

Hostages are victims of past inaction

Marvelously, while Americans were mesmerized by the worst terrorism crisis since the last one and until the next one, and the usual people were saying the usual things about the need to understand the roots of terrorism, the New York Times reported that thanks to recent scholarship Nero is now better understood than previously, and that although no one is saying he was nice (he murdered his mother and slaughtered Jews and Christians evenhandedly), he had his virtues and his vices have explanations.

Mother was a pill; it was tough being a teen-age emperor; he loved the arts; literature flourished during his reign; and evidence suggests he did not set, let alone fiddle during the fire that burned Rome. He killed his last victim, himself, by suicide, 1,917 years ago. Today he is more comprehensible without seeming less lurid.

And 1,917 years from now will be soon enough to worry about "understanding" the motivations of the terrorists — as though there is some mystery about the religious and political motives of their war against the West.

When one of these standard crises begins (television news, like entertainment programming, seems to be in summer re-runs), the air becomes thick with the thought that understanding the terrorists will make possible a the-

rapeutic foreign policy. Actually, the only practical task is to make terrorism against Americans terrifying to those (in this case, Syrians) who could, if motivated, restrain it.

But already portions of the government are secreting the suggestion that this time, too, retaliation would be inappropriate. Why? Because it would interfere with fine-tuning and nation-building in Lebanon. Here we go again.



George Will

In Vietnam, the proper task was to defeat aggression by North Vietnam's army. But the displaced professoriat in the U.S. government saw the problem as "nation building." As a result, the nation of South Vietnam no longer exists. In the Middle East, the problem is to make terrorism costly as opposed to what it now is: it is rational, because it is effective and risk-free. But today's suggestion is that retaliation would damage the standing of Nabih Berri, who supposedly could be crucial to U.S. influence among "moderates" in Lebanon.

We are back in business at the old stand — nation building. In these crises, the supposed "moderates" are the terrorist negotiators (in Iran, Gotz-

badeh; in Lebanon now, Berri) to whom consideration must allegedly be given lest "extremists" prosper.

But U.S. policy should not be controlled by consideration for the likes of Berri, who by his behavior is on the terrorists side, and who by the evidence of recent history is just another mayfly in a tornado.

Ronald Reagan has been so Mau-Maued by critics of his (quite imaginary) bellicosity, he seems unable to make America as menacing as it should be at moments like this. He should remember the promise he made a week after his inauguration, at the White House ceremony for the freed hostages from Iran: the promise of "swift and effective retribution" for terrorism. If there is no retaliation now, then from now on, over all Reagan's words will hover an asterisk denoting "these are just words, probably empty and unrelated to action."

For the moment, the administration should just muzzle those officials who are complaining because Israel is reluctant to practice surrogate appeasement for us. Then the administration should fold its arms, shut its mouth and wait. That will not be easy, given the ecstasy with which the television networks go about saturating the nation with coverage of such episodes.

ABC's Peter Jennings says television

has "got to be very careful not to feed the public anger." Have the networks decided on the appropriate American mood and their responsibility for fine-tuning it? Americans are not nearly angry enough about the savage beating and murder of the sailor who followed Maj. Nicholson to Arlington Cemetery. Intelligent behavior flows not from keeping one's passion and rational capacities separated, but from reasonably relating a proper passion — in this case, cold fury — to action.

It is getting late in the Third World War for Americans to heed Douglas MacArthur's warning that all military failure is explicable in two words: "too

late." Too late perceiving, too late responding to, threats. The President says he does not want to jeopardize the lives of today's hostages. He is too late. Today's hostages are, to some extent, victims of yesterday's flaccid responses by him to terrorism, emphatically including the non-response to the truck bomb that blew U.S. forces out of Lebanon.

Under U.S. policy, the tragedy of terrorism resembles an operetta, Gilbert and Sullivan's "The Pirates of Penzance," in which the police assigned to deal with the pirates say, "Yes, yes, we go...All right — we go," but what they communicate is extreme reluctance.

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