Vietnam war, for example, we would get calls from protest groups saying, "We're going to pour chicken blood all over the entrance to Dow Chemical Company. Come cover this event." We didn't. But we did cover a Buddhist monk who wished to be filmed setting fire to himself.

How did we make the distinction? Here it was a question of trivial versus serious intent and result, of low versus high stakes. Clearly, the suicide was of cataclysmic importance to the monk.

The point is we generally know when we are being manipulated, and we've learned better how and where to draw the line, though the decisions are often difficult.

A few years ago a Croatian terrorist group in a plane demanded that its statement be printed in several newspapers, including The Washington Post, before it would release 50 hostages. In the end, we printed the statement in agate, the smallest type size we have, in 37 copies of the paper at the end of our press run. Now I'm not so sure we would accede to this demand in any form.

Nor do I believe we should put convicted murderers on the air to find out their political views.

The danger in terrorist crises is that reporters may develop a Stockholm Syndrome of their own, that they may be pulled into the terrorist's rhetoric. We may appear to be too respectful of the perpetrators -- although the fact they may be holding hostages at gunpoint tends to make us cautious.

That brings me to a third issue challenging the media: How can we avoid bringing undue pressure on the government to

Tasteless invasion of privacy can result. The ultimate horror is the camera that awaits in ambush to record the family's reaction to the news of some personal tragedy.

More to the point, there is a real danger that public opinion can be unjustifiably influenced by exposure to the hostage relatives and their views.

The nationwide television audience becomes, in a sense, an extended family. We get to know these people intimately. Our natural sympathies go out to them. We often come to share their understandable desire to have their loved ones back at any cost.

This can force a government's hand. Last May, Israel released more than 1,000 Arab prisoners in exchange for three Israelis being held in Lebanon. It was an action that ran counter to Israeli policy. However, I heard that the appearances of the families of the Israeli prisoners on television made the Israeli government think it was a necessity.

I believe the media must be exceedingly careful with the questions they ask the relatives and, of course, the hostages themselves. When we ask if they agree with the government's policy or its handling of the incident, what they would do if they were in charge, or if they have messages for the President, we are setting up a predictable tension: Hostages and their families are, understandably, the most biased of witnesses. The media must exercise the same standards with them as they would with any other news source.

A final pitfall for the media is becoming, even inadvertently, a negotiator during a crisis. But it's tough to avoid. Simply by asking legitimate questions -- such as "What are your demands?" -- the media can become part of the negotiating

appeared on the nightly news often had been in the morning paper.

This meant that television news executives had at least some amount of time in which to reflect, discuss and decide on whether a story should be broadcast and how it should be presented.

Today our networks have the technological capability to present events live -- any time, any place. As a result, the decisions about what to cover and how to cover are tougher. And they must be made faster, sometimes on the spot. The risks of making a mistake rise accordingly.

Intense competition in the news business raises the stakes even more. The electronic media in the United States live or die by their ratings, the number of viewers they attract. As a result, each network wants to be the first with the most on any big story. It's hard to stay cool in the face of this pressure.

This has created some unseemly spectacles and poor news decisions. During the TWA crisis, for example, the U.S. networks ran promotion campaigns on the air and in print touting the scoops and exclusives that each had obtained. This commercialized and trivialized a dangerous and important event.

The most dangerous potential result of unbridled competition is what we have come to call the lowest-common-denominator factor.

I believe that all of the serious, professional media -- print and electronic, in our country and in yours and indeed around the world -- are anxious to be as responsible as possible.

of what they believe is good for people to know. It's dangerous if we are asked to become a kind of super-political agency. Thus I was very sorry to see the BBC give in to government pressure to censor "Real Lives," even though it may or may not have been poorly edited.

Ultimately, I believe a terrorist attack is a self-defeating platform from which to present a case. Terrorists, in effect, hang themselves whenever they act. They convey hatred, violence, terror itself. There was no clearer image of what a terrorist really is than the unforgettable picture of that crazed man holding a gun to the head of the pilot aboard the TWA jet. That said it all to me -- and, I believe, to the world.

Suppressing or rationing the news provides no solution for the long term. If a government cannot make its case through democratic means in the face of violence, then I do believe its policies must be misguided.

Witness the current events taking place in South Africa. The government has banned television cameras from areas of unrest and made it difficult for print journalists to report what is happening. The government may have succeeded in limiting the news coverage and moving it off the screen and the front page, but the killing is worse than ever. Censorship won't work in the long run.

As a former managing editor of The Washington Post recently said, "Whenever any government attempts to hide its actions, the assumption will be made that it has something to hide and what is being hidden is more often than not sinister. Deception always is dangerous, always found out, and always boomerangs to cripple the deceivers."