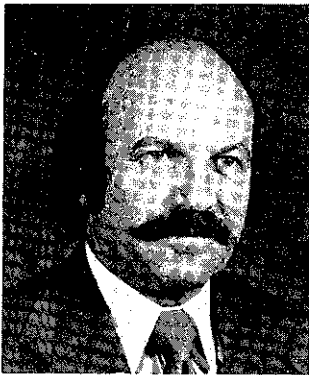


editorial



The Real Cost of Blackmail

by Reuven Bar-Levav, MD

The fifty-two unfortunate Americans who were held hostage in Iran are back in the United States, but only their personal ordeal is essentially over. It, too, is likely to have late sequelae. But for the rest of us, not only Americans but all those in the West, the real price will have to be paid for many years, a price infinitely greater than the unfrozen billions. This brief note is one small contribution toward minimizing the severe public health problem that is facing us.

The Reagan Presidency will have to devote much effort to undo the immense damage that was inflicted on our individual psyches, as much by our own government and media as by the Iranians. Free men and women everywhere have been indoctrinated over a period of almost 450 days, slowly but persistently, through live television and the printed word, day after day and evening after evening, with a stance that accepts kidnapping and blackmail as part of a civilized society without revulsion. By negotiating with the Iranian "government" the Carter administration has desensitized the Free World and has prepared it to accept similar acts of piracy without horror or shock in the future.

Because of such desensitization we have forgotten these salient facts: The hostages were captured by an angry mob of so-called "students," but the negotiations have for many months been conducted with official representatives of a legal Iranian government, which was not held responsible for

violating the basic tenets of human decency, civilized existence and international law. Hundreds of times were the internal conflicts in Iran cited by American newsmen and by official spokesmen as possible excuses for the continued holding of innocent human beings for ransom. In so doing we have slowly learned to accept the principle that a government may be excused for illegal and inhumane acts on its territory. The Iranian government no longer even claimed that "students" or "masses" were responsible for the blackmail and we negotiated, though indirectly, and signed bilateral agreements with kidnapers and terrorists. By doing so we weakened the fragile mesh of civilized order, and invited future atrocities. Basic values of our Society have been successfully challenged and thus weakened.

1984 is upon us now. The Big Lie when repeated enough becomes believable. Many Americans, not only the ex-hostages, have come to accept at least some of the fantastic accusations about our collective guilt and shame. Carter's holier-than-thou rhetoric about human rights confused our policy makers. In the name of rectifying the impurities of a Shah we have indirectly helped a regressive, repressive, clerical, fundamentalist regime to take over in Iran. Our naive fallacies have quickly been shown to be no more than pious acts of incompetence for which we are paying a very high price.

The repeated desensitization of our sense of justice has changed the moral background of international relations. The new conditions that have been created are such that an

infinitely greater number of lives than fifty-two is likely to be lost in the future as a result.

Had our government flatly refused to negotiate with any Iranian "government" that could not or would not control its own population and held responsible a fragile government for what happened to

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innocent Americans kidnapped on its territory—these fifty-two lives, like soldiers at war, might perhaps have been lost. But, tragic as such a result would have been, it would surely have entailed an infinitely lower price than the one we must pay now. As physicians we often have to make difficult and painful decisions under extreme circumstances. That is why a triage system was devised for battlefield conditions. It is the kindest system in a cruel reality.

The disturbed mental health of Free men and women everywhere and the wider acceptance of legally sanctioned evil are the continuing cost of our own handling of this sad affair. While we rejoice at the saving of the fifty-two lives, we have few other reasons for merriment now.

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