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U.S. a prisoner of its own power

Even before we get our hostages back, Americans are already talking about what revenge we are going to take on the people who grabbed them.

In one sense, our revenge could be unlimited. We have atomic weapons. We have chemical weapons and nerve gas and bombs that release diseases you don't want even to think about.

Once we have our hostages safely back, we could drop those weapons on Lebanon. And we could drop them on Syria and Iran for good measure.

But, in another sense, we are prisoners of our own power.

We aren't going to be dropping nuclear bombs anywhere. And we are not going to be using any of the other exotic arrows in our quiver.

If we do take action, it is going to be very conventional and very limited. World opinion would not allow us to do anything else.

Ironically, whatever action we do take is going to put us in the position that Israel has been in for years.

Israel responded to terrorist attacks with counterattacks of its own. If the attack came from Jordan, no matter whether the government of Jordan approved it, Jordan was the target of the Israeli attack.

The policy worked. Jordan, Syria and Egypt began clamping down on terrorist raids in order to avoid Israeli reprisals.

But Lebanon was different. The government of Lebanon does not exercise any real control over that country.

And the Israeli solution, an invasion of Lebanon, proved more costly than it was worth.

America is now faced with the same dilemma. Sure, we could invade Lebanon. But we would find ourselves in the same quicksand the Israelis were sucked into.

Blockade Beirut harbor. We could do that. And we may.

Our oil-rich allies in the Mideast such as Saudi Arabia, who get their goods through Beirut, would howl, however. And our Western allies and Japan, who supply those goods, would howl too. But we could stand up to that.

It would be swift, dramatic action. But would it really punish the terrorists? They can get whatever weapons they need overland through Syria.

We could close Beirut airport. It is closed much of the time anyway.

But to make sure future hijackers could not use it as a landing site, we would probably have to bomb the runways at regular intervals. And even that might not work.

Keep in mind that the current hijackers held a gun to the TWA pilot's head and ordered him to land even if trucks were blocking the runway.

Future hijackers might order a landing even if the runways were full of bomb craters.

There are other forms of revenge we could take. Assassination, at first glance, has a certain appealing simplicity, to it.

The Kennedy administration was obsessed with the assassination of Fidel Castro and, under other administrations, the CIA has been accused of assassinations or arranging for the deaths of world leaders.

There are problems with this, however, aside from the obvious violation of law. The U.S. would have to find a clear target, a clear leader of the terrorists to assassinate. And that is not easy.

There is another problem. We are, after all, supposed to be the good guys. And assassination just doesn't seem very American.

We could bomb various suspected Shiite camps, and we might actually do that. This will surely kill some innocent civilians, however.

Killing civilians will not make the U.S. look very good, no matter how good our motivation. When Israel bombed military targets and killed nearby civilians, it was widely criticized for it in this country and elsewhere.

Then there is the biggest problem of all with our revenge: Aside from the TWA hostages, there are seven other kidnaped Americans somewhere in Lebanon.

If we get the TWA hostages back without getting the others back, can we really take reprisals without putting the lives of those seven at risk?

And, even if we get all the hostages back, there are still many Americans living in Beirut, all possible kidnaping targets. And there are still millions of Americans flying around the world, all possible hijacking targets.

Our current anger is understandable. We were angry when our hostages were held for 444 days in Tehran. But even though many people talked about it at the time, we didn't bomb that city into dust after we got our hostages back.

Are we helpless to take revenge? No, not entirely. We might take some limited action.

But the good guys do bear a certain burden. The good guys care about killing the innocent. They care about what happens to their own citizens. They care about decency and law.

Sure, we could flex our muscles and feel more macho if we didn't care about those things.

But then how could you tell the good guys and the bad guys apart?

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