**America’s First Hostage Crisis**

In 1979, Iranian students invaded the American embassy in Tehran and held American diplomats and others hostage for 444 days. To secure their freedom, President Jimmy Carter agreed in his last days in office to release $8 billion in frozen Iranian assets.

In Lebanon, during the mid-1980s, pro-Iranian extremists kidnapped and held hostage some two dozen American journalists and teachers. In one bloody incident, militants abducted a U.S. marine lieutenant colonel, hanged him, and broadcast videotaped pictures of his lifeless body on television. Despite his pledge never to negotiate with terrorists, President Ronald Reagan agreed to sell weapons to Iran in return for the hostages' release. Two were freed, but they were soon replaced when extremists took new American hostages.

After invading Kuwait in August 1990, Iraq announced that 10,000 Americans and other Western citizens trapped in Iraq and Kuwait would be scattered among Iraqi military bases, oil production facilities, and industrial installations as human shields against Western and Arab attack. At first, President George Bush refused to use the "h"-word--"hostage"--to describe these trapped Westerners; but soon he acknowledged that he too faced a hostage crisis. Ultimately, Iraq freed the Western hostages, apparently in an attempt to initiate negotiations with the United States and its allies.

Few political issues have distressed Americans more in recent years than the taking of hostages. Both the Carter and Reagan administrations suffered severe political damage as a result of their handling of hostage crises. Today, Americans continue to debate how best to deal with hostage situations. Should the United States negotiate with kidnappers? Should we pay ransom and make political concessions to secure the hostages' freedom? Or should the country flatly refuse to deal with kidnappers?

These questions are not new. Even before George Washington became president, the United States was confronted with a hostage crisis. The episode began in 1785, when an American schooner Maria, sailing off the coast of Portugal, was boarded by Algerian pirates. Its captain and five crew members were taken prisoners. Then a second American ship, the brig Dauphin was captured, and its 15-member crew was taken to Algiers and enslaved. Several hostages were put to work as domestic servants; another was forced to care for the Dey of Algiers's lion. Much of the time the hostages were kept in leg irons, chained to pillars or locked in a rat-infested prison. Six Americans died of bubonic plague; one went insane.

During the late eighteenth century, three small north African states--Algiers, Tripoli, and Tunis--preyed on merchant ships sailing in the Mediterranean, seizing their crews and cargoes and holding both for ransom. Many European countries paid tribute to what were called the Barbary states to insure that their ships would be unmolested, but Americans did not. Major powers like Britain and France tolerated the "Barbary pirates" because they exacted high costs on the the shipping of potential competitors, such as Denmark, Holland, Portugal, Sweden, and the United States.

In a bid to free the American hostages, Thomas Jefferson, then Minister to France, offered to pay $200 ransom for each American prisoner. This sum was well below the going rate of $1,600 per hostage. As a result, the hapless prisoners languished in captivity. Over the next eight years, Algerian pirates seized more than a hundred hostages from a dozen captured American ships.

Finally, in 1795, the State Department dispatched a poet, Joel Barlow, to negotiate for the hostages' release. To gain the captives' freedom, the United States agreed to pay $800,000 plus annual tribute--and to provide the Dey of Algiers with a brand-new 36-gun frigate. In 1797, the hostages were freed and sailed to Philadelphia, where they were greeted by cheering crowds.

Although the hostages were now free, the story was not yet over. After the military ruler of Tripoli learned that the Dey of Algiers had received an American frigate, he demanded a ship of his own. When the United States refused to accede to his demand, the Bawshaw of Tripoli seized an American merchant ship and ordered the flag of the U.S. consulate in Tripoli cut down.

President Thomas Jefferson responded by imposing a naval blockade of Tripoli. In 1803, however, the U.S. frigate Philadelphia ran aground off the coast of Tripoli and its 307-member crew was captured. In a daring raid on February 16, 1804, Lieutenant Stephen Decatur, Jr., and a small band of sailors boarded the Philadelphia and set the ship afire. But the Philadelphia's crew remained imprisoned, and Tripoli's leader demanded $200,000 ransom for their release.

The stage was now set for one of the most colorful episodes in American military history. In 1805, William Eaton, the American consul to Tunis, led a ragtag "army" consisting of eight marines, two navy midshipmen, and some three hundred Europeans and Muslims on a fifty day, 520-mile march from Egypt and successfully stormed the Tripolitan city of Derna. Eaton's stunning victory led Tripoli to sign a peace treaty with the United States. In return, the United States agreed to pay $60,000 for the release of the Philadelphia's crew.

It was not until 1815 that the United States successfully ended North African piracy. In that year, a fleet of ten American ships under the command of Stephen Decatur threatened to bombard Algiers. The threat worked. The North African states agreed to release American prisoners without ransom and to cease all interference with American shipping.