

## The Persuasive Appeal of Mediated Terrorism: The Case of the TWA Flight 847 Hijacking

WILLIAM J. BROWN

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Research on terrorism and its relationship to the media is not sufficient to warrant firm conclusions regarding how terrorism affects distant observers. This essay explores the effects of terrorism by approaching it as a persuasive form of human communication rather than a dysfunctional sociological act. It (1) describes the rhetorical functions of terrorism, (2) evaluates the persuasive appeal of a mediated narrative, and (3) applies narrative theory to analyze the TWA Flight 847 hijacking incident of 1985 and the role of terrorist spokesman Nabih Berri. The analysis indicates that Berri successfully used the news media to persuade Americans that the just and reasonable solution to the hostage crisis was to trade the release of Shiite prisoners in Israel for the release of American hostages in Beirut. The study suggests that narrative theory provides a valuable means to analyze media coverage of terrorism and its affects on distant audiences.

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**M**ASS MEDIA COVERAGE of international terrorism has become controversial during the past two decades. The trend of terrorist activities during the 1980s produced a steady rise in fatalities (Jenkins, 1985). From 1975 to 1984, the average number of terrorist incidents reported rose from 10 per week to nearly ten each day (Risks International, 1985). The recent bombings of Pan Am Flight 103 over Scotland and of a French D-10 over Niger are painful reminders of the cost of human lives and destruction of property that makes the study of terrorism an important academic concern.

The effects of international terrorism are complex, because distant audiences and public opinion are influenced through media reports of terrorism. News coverage of terrorist events often evolves into dramatic stories that induce audience involvement in the same way melodramas do (Alexander, 1978, 1980; Bassiouni, 1982; Dowling, 1986; Lacqueur, 1976; Levy, 1985; Weimann, 1983; Wilber, 1985). The impact of terrorism on mass audiences cannot be assessed without analyzing media stories that focus on terrorist acts. A research approach is needed to evaluate whether or not media coverage enables terrorists to achieve

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WILLIAM J. BROWN is Assistant Professor of Communication, University of Hawaii at Manoa, Honolulu, HI, 96822.

their objectives. Such an approach is absent in present studies of the effects of terrorism.

Research findings concerning how media coverage may have benefited terrorists are contradictory and inconclusive. An analysis of *The New York Times* and *The London Times* by Kelly and Mitchell (1981) indicated that very little coverage of terrorist events dealt with the grievances, causes, and motivations of the terrorists. Paletz, Fozzard, and Ayanian's (1982) analysis of reports of terrorism in *The New York Times* yielded no evidence to support the claim that the mass media legitimize the causes of terrorists or advance their political objectives.

However, another group of researchers, emphasizing the psychological impact of terrorism on mass audiences, arrived at different conclusions (Bassiouni, 1982; Stoil & Brownell, 1981; Weimann, 1983; 1985). These researchers found that the media enabled terrorists to influence the perceptions of media users, especially television audiences. Several studies linked television news coverage of terrorist events with the ability of terrorists to gain political leverage (Behr & Iyengar, 1985; Larson, 1986; Palmerton, 1988; Sadeghi, 1987). Researchers who have studied media accounts of international terrorism contend that news coverage played a critical role in forming public opinion of terrorists (Brown, 1987; Larson, 1986; Palmerton, 1988; Sadeghi, 1987). It is not clear, however, how public opinion is affected by news coverage of terrorism.

The present essay seeks to explain how media narratives of terrorism can benefit terrorists. In contrast to past studies that have focused on the quantity and type of media accounts of terrorism, the present evaluation focuses on how the narrative elements of mediated terrorism affect mass audiences. My thesis is that the rhetoric generated through an act of terrorism is often organized by the news media into a dramatic narrative that helps terrorists to achieve their objectives. To understand how this occurs, the rhetorical functions of mediated terrorist discourse and the persuasive appeals of a mediated narrative will be considered. The theoretical explanation offered in this essay will then be applied in an analysis of the 1985 TWA hijacking.

#### RHETORICAL FUNCTIONS OF MEDIATED TERRORISM

Mediated terrorism functions rhetorically in two ways. First, terrorism has a symbolic function. An act of terrorism is both physical (meaningful violence) and symbolic (capable of audience inducement). A bomb, assassination, or hijacking that is intended to influence others is rhetorical, because it involves the use of symbols as a means of persuasion (Burke, 1950, p. 43). The symbolic function of terrorism occurs when a terrorist act induces an audience to search for motives and meanings to explain and interpret the act. For example, when an audience first learns of a bomb that exploded in a supermarket or on an airliner, the audience wants to know who planted the bomb and why.

Some acts of terrorism are meant to speak for themselves, as in the case of bombings not accompanied by ideological claims or statements. Such acts are rhetorical, without spoken communication, because they include symbols of power that influence people. The implicit message of such acts is that the world must pay attention to what the terrorist is trying to communicate.

Second, terrorism generates discourse that affects distant audiences. Although a terrorist act usually affects a small number of people directly, the discourse generated during a terrorist incident has a much broader impact. Terrorists use words to pursue their objectives, not just violence. Terrorist discourse functions rhetorically when terrorists strategically disseminate statements to obtain specific objectives. Dowling (1986) argues that three of these objectives are to gain recognition, to acquire legitimacy, and to achieve political ends. The ability to achieve these objectives is greatly determined by the type of media coverage terrorists attract. Extensive media coverage enhances the rhetorical power available to terrorists, because it enables them to gain public recognition and present their claims and ideologies to the public.

The first objective of terrorist discourse, the gaining of recognition, occurs when an audience identifies the terrorists with a specific cause. For example, most people would be able to identify the major objective of the Irish Republican Army (IRA): to free Northern Ireland from British control. Without media coverage of IRA objectives, such an association would not be made by the general public.

The second objective of terrorist discourse, achieving legitimacy, occurs when the causes or demands of terrorists are perceived as being justified by accepted values such as self-determinism. For example, in the early days of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), very few nations recognized their legitimacy as a political body or their demand for a Palestinian homeland. Today there is recognition by most members of the United Nations that the PLO has a legitimate right both to exist and to seek a homeland. Brock's (1988) recent historical analysis of the rhetoric of the PLO indicates they have been very successful in inducing a favorable public opinion shift in the United States toward the Palestinian cause, despite the PLO's history of violence.

Without media coverage of the rights for which Palestinians have been fighting, international exposure to the PLO's claims of legitimacy would be impossible. Public awareness of the PLO cause enabled the PLO to build public support for their claims. Although media coverage of a political group or ideology does not always lead to public support, the media can enhance the legitimization process once public support is expressed.

The third objective of terrorist discourse identified by Dowling (1986) is the achievement of political goals. The removal of American troops from Lebanon was partially achieved through the rhetoric of Islamic

revolutionaries. The Lebanese Shiites, with the support of Iran, waged a publicity campaign against Western influence. This example shows that terrorism is often used strategically as a political weapon to gain outside nations as an ally. Although not all terrorist activities are intended to gain recognition, legitimacy, and political influence, the rhetoric of terrorists often achieves one or more of these three objectives.

Terrorists and their spokespersons produce two different kinds of rhetoric, that which appears to be cooperative and that which is antagonistic. Griffin (1964) calls these two broad categories persuasive rhetoric and coercive rhetoric. Coercion takes place when an individual or group is forced to make a specific decision by a power originating outside of themselves (Simons, 1977). In contrast, persuasion involves free choice and is a voluntary, moral and rational process. Rhetoric becomes less persuasive and more coercive to the extent that it limits the viable alternatives open to receivers (Andrews, 1969).

Both coercive and persuasive rhetoric are generated during a terrorist event that receives media coverage. Discourse consisting of threats of violence or claims of responsibility for violence is regarded as coercive. Effective coercive rhetoric influences behavior through fear and intimidation and induces involuntary compliance.

Although direct statements by terrorists and their supporters are often coercive, much of the rhetoric generated during a terrorist incident is persuasive. Discourse regarding the causes of terrorism, the political objectives of terrorists, and audience responses to terrorism, is persuasive rhetoric. Persuasive communication especially abounds when extensive media coverage creates a public forum focusing on terrorism. Palmerton (1988) notes that it is a mistake to attribute the persuasive effects of terrorism only to the rhetoric of terrorists (direct statements, slogans, demands, etc.). The rhetoric of audiences who respond to terrorists is also important.

Combining the three objectives of terrorist discourse with the two types of rhetoric generated during mediated terrorism results in a model for illustrating how the media diffuse both coercive and persuasive messages during a terrorist incident (Figure 1). The model includes examples of statements spoken by the Shiite terrorists and their supporters during the 1985 TWA hijacking that addressed the Shiites' quest for recognition, legitimacy, and political power.

#### THE PERSUASIVE APPEAL OF A MEDIATED NARRATIVE

The persuasive impact of rhetoric generated by mediated terrorism depends on the nature of the narrative created by the media. One question that frequently arises is, how can a mediated terrorist incident persuade audiences to look sympathetically upon terrorists? If, as many contend, the media help to advance the objectives of terrorists through the inducement of public sentiment, then there must be a theoretical

Figure 1. Types of rhetoric generated during the 1985 TWA hijacking incident.

