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16 July 1987

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Dear James:

A quick comment on your very interesting presentation: "The Media and the Terrorist : A Dance of Death".

It is both provocative and common sense applicable to many other types of crisis.

Although not a technical health issue per se, the problem is of interest to people dealing with disasters or living in Latin American countries with increasing unrest.

I take the liberty to share it with our Public Information Office and our disaster field staff.

Thank you again,

C. de Ville de Goyet, M.D.
Emergency Preparedness and
Disaster Relief Coordination
Program

cc: DPI
Dr. L.J. Pérez
Dr. Hugo Prado
Ms. Gloria Noel

Airport Operators Council International
and
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Airport Security Joint Committee Meeting

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THE MEDIA AND THE TERRORIST: A DANCE OF DEATH

By

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THE MEDIA AND THE TERRORIST:
A DANCE OF DEATH

By James E. Lukaszewski, APR

I'm delighted to be with you this morning, but must make the observation that I find it unusual that a room full of security experts would chose as a meeting site a place so isolated from the mainland -- cut off by two draw bridges and the rush of the nation's college students heading south for the beaches during spring break.

Nevertheless, we are about to talk about one of the most vital subjects on your agenda, news media reaction and action in situations involving terrorists and terrorism.

In the introduction I was characterized as an expert in crisis communications management involving many of the most serious situations organizations can face -- labor problems, strikes, transportation accidents, chemical spills, adverse legislation and media-initiated investigations. Yet, there is no more frightening, potentially dangerous, nor personally terrifying experience than dealing with someone who, to achieve an end, uses human life as the currency of communication.

What we will share today will enable everyone in this room to be more careful, purposeful and precise in handling these most irrational and high-profile situations.

To move into this topic effectively, we must start at the beginning. That means defining the term about which we are speaking. The office of the Ambassador-at-Large for Counter Terrorism has defined the term "terrorism" to mean, premeditated, politically-motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by sub-national groups or clandestine state agents, usually intended to influence an audience.

To influence an audience ... that's why media coverage and terrorism are soul-mates -- virtually inseparable -- they feed off each other ... they together create a dance of death. Many of you and many of your colleagues in the security profession have strong biases about the news media. But when it comes to the terrorist act, the imperatives are these:

- Understand the media, what's newsworthy and why, so that you can be more comfortable and better prepared to deal with visibility created by terrorists;

- Study the terrorist, understand terrorist needs and requirements, not because you can stop terrorism, not because you can influence the terrorist, but rather to contain and counteract what terrorists try to achieve at their victims' expense; and

- Be knowledgeable about the relationship between the two.

This is a powerful, even explosive, topic to discuss. So, to be as productive as possible, let me tell you what I would like to cover in the time we have together.

I want to briefly talk about:

- Your concerns about the news media;
- Media's concerns about you;
- Myths about the media and how they cover crisis situations and acts of terrorism;
- Who reporters are and what news is;
- Reporter coverage patterns in terrorist situations;
- Terrorist needs;
- Media needs in terrorist situations;
- Goals you might set for yourself; and finally,
- How to be prepared.

Now that we have a definition of terrorism and a concept of the scope of our discussion today, let me begin by sharing the terrorist's needs so that you can carry them in your mind as we begin discussing the media relations aspect of terrorist situations.

The terrorist has seven essential needs as they seek to achieve their audience impact objectives. The terrorist needs:

1. <u>An act</u> of sufficient magnitude to gain audience attention.

2. <u>A setting</u> for the act which facilitates communication.

3. <u>Timing</u> to suit the objective.

4. Collaboration or collaborators to carry out threats and coerce compliance.

5. Demands sufficient to achieve the goal, yet retain some uncalculated flexibility.

6. Media access because that is the only way to reach the audience the terrorist is trying to affect.

7. A way out, although not always. The dedicated terrorist is always prepared for the ultimate sacrifice if it will help get the message through.

Prior to this presentation many of you were asked to share your concerns about the news media so that we could relate them to the today's topic. You told me that the media:

- Are ignorant
- Are intimidating
- Are inaccurate
- Sensationalize
- Focus on bad news
- Oversimplify
- Are anti-security interests
- Don't do their homework
- Sometimes act unpatriotically
- Don't use common sense
- Invade people's privacy
- Intentionally hurt people
- Report events differently than other eye-witnesses

Your comments reflect those of more than 4,000 U.S. and international executives I've surveyed in recent years. What we're going to talk about today will not change those attitudes but will, I hope, change your behavior toward the media. The first method for changing behavior is to recognize the attitudes which influence it.

We also talked in advance of this presentation about those things which concerned you, perhaps frightened you, most about the news media. The result was a list of observations which, once discussed, will help you prepare for dealing with the news media.

Your observations came mostly in the form of questions. Here is a representative sample:

- Will the media tell our story accurately?
- Will the media present a proper image?
- Will I have the opportunity to respond effectively?
- Will I be forced to simply spill my guts?
- Will they really understand our business?
- How can I control the interview?
- What traps is the reporter going to set for me?
- When should I go off-the-record?
- What if the reporter asks hostile questions?
- How do I stop the story if I don't like it?
- Will they let me see the story before it appears?
- How can I fix a mistake if there is an error in the story?

To be honest, I think I'd have to characterize most of your feelings about the media as being rather negative. Only one of you said something positive about the media -- and that person was a former reporter. Yet, most of you feel you have good working relationships with the media, especially in situations of trauma and terror. We'll talk about why that is in a moment.

In the meantime, we need information about the media's news needs and reporter attitudes to be able to assess, accommodate and anticipate the media's impact on the situations in which they inject themselves.

Over the years many news people have shared with me their attitudes about business people and government officials. Surprisingly, their list parallels yours. Let me share it with you. Incidentally, they are in the order in which reporters most often mention them. Reporters tell us that business people:

- Don't trust the media.
- Don't permit much access.
- Expect reporters to know how business operates.
- Don't know what news is.
- Seem hostile to reporters and their questions.
- Are arrogant and self-serving.
- Don't care very much about people.
- Don't know that reporters don't write headlines.
- Don't understand that newsroom culture has little use for reporters whose copy flatters the people about whom they write or broadcast.
- Cannot accept the fact that if it is embarrassing or causes conflict, it is going to be newsworthy.
- Don't agree that although it may be unfair, the media has complete power to set the agenda and define the

situation ... or as the old saying in journalism goes, "What the editor thinks is news, is news"; and

- Refuse to understand that if the reporter thinks there is trouble, there is trouble.

There is one major difference between media attitudes about business people and media attitudes about government officials -- respect. By-and-large, the media tends to have a more natural respect for the public servant. Perhaps this is because the public servant is perceived as being more committed to the people's business -- a perception the media has of itself. The business person, on the other hand, is perceived as being committed solely to profit, often at public expense.

I told you earlier that we would explode some myths about how reporters cover the news. But before we do that, let me share what I call the "Interviewee's Wish List." It is a list of what an interviewee would like to accomplish in a news interview. It just happens to contain the components of what most of us would judge to be a successful interview.

Interviewees wish that:

- The media would get the facts right;
- More of their organization's point of view would get into the story;
- The story would contain predominantly positive messages, and negative messages would be minimal
- Quotes and facts would be used in context
- The media would use information exactly as provided
- The story would be "straight," without editorializing, commentary or bias
- Off-the-record or background comments would remain anonymous
- Story copy could be reviewed before it was published or broadcast
- A retraction or correction, equal to the scope of the error, could be obtained from the media should a mistake be made or reputation harmed

I hope you can tell that my purpose is to build a fairly balanced information base on which to build our discussion of terrorism and the media. Now let's apply what we've learned to the extraordinary atmosphere created when a terrorist incident occurs. First, we need to destroy some myths about how the media covers crisis-type events.

Myth #1: The media has experienced crisis-beat reporters.

Unfortunately, the media is as unprepared to handle these situations as we sometimes notice they are. No news organization can afford to keep reporters on the crisis-beat. Therefore, almost every new situation seems to be handled by someone who is unfamiliar with the incident, problem or circumstance. It means you need to prepare more effectively and help reporters better understand why there are limitations, and why they cannot have the free access they might have in other news circumstances.

Myth #2: The media will take time to understand what you are going through during the terrorist situation.

Wrong again. The media are generally under such enormous competitive and deadline pressure that they will believe and use almost any information acquired during a crisis situation -- just to get the news out ahead of the competition. Reporters in situations where facts are limited move rapidly to speculation and supposition.

Another rather frightening phenomenon sometimes occurs, "the predeadline guess." This is the circumstance where the reporter, independently, decides how a story is moving, what the keys facts are or what conclusions can be drawn ... with only partial information. Because this is not exactly professional behavior, the reporter is the only person who knows the information being shared is a guess. Often, this situation goes completely undetected. When it is, however, it's generally because other eye witnesses dispute the reporter's account. Yet, the editor is forced into the position of standing by a reporter's story based on solely that reporter's word. The "predeadline guess" happens far more than reporters like to admit, and especially in crisis situations.

The lesson for us is that if we are unprepared to help the media on an immediate basis, our story may not catch up until the situation is over.

Myth #3: If we explain everything to reporters they will understand and help us out.

Unfortunately, the more we explain, the less they are likely to understand, especially those in broadcast.

The reality is that what the media wants and needs is the briefest, most appropriate, correct information, as quickly as possible. They'll handle the details later, if ever.

Myth #4: The media should get special access during crisis situations.

During crisis situations, and especially incidents involving terrorism, media access needs to be more completely controlled than ever. The difficulty most of you have is in explaining why their movements must be so carefully controlled. The three principal reasons are:

- The personal safety of media representatives and others who move into the situation with them;
- The safety of those negotiating and handling the situation whose status may be jeopardized through the unplanned, unprepared, and unpredictable actions of outsiders, including the media; and
- The safety of those who are hostages or could be exposed to danger through terrorist actions as the terrorists move through the negotiation phase seeking to achieve their objectives.

Myth #5: The more we get our facts together and delay talking to the media until we are ready, the better the story will be.

The media don't wait for additional facts. The more intense the crisis, the more the media is prone to deal in the incremental release of information, detail-by-detail, incident-by-incident. The lesson is to be ready with facts and figures so reporters may generate stories and develop information as productively as possible.

You see, almost immediately, the "parallel-story" phenomenon begins occurring in any high profile, high visibility story. There is the reality created by the news media's perception -- that gets reported quickly. But, there is also the real situation. In virtually every single crisis situation, the two -- perception and reality -- are vastly different in the early stages. You find yourself reacting in terms of what is actually going on; yet reporters' questions are based on their perception of what is going on.

Therefore, one of your immediate operational goals in working with the news media is to, as quickly as possible, force the reporter's perception to match the facts. Only this convergence will end the parallel stories. Delay in reporting facts and information merely causes more speculation, hypothesizing, and invention of detail on the part of reporters for their hungry, competition-conscious news editors.

Perhaps the most blatant example in recent times was the Chernobyl disaster. In fact, reporting of that event is one of the most descriptive examples of gang journalism in recent history. Within a very few hours of the incident at Chernobyl, in the absence of any information, the U.S. media was speculating that there were perhaps as many as two million already dead at the site.

There is another extremely important lesson here. Monitor the media yourself. Assign individuals to monitor radio and television -- but especially television. The public and the media's perception of incidents is largely generated by television coverage, and this is especially true in terrorist situations. Monitoring the media will help you understand and react effectively to the parallel story phenomenon.

Myth #6: Reporters work independently, verify facts vigorously during crises, just as they do during regular reporting assignments.

The truth is that there is almost no checking of facts in crisis situations. "Gang-reporting," the phenomenon I mentioned a few moments ago, occurs. Reporters rely on other reporters when primary news sources are not available.

The crisis situation is one of those rare times when you really do control news media actions. But because crisis situations involve almost a simultaneous occurrence of events without any time or space in between, reporters have little choice but to rely on you for their information, their data, their facts. Even the order in which their understanding of events takes place -- should come from you. This is why, by the way, you have good cooperation with the media in crisis. Don't be surprised. They have no where else to go.

Another phenomenon often occurs as well -- "follow-the-leader journalism." If a very senior

reporter is on the scene, you can bet that other reporters are looking over his or her shoulder to see what the lead is going to be, what the context will be, and the direction the story will take.

The veteran reporter's mistake will often cause a ripple of mistakes in all coverage of the event, from the local newspaper to the London Times to the Cable News Network. Despite attempts to be accurate and report unique aspects of stories, a mistake, once made, in a crisis communications situation is often impossible to eradicate due to the gang nature of the reporting. If you anticipate follow-the-leader journalism, you can warn, forecast, and forestall potential problems as the incident develops.

Having rather graphically described how reporters operate during these circumstances, it's only fair that I now discuss mistakes organizations make which cause poor coverage and strain media relationships. I've noticed five important mistakes many organizations make in responding during crisis situations. This is important because these are the mistakes that cause bad news to occur. Let me summarize them and then talk briefly about each of the five mistakes. They are:

- Accessibility;
- Understandability;
- Dullness;
- Timeliness; and
- Arrogance.

Each of these is a legitimate source of complaint on the part of newspeople:

- Accessibility. In the absence of information, the media will go with its perceptions; its sense of how events are flowing and occurring. When we don't provide spokespersons and information, we risk getting bad coverage.

- Understandability or speaking in jargon. We tend to assume that the media understands our business. They don't. They can't. They won't. And, we shouldn't expect them to. It's your job to understand your business and to convey it effectively. You've told me that you are often irritated with reporters because they ask you to explain your work ... the things you think they should have understood before they were sent out by the assignment editor. Why

should they? How can they? We forget whose business it is. When we use jargon, our own private language, to explain what we're doing, we're permitting the reporter to interpret our business. We deserve whatever the result happens to be. Speak in plain language, language which our mother, sister, father or brother can understand. After all, isn't that who's reading, watching or listening to our news?

- We're boring and dull. News is, by definition, that which is interesting, unusual, and affects people -- people often in conflict and pain. Yet, we talk as though we are describing the design of the bottom of a runway. When we don't add appropriate power and positiveness to what we say, the media will. After all, their job is to report news stories. If we don't talk in terms of stories, we force the media to interpret what's happening and another parallel story can be created.

- We're late in responding. Nothing makes the media angrier than our lack of sensitivity to their deadlines. Media coverage in terrorist situations is a fact of life. Be sensitive to media deