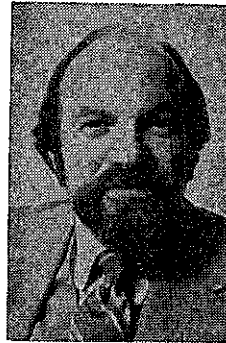


Editorial

The Second Embassy Holdup

Americans have been fortunate, living in a rich country and not exposed to as much war as the Europeans. But, as a result they are very naive politically, and they can learn a lot from the recent Iranian crisis. American Medicine, no less naive than the society of which it is a part, also stands to benefit from learning the following two lessons:

1. When the fanatic and mindless mob ransacked the American Embassy in Tehran, the world and the American public were understandably infuriated. But, they should not have been shocked or surprised. President Carter had claimed that never before in the history of mankind had a government condoned such acts of terrorism in its territory, ignoring not only international law but also a long tradition of immunity for diplomatic representatives. The statement is erroneous, however, and indicates a lapse of memory on the President's part and on the part of the press and the public who failed to correct it.



DR. BAR-LEVAV

Having tolerated mob-rule in one instance, we ought to have known that it was likely to recur. Irrational outbursts of strong feelings that are excused generally breed even worse out-breaks.

Only several months before the American Embassy was overrun, we were shown films of the same mob committing the exact same act of piracy against another diplomatic mission in Tehran, that of Israel. All three networks prominently featured Yassir Arafat embracing the Ayatollah Khomeini, just before the former proudly raised the P.L.O. flag over the deserted building. No one was dismayed or surprised by the dastardly act, and no one took a firm stand. It was expected that a hate-whipped, primitive, Moslem mob would surely not tolerate the presence of an Israeli mission, even though it was only yesterday officially welcomed.

If it needed proving again that peace and justice are indivisible—here was the proof. Having tolerated mob-rule in one instance, we ought to have known that it was likely to recur. Irrational outbursts of strong feelings that are excused generally breed even worse outbursts. This is as true in child rearing as it is in international law and in domestic politics.

Organized medicine has similarly failed to recognize in the last forty years that yielding to ever expanding pressures would never contain the onslaughts upon the independent judgment of physicians. Only the self-serving interests of the politicians who whip up unrealistic expectations are being advanced. Yielding merely encourages further attacks elsewhere and everywhere. Those who advocated non-compromise were usually told that reasonable people must make reasonable allowances in a changing society, even if contrary to experience and reason. Many physicians have also accepted by now the claim that medical treatment is a right of every citizen, no less than life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. When opportunistic promises are taken seriously by thoughtful men, we ought not be surprised if strange results eventually follow.

2. One of the attackers on the American Embassy told a German correspondent that he was very scared as he ran towards an armed American Marine guarding the Embassy gate. He expected to be shot at but, instead, the tough-looking soldier simply handed over his rifle. "I did not understand it," the Iranian said.

Failure of will always precedes actual losses in the field. Having agreed to accept

third-party involvement in the doctor/patient relationship, we have let go of the principle of the mutual responsibility to each other. Consequently, physicians must battle today for rights that were clearly theirs even a few years ago. Although some physicians abuse their license, we should not accept the assumption of our general corruption, lest we lose the power to resist the attacks. Even if the accusations against physicians, as those against the Shah, are justified in a minor way, they are nonetheless the pretext, not the real reason for the exploding fury.

Kennedy and his likes describe American physicians as the Ayatollah describes Americans in general: Basically untrustworthy, in need of close monitoring, constriction and punishment, and by nature, like the Shah, greedy and likely to abuse and take advantage of others. If we confine our defense essentially to questioning one regulation and then another, we tacitly accept these basic premises. Our will to continue existing as an independent profession is slowly being corroded in the process.

Practically, there is no easy way to get the hostages out of Tehran, and it is no less difficult to reverse the trend that threatens to destroy the best medical system in the world, even if imperfect. But, a clear recognition of reality will make it somewhat easier to choose the best course.

R. Dan-Lewin M.D.