OBJECTIVES OF TERRORIST DISCOURSE	PERSUASIVE	COERCIVE
RECOGNITION	"They have only the willingness to die [to] become an example for all freedom seekers in the world. They are not terrorists."	"We are suicide terrorists. We don't want money. All we want to do is die."
LEGITIMACY	"Those people [Shiites] being held there [in Israel] are hostages also. They are civilians."	"We'll take this marine [a passenger killed by the hijackers], one of the Marines who shelled national Beirut."
POLITICAL INTENT	"Instead of looking upon it as terrorism, which it is not, Americans should think about their own Middle East policy."	"To the people of Palestine, we say: . . . it is only through Islam that you can liberate your land."

explanation that can account for either the terrorists' success or failure. In addition, this success or failure must be related to the way in which the media creates the narratives that describe terrorism.

When terrorism is reported by the media in the form of a news story, the structure of the narrative can enhance the story's persuasive appeal. Newsworthy events are framed by the media in an organized and cohesive fashion to develop narratives that will make sense to the news audience (Bennett, 1983; Gans, 1979); resulting in a distorted vision of events (Paletz & Entman, 1981). The sense-making activities of the media often lead to inaccurate stories, especially when events are reported from overseas (Bennett, 1983; Larson, 1984, 1986).

Terrorism represents a facet of human behavior that is very difficult to understand. Most individuals would not choose to engage in dialogue with terrorists. Yet, when the news media report the acts and rhetoric of terrorists to the public, they promote a dialogue between the terrorists and their intended audience. The media explain to the public the identity of terrorists, their intended purpose, and reasons why they resort to terrorism. The public then evaluates the accounts given by terrorists and responds accordingly. These responses are diffused by the news media, thus focusing public dialogue on issues raised by terrorists. Agenda-setting studies have demonstrated that to a large extent media coverage determines both the salience and importance of events in the minds of the public (MacKuen & Coombs, 1981; Rogers & Dearing, 1988). Therefore, mediated terrorism promotes public thought and discussion on matters important to terrorists.

Terrorism is also dramatic, and dramatic stories induce a high degree of audience involvement. A number of scholars have emphasized the

dramatic attributes of mediated terrorist episodes (Alexander, 1978; Bassiouni, 1982; Dowling, 1986; Lacqueur, 1976; Weimann, 1983) which produced narrative accounts through the use of analogies, metaphors, theories, and ideologies (Bennett & Edelman, 1985). Audience perceptions of terrorists are formulated on the basis of the attitudes, symbols, and theoretical constructs employed by media storytellers (Ellul, 1965). As the dramatic development of a media story becomes more intricate, the involvement of viewers and the persuasive impact of the story increases (Bentley, 1964).

Audience involvement in media stories is important because narratives make arguments that are persuasive to audiences. These arguments are not always based on formal logic. Often rhetoric on behalf of or by terrorists is dismissed as irrational, because it fails the "rational-world paradigm" applied to it. Such dismissals falsely assume that the rhetoric of terrorists and their spokespersons only influences people through coercion, and not through persuasion.

Instead of focusing on formal logical analysis, the persuasive appeal of terrorists can be assessed by focusing on the narrative rationality of media stories generated by acts of terrorism. The informal logic described by narrative rationality, "the logic of good reasons," provides an appropriate test for evaluating mediated terrorist discourse, because it regards human values as more persuasive than other modes of argument (Fisher, 1987, p. 48). Values serve as powerful psychological forces that provide warrants for accepting or rejecting the narratives we encounter. Narrative theory predicts that stories which exhibit a greater probability (coherence) and fidelity (verisimilitude) will most likely become guides for thought and action in our lives (Fisher, 1987, p. 47). Media stories of terrorism that are coherent and consistent with the realities experienced by media audiences will have a greater impact than stories that fail to provide warrants for the actions of terrorists.

Viewing the communication that occurs during a mediated terrorist event as storytelling enables one to evaluate the adherence to the persuasive messages of terrorists and their spokespersons as a selection process. In this process the public chooses from a competing set of stories in order to give meaning and understanding to the behavior of terrorists. A story that makes sense and sounds right will be more adhered to by an audience than a story that does not seem reasonable.

In summary, a terrorist event that receives extensive media coverage functions rhetorically, because it is a special kind of symbolic act, a mediated narrative, that generates persuasive communication. Mediated terrorism produces stories that display the human emotions, struggles, values, motivations and needs of its participants and can captivate an audience with a constructed reality that affects public opinion.

#### **A CASE STUDY OF THE TWA FLIGHT 847 HIJACKING INCIDENT**

No other single event during 1985 received as much media attention as the TWA Flight 847 hijacking (Sadeghi, 1985). The story

dominated the U.S. news for three and one-half weeks. The hijacking began on June 14, 1985, when two armed Shia Muslims took control of a passenger flight en route to Rome from Athens. After the hijackers commandeered the plane for two days, flying back and forth from Lebanon to Algeria, releasing some passengers in each location but killing one passenger, the plane landed in Beirut with 39 American hostages. For a two-week period the hostage-takers and their spokesperson, Nabih Berri, negotiated for the release of more than 700 Shia Muslims being held at Atlit Prison in Israel in exchange for the safe return of the Americans. After a lengthy diplomatic process, the hostages were released on June 30, 1985, and the Lebanese prisoners were subsequently released by Israel, some immediately and others much later.

Through a narrative analysis of TWA stories published in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report* from June 24 through July 8, and of selected broadcasts of *ABC World News Tonight* and *Good Morning America* from June 14 through June 30, in 1985, the present case study seeks to explain why most Americans favored giving the terrorists who hijacked Flight 847 their primary demand. ABC coverage of the TWA incident was selected for analysis because it was the most extensive of the three major U.S. television networks (181 TWA news stories). Atwater's (1987) analysis of television news coverage of the TWA incident indicated that the amount of coverage by networks was similar from one day to the next, and there was a homogeneity in topical emphasis among the TWA news stories broadcast by the networks. Therefore the news sources analyzed were considered to be representative of other media sources. The following analysis of the TWA hijacking shows how these media accounts demonstrated the three functions of terrorist objectives: to gain recognition, legitimacy, and political influence.

### *Recognition*

The terrorists who hijacked TWA Flight 847 were able quickly to gain recognition due to the international nature of the event. Responses to international news coverage of the hijacking came from many nations. The TWA story recreated by the media spanned three continents, involved 145 passengers from several nations, and was covered live via satellite television throughout much of the world.

Shortly after the hijackers took control of Flight 847 by gunpoint, they identified themselves as Shiites and demanded the immediate release of Shiite prisoners in Israel. When a Lebanese army negotiator tried to talk with the hijackers in Beirut, one of the hijackers responded, "I don't want to talk to you; I'll only talk to Amal" ("Mideast Terror," 1985, p. 11), referring to the Shiite group in Lebanon.

Major news magazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report* published feature stories on the Shiites in the Middle East,

linking the hijacking to Shiite goals. One story indicated the wave of hijacking and bombing assaults in Lebanon represented a Shiite strategy to "purge Western influence from the Islamic world" ("Shiite Extremists," 1985, p. 10). The immediate goal of the Shiites was identified as "seeking the release of 700 Shi'ites from Israeli custody" (Smith, 1985a, p. 19). Thus the hijackers achieved the recognition of an international audience. The news media communicated the identity of the hijackers, their immediate objectives, and their long-term cause. Without the media, such recognition by mass audiences would be impossible to achieve.

### *Legitimacy*

No published systematic study thus far has attempted to evaluate how American public opinion of the Shiite demands was affected by the media coverage of the TWA event. It is difficult therefore to assess whether or not the Shiite terrorists achieved legitimacy in the minds of the American public. However, a poll conducted by the Gallup Organization for *Newsweek* indicated that most Americans believed the United States should have persuaded Israel to release the Shiites they held, thus granting the hijackers one of their primary demands ("Is Reagan Tough Enough," 1985, p. 21). The results of this poll, partially reproduced in Figure 2, indicated that a slight majority of Americans also felt that the United States should be willing to compromise on terrorist demands to ensure the safe release of American hostages.

Responses to one question in the Gallup poll indicated that most Americans also felt Israel should speed up the process of freeing Shiite

Figure 2. Gallup Organization poll for *Newsweek*

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Q: Which is more important: ensuring the safe release of American hostages even if it means working out some compromise on terrorist demands or discouraging future hostage taking by refusing to deal with terrorist demands even if it risks the lives of American hostages?	
R: Ensuring hostages release: 47%	Refusing to deal: 42%
Q: Israel has already promised to free over a period of time all the Shiites that President Reagan says were detained and taken to Israel illegally. Should that process be speeded up to free the current hostages or should it not be speeded up so as to deny terrorist demands for the Shiites' immediate release?	
R: Speed up the Shiites release: 56%	Not speed up: 29%
Q: How effective do you think . . . refusing to negotiate for U.S. hostages . . . would be in preventing terrorist hostage taking in the Middle East?	
Responses:	Very effective: 24%
	Somewhat effective: 26%
	Not effective: 39%

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The Gallup Organization interviewed a national sample of 1,016 adults by telephone on June 20 and 21, 1985. The margin of error is plus or minus 4 percentage points. Responses of "don't know" and "no opinion" are not included in the percentages above.



prisoners. Although the question did not explicitly mention legitimacy, responses to the question imply that many Americans felt the Shiites had a legitimate request. Without the media, Atlit prison and its prisoners would not have emerged into the public spotlight. Few Americans were even aware that Israel had detained over 700 Shiites.

### *Political Objectives*

The terrorists who hijacked TWA Flight 847 initially appeared to be concerned about spreading their Islamic ideology, but the events that unfolded revealed the importance of their political intentions. The Shiite terrorists wanted not only the release of fellow Shiites held captive by Israel and two other nations, they also wanted to strengthen their political power base in Lebanon.

Smith (1985a) argued in *Time* that "The terrorists' repeated emphasis on seeing officials of Amal, the mainstream Shi'ite organization, suggested not only that they were seeking a negotiated settlement but that their motivation may have been essentially political rather than ideological" (p. 22). In *Newsweek* Deming (1985) noted the political objectives of the terrorists, stating "No one knows how far the fired-up Shiites will go in their quest for . . . political power—or for revenge" (p. 25).

The political ramifications of the TWA event for the Shiites in Lebanon were frequently reported by the news media. For example, *Time* expounded upon the hijackers' objectives "on a political level" (Smith, 1985a, p. 19); *Newsweek* predicted the most profound effects of the Shiites' violent fundamentalism would "likely be political" (Woodward, 1985, p. 28); and *U.S. News & World Report* claimed the hijackers represented a neglected minority who are now "emerging as a powerful political force" in the Middle East ("Shiite Extremists," 1985, p. 10).

### IMPACT OF THE TWA NARRATIVE

Clearly the TWA story disseminated by the news media had a persuasive impact on audiences exposed to it. The American people responded to the story by publicly encouraging the U.S. government to seek a negotiated settlement with the terrorists. The Reagan administration conducted closed door negotiations with the terrorists' representatives, thus recognizing the demands of the hijackers. Although President Reagan stated that "America will never make concessions to terrorists," he was willing to negotiate with Nabih Berri for the release of the American hostages (Chaze, 1985, p. 20).

Diplomatic actions by the U.S. during the TWA incident represented a departure from stated U.S. foreign policy. The controversial U.S. arms trade with Iran, which began during the same time period as the TWA event, was also directly linked to the Reagan administration's concern for hostages in Lebanon (Tower, Muskie, & Scowcroft, 1987).

The attention focused by the media on American hostages placed tremendous pressure on the Reagan administration, similar to the pressure felt by the Carter administration when dealing with the Iranian hostage crisis in 1979. Lloyd Cutler, a White House Counselor to President Carter, believed the news media's coverage of the Iranian crisis pushed the Carter administration "to do something," resulting in the ill-fated rescue attempt (Cutler, 1984). Likewise, constant media attention to the TWA story made it difficult for Reagan to ignore the crisis nature of the event.

Larson's (1986) analysis of the Iranian hostage crisis indicated that public perceptions and foreign policy decisions in the United States were affected by media coverage of Iran. The Tower Commission Report also indicated that concern for American hostages affected American foreign policy decisions in the Middle East (Tower, Muskie, & Scowcroft, 1987). In both the TWA and Iranian hostage crises, the media were instrumental in the formation of public opinion which affected American foreign policy (O'Neill, 1986). What enabled the TWA story to have a powerful impact, however, was not simply the quantity of media coverage, but the way in which the story was presented. Much of the rhetoric reported during the TWA event was voiced by Nabih Berri, the appointed spokesman for the terrorists. If the TWA hijackers had a persuasive influence on the American public through Nabih Berri, as this essay contends, then there must be elements in Berri's rhetoric that helped to formulate the TWA story in a way which encouraged Americans to favor granting the hijackers their primary demand.

#### NABIH BERRI'S USE OF THE MEDIA

The dramatic TWA narrative presented to the American public was orchestrated by the rhetoric of Nabih Berri and those who responded to him. The media reported much of Berri's version of the TWA story. Critics of ABC's coverage of the TWA hostage crisis dubbed ABC the Amal Broadcasting Company. One American hostage stated, "Maybe ABC had us hijacked to improve their ratings" (Borrell, 1985, p. 16). Berri's rhetoric was chosen for the present analysis because of his substantial contribution to the TWA story reported by the media. The persuasive elements in Berri's rhetoric as the hijackers' representative can be assessed by evaluating Berri's merits as a storyteller, the appeal of his narrative, and the media's ability to enhance his story.

#### *The Storyteller*

There were several reasons why Nabih Berri was an effective spokesman for the hijackers. He was both a diplomat and a pragmatist who wanted to solidify his own political power in Lebanon by gaining favor with the hijackers and by strengthening his support among the Amal Militia. Yet he also wanted to appear as a moderate who would

cooperate with the United States. Berri's experiences in the U.S. enabled him to be a persuasive communicator who understood American values and used his public statements to appeal to those values. In contrast, the rhetoric of the hijackers was coercive and failed to identify with the values held by most Americans. Berri's rhetorical success emanated from his American education and family ties. He had lived in Michigan for several years, had an American wife and six children, and often visited his family and relatives in Dearborn, Michigan.

An analysis of Berri's discourse indicates his rhetoric was very different from the discourse of the terrorists. Berri stated he wanted a "just solution for all," for the American hostages and the Lebanese prisoners, and the theme of justice permeated his speech. In contrast, the discourse of the hijackers was replete with language perceived by the American public as fanatical and nationalistic (Brown, 1987). The hijackers stated that "America was the reason for the world's tribulations," and when they demanded fuel, they announced, "Either refueling the plane or blowing it up. No alternative" (Smith, 1985a, pp. 18, 22). Whereas the hijackers alienated the American public through coercive rhetoric, Berri used persuasive rhetoric to try to convince the American public that he wanted to join them in ending the hostage crisis.

Berri's presentation of self through the media also enhanced the fidelity of his TWA narrative. He presented himself as one on a quest to free the captive American hostages and Shiite prisoners. His use of the words "liberty," "justice," and "family," was consistent with both his projected image and his official position as the Lebanese Minister of Justice. He strategically portrayed himself as a caring and fair person and made a concerted effort to convince Americans that he was personally concerned for the hostages. For example, Berri told *Newsweek's* Theodore Stanger, "It is my duty . . . as Lebanese justice minister to intervene if I can help save innocent lives" and pleaded, "I want to help" ("Berri," 1985, p. 25).

Media reports contained many examples of Berri's strategic use of communication to create this persona. In one news interview Berri stated, "I personally check everything for them [the American hostages], even their food. They get good food—Lebanese and American cuisine, steaks and hamburgers. I am paying for it" ("Berri," 1985, p. 25). Berri had some of the hostages living with him in his own home, and made sure the news media broadcast his personal caretaking into the living rooms of American families.

The media helped Berri to portray himself as a peacemaker. One photo in *Newsweek* showed Berri with two hostages, and raised the question in the caption, "Berri . . . A White Knight?" (Watson, 1985a, p. 20). In a published interview between Berri and *Newsweek's* Theodore Stanger, the headline for the interview was Berri's plea, "I'm Against Hijacking" ("Berri," 1985, p. 25). In a live television interview with David Hartman on *Good Morning America*, Berri was asked if he had any final

words for President Reagan. He replied, "I want him to deal with this affair like a brother, not like a President, not by flexing his muscle" (*Good Morning America*, 28 June, 1985).

These are just a few of many statements spoken by Berri and reported by the media that presented him as a peacemaker, as one who wanted a just solution for all. Whereas the words of the original hijackers were not perceived as conciliatory, Berri's rhetoric was different. It was understandable, seemed reasonable, and it made sense to many members of the distant audiences that followed the TWA crisis.

### *The Story*

One of Berri's primary goals was to use the news media to persuade Americans to support the hijackers' demand for the release of Shiite prisoners in Israel (O'Neill, 1986, pp. 42, 51). Under his leadership, the Lebanese Amal Militia conducted news conferences and live television interviews with several of the American hostages. Berri also provided personal interviews with major news correspondents. For *Good Morning America*, he took part in a live three-way telephone interview with David Hartman and Olga Conwell, the wife of American hostage Allyn Conwell.

Berri advanced his persuasive arguments by creating a narrative with both coherence and fidelity. The essence of his narrative was that the TWA crisis represented two interrelated problems that had one solution. According to Berri, two groups of people, the American hostages and the Shiites in Israel, had been unjustly denied their freedom. In both cases, Berri affirmed that innocent husbands, wives, and children should all be reunited with their families. His narrative was carefully grounded in the traditional American values of upholding liberty and justice, and defending the family.

The news media strengthened Berri's attempt to equate the fate of the American hostages with the fate of the Shiite prisoners in Israel. ABC news, as well as other media, broadcast pictures of Atlit prison alongside pictures of the TWA jetliner, equating in the minds of the public the two groups of people. A typical example of this comparison was seen in two photographs published adjacent to each other in *Newsweek* (Watson, 1985a, pp. 18-19). The caption of one picture of Atlit prison in Israel, stated, "Israel's side of the chessboard: The Atlit prison camp where roughly 570 Shiites are held." Below were passport-size photos of 37 of the American hostages.

In another media portrayal emphasizing the same theme, "ABC's *Good Morning America* featured the families of the imprisoned Shiites—as if, some Jews charged, they could be equated with the families of innocent American hostages" (Alter, 1985, p. 37). *Newsweek* reported that some of the hostage families were becoming impatient with Washington and Israel. The reaction of Kelly Cullins, wife of hostage Thomas Cullins,

provides a good example. Cullins stated, "It's like two little boys standing in separate corners saying, 'I won't unless you do'... That's ridiculous. There are lives at stake here'" (Watson, 1985a, p. 22). The focus of such published statements equated the release of the American hostages with the release of the Shiites.

These media reports placed very little emphasis on the great differences between the Shiites, who were detained during civil war, and the Americans, who were hijacked on a civilian airliner in Europe. *Newsweek* reported statements by those who believed the exchange of the American hostages for the Shiites was "common sense," quoting an Israeli official who regarded Berri's offer as a very reasonable one (Watson, 1985b, p. 20).

#### *The Audience*

Berri's story, which called for liberty for all of the Shiite and American captives, likely made sense to the American public. In an interview with *Newsweek's* Theodore Stanger, Berri stated, "I want to help. So why doesn't the United States, which has the statue of Liberty, agree to help?" ("Berri," 1985, p. 25). When asked how he felt about the exchange of the Shiites held in Israel for the American hostages, Berri replied, "Those people (the Lebanese) being held there (in Israel) are hostages also. They are civilians" ("Berri," 1985, p. 25).

During his interview on *Good Morning America*, Berri again promoted the theme that all families should be reunited (*Good Morning America*, 28 June, 1985). He spoke cordially and sympathetically to Olga Conwell, and allowed her husband, hostage Allyn Conwell, to speak with his wife and David Hartman. Thus Berri used his airtime on *Good Morning America* to focus on one of the families caught in the TWA crisis. He also appealed to President Reagan "as a brother" and reassured Olga Conwell by promising her, "I will take good care of your husband" (*Good Morning America*, 28 June, 1985).

Berri's actions amplified his projected concern for the families of the hostages. He arranged for the hostages to communicate with their families. When one of the hostages became sick, Berri facilitated his early release. As stated earlier, he took care of hostages in his own home. The images of Berri portrayed by the news media strengthened the fidelity of his narrative. When Berri communicated that he believed the only just and humanitarian way to solve the TWA hostage crisis was to force Israel to release the Shiites and then the Shiites would release the Americans, many Americans agreed. Berri did not identify the terrorists or the American public as the problem, but rather he identified the American government as the problem. Thus his words and actions were congruent with American values and with his projected image as a "family man," "brother," and a "just human being."

Although the American hostages were under duress, statements they made strengthened the coherence of Berri's story. For example, Peter Hill, one of the American hostages, was asked by a *Newsweek* reporter, "whether Israel should free the Shiite prisoners. Hill responded: 'They're hostages and we're hostages'" (Watson, 1985a, p. 20). Allyn Conwell, the spokesman for the hostages, made an even stronger appeal at a news conference when he stated, "If a person is not a legitimate prisoner of war or prisoner due to other crimes, let's all use common sense. . . Let's get innocent people where they belong—with their loved ones'" (Smith, 1985b, p. 22). Conwell repeated his appeal on *Good Morning America* by urging Americans to "stand up" for the right of all prisoners to go home (*Good Morning America*, 28 June, 1985).

Conwell also told ABC News that "many in our group have a profound sympathy for the [Shiite] cause—for the reasons the Amal have in saying, 'Israel, free my people'" (Watson, 1985a, p. 19). He called for the release of the Shiite prisoners in Israel, stating "they undoubtedly have as equal and as strong a desire to go home as we do" (Smith, 1985b, p. 21).

Although these statements by hostages were not surprising considering the situation, the news media assisted in accentuating the probability of Berri's narrative. Narrative probability, or how a story "hangs together," is assessed by the story's structural coherence, material coherence (its comparison to alternative stories), and characterological coherence (Fisher, 1987, p. 47). The structural and material coherence of Berri's TWA story were embellished by the media's comparison of the Shiites in Atlit prison and the American hostages in Beirut. Berri's story was also characterologically coherent, because his words and actions were consistent with his image as a just person, a peacemaker, and a caring family man. Coherent stories are persuasive because they become guides for thought and action (Fisher, 1987, p. 47). Thus the media enabled Berri to build a strong persuasive argument that generated support for the hijackers' demand.

#### *The News Media*

The news media enhanced Berri's arguments and did little to question the coherence and fidelity of his version of the TWA story and his proposed solution to the crisis. Interviews with wives and husbands of Shiite prisoners were broadcast into American homes along with interviews of wives and children of American hostages. Berri made the central theme of his narrative liberty for both groups. Likewise, the American news media made the welfare of the Americans, and to a lesser extent, the Lebanese, a central concern.

This concern was one which the American public could not escape, nor could the Reagan administration (O'Neill, 1986, p. 52). There was simply too much media coverage over too long a period to prevent the

public from becoming involved in the crisis. Before the hijacking incident, Americans knew little about the plight of the Lebanese, and had neither knowledge nor concern for the Shiites detained by Israel. With the media's assistance, Berri persuaded Americans to transcend the political realm by appealing to common human values.

The reframing of the TWA incident was powerfully enacted during a farewell dinner given to the American hostages by their Lebanese captors. A ceremonial banquet table was set for the Americans, who were served by the Lebanese. A cake was presented to the Americans with the words, "Wishing you all a happy trip home." Hostages were seen laughing and interacting with their captors, for example, as shown in pictures published by *Time* showing the Lebanese serving dinner and giving orange roses to the Americans (Church, 1985, pp. 16-17). Televised scenes and published pictures of the farewell dinner did not reflect the end of a conflict between hostages and terrorists. Instead, the media portrayed fellow actors who had only played the roles of hostages and terrorists, and who were then enjoying a special meal together to celebrate the end of the drama. The actors had come together in order to conquer, not one another, but a greater enemy, human misunderstanding and injustice.

Although such a description of the farewell dinner does not reflect all the facts of the TWA hijacking, Nabih Berri, with the media's assistance, created a believable story that presented a seemingly reasonable solution to the crisis. Fisher (1987, p. 76) notes that the most compelling persuasive stories are mythic in form. The mythos of human communication refers to the ideas within stories that cannot be verified or proved in any absolute way. Whether or not the values of liberty, justice, and family security were Nabih Berri's personal concerns, these values provided meaning for Americans trying to understand the TWA crisis. The narrative coherence of the TWA story was established because it made sense; or as Fisher (1987, p. 88) earlier described, it "hung together." The narrative fidelity of the story was established by the soundness of its reasoning and the values upon which it was based (Fisher, 1987, p. 88).

## CONCLUSION

We should not be surprised that most Americans believed the hijackers' demand for the release of the Shiites held by Israel was a legitimate one. Nabih Berri was persuasive because he was a good storyteller, either accidentally or by calculation. However, without the media, his task would have been impossible. The media enabled the TWA hijackers to use terrorism to achieve their rhetorical ends. By making Nabih Berri their spokesman, the TWA hijackers gained recognition for the Shiite cause, they gained legitimacy for their demand that the Shiites in Atlit prison in Israel be released, and they strengthened their political power in the Middle East.

Berri's success as a persuasive communicator was due to his ability to perpetuate a story that was grounded in narrative rationality. He made the media work for him by understanding and appealing to the values and concerns of his audience, the American public. The reason for the hijacking was made understandable, and Berri's solution made sense. Perhaps if Americans better understood the values and concerns of people who feel compelled to commit acts of terrorism, the American media could be used to produce stories that reduce the likelihood of future TWA-type crises.

This analysis of the TWA incident demonstrates how mediated terrorism can have persuasive influences on distant audiences. An international terrorist incident that receives extensive media coverage is a special kind of symbolic act, a mediated narrative, and the power of this act resides in the narrative accounts of terrorism disseminated by the media to the public. When the news media report the rhetoric generated during a terrorist incident and fashion it into a story, they engage in sense-making activities. Sense-making enhances the narrative rationality that makes a story believable and persuasive, even a story that encourages people to support the demands of terrorists.

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