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# On the Terrorism Beat

The quickest way into the hearts and minds of Americans is via television, and no terrorist alive doesn't know it: If you grab a plane full of Americans, can the press be far behind? Before the hijacking of TWA Flight 847, there were no American reporters in Beirut. Afterward, the airport was crawling with them — literally crawling, as reporters ducked the bullets of hijackers who'd had enough of the media for the moment.

The hijacking was certainly news, but much of what came over the airwaves afterward was manipulation masquerading as news. How is it that American media, so loath even to appear being used by its own government, would dance so to terrorists' tune?

Americans may be sophisticated viewers: We knew where those reports were coming from, and we knew where Nabih Berri was coming from; we knew that it was no place, physically or philosophically, where Americans particularly want to go and definitely where no Americans should be forcibly taken. But the rest of this global village is increasingly sophisticated about American media, and those who reside in it — in aggrieved squalor, misery and anger about which Americans know little but for which they are very much blamed — also know that TV will get our attention and terror will get TV, this time, next time and the time after that.

So we had the press secretary for the militia Amal posting a notice that all film made by one American network was to be "pooled," i.e., shared, with all American networks. We had street demonstrations in Beirut, with signs lettered in English, organized by Shiites for the express benefit of the American viewing audience. We had "interviews" "conducted" by the captors with their captives. And we had a "press conference" called by militiamen at which American reporters literally fought for the floor, at which American hostages apologized for the commotion, and which, one newspaper reporter was heard to say, only half-jokingly, was "the first time I've seen fear in the eyes of the Amal militia."

And when there wasn't much to beam or to telex from Beirut, we had reporters here at home questioning — some of them badgering — administration officials about what actions/reactions were in store, as though not only the American media and public but the world at large had a right to specifics in advance. We had reporters repeatedly quizzing the hostages' kin,

as though we wouldn't otherwise have known how worried, frustrated and angry they were — and, understandably, how narrowly focused their perspective. It's a measure of how accustomed Americans are to television's so often intrusive role that most officials demurred politely and most families complied with panache.

After the next few days, things will get pretty quiet on the terrorism beat, the crisis being over when the cameras click off and the size of the headlines drops. The public's initial reaction of anger and indignation will be pretty much diluted, what with catching up on all else that happened these past two weeks, and what with the already confusing interpretations of who among all those involved were the good guys, the bad guys and the not-so-bad guys. The important thing, was it not, was to get our guys back; that has been pretty much accomplished. Still-important subjects brought up by the media — airport security, the legitimate grievances of faraway folk, the responses of civilized societies to uncivilized acts — will fade from view. The media do make us think about things that require our attention — but not, apparently, early enough, nor for very long.

The press, press people are wont to say, isn't good or bad; it just is, immutably. But the press, the most self-policing force in our society, needs to examine to what extent it was a complicating, and perhaps contributing, factor. Among the rationales offered for the hijacking was the anger of radical Shiites at a Washington Post story in May alleging a tie between the CIA and the car-bombing of the residence of a militant Shiite leader, an allegation that the CIA vehemently denied and that a House committee highly skeptical of CIA disclaimers has since disproved to its satisfaction. Another rationale was that Lebanon had been off the nightly news map for too long. Our plaint is not that the American press left a country in anarchy but that it scrambled so to return and reported events so rawly.

The press gets used, indeed it does; but too often in this instance the used were uncharacteristically less shrewd and selective, and considerably less disciplined, than their users. And because they were, they may well have bolstered those who think that a sure way to get the attention — and possibly the help, sympathy and indulgence — of Americans is to hit them with the 2x4 of terrorism.