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COVER STORY

'Under Siege' Terrorism in D.C.

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For months now—years, really—the question has been eating its way into the public consciousness:

How would Americans feel, and what would the government do, if the terrorism we read about in the Middle East and Western Europe were to explode onto American soil?

The question is raised at 8 tonight when NBC presents "Under Siege," a drama in which the U.S. government has to respond to terrorism on the home front. It is a Washington-based movie—which ironically could not be filmed here—that seems keyed to recent headlines.

The producer of the film, Karen Danaher, acknowledged the timeliness of the production, but said the creative germ of the movie was actually planted in Moscow six years ago.

That's when her boss, Don Ohlmeyer, a longtime television sports producer and director who now has his own production company, was in Russia during preparations for the Olympic Games.

Ohlmeyer observed how the Russians went about rounding up all the usual suspects, anyone who might create a disturbance of any kind during the Games. And he wondered how the United States would handle things four years later.

Ohlmeyer and Danaher talked about what he'd seen in the Soviet Union, and they had another thought: How would a country that protects the civil liberties of good guys and bad guys alike cope with acts of terrorism? "About that time," said Danaher, "a Washington Post series on terrorism written by Bob Woodward, Chris Williams and Dick Harwood appeared. Ohlmeyer went to talk to Woodward."

"Under Siege" was born. It was agreed that the Post writers would do the script. "We thought it would lend authenticity to have them do it rather than a Hollywood writer," said Danaher. Their script went through 10 drafts. "That's a lot," said Danaher. What emerged, she said, was an original story, written with constant concern for responsibility. The story was not pegged to headlines, she said, acknowledging that events of the past year or so overtook their story.

"It centers on Peter Strauss as the head of the FBI," said Danaher. "It's his job to find out who's behind the terrorism." At first it is assumed that the Ayatollah is responsible. It becomes a race against time for Strauss to determine who, if not the

Iranian, is responsible before there are unwarranted counterattacks on his country.

The cast includes Hal Holbrook as President Maxwell Monroe, Paul Winfield as the secretary of defense, E.G. Marshall as secretary of state. Stan Shaw is Strauss' right-hand man, Fritz Weaver plays the head of the CIA and Mason Adams is a presidential adviser. Lew Ayres plays a retired newscaster, and George Grizzard is the editor of a fictitious Washington newspaper. Victoria Tennant gives the show a softer side as Strauss' wife.

Danaher wanted to film "Siege" in Washington. But when the Hollywood producer with a hot topic met with the Washington bureaucracy, things got "interesting."

"There were people from the Capitol police, D.C. police, the CIA, Secret Service, the Park Police—there were 25 people in the room," she recalled. "Half of them, I didn't know who they were representing. They were very concerned, basically, because of the nature of the

project. It was an issue that frightened them. They were afraid that we would raise a red flag. They couldn't stop us from making the film, but there was great resistance to cooperating. That was clear."

Flying to Washington for a third appeal, Danaher met a former colleague who told her that the capitol in Arkansas was modeled after the one in Washington. After her meeting, she called Arkansas.

The film was shot last summer in Little Rock. "They let us do special effects on their capitol," said Danaher. (At one point in the film, the U.S. Capitol comes under missile attack.)

"And we built an oval office, to scale, in an abandoned Safeway store," she said.

The show that resulted isn't perfect, said Danaher. But "what I'm pleased with is that at the end of the movie you're left thinking about issues that are important," said Danaher, an issue-oriented producer whose credits include "The Burning Bed." "The question is, how far would you go to fight terrorism? How far without compromising civil liberties?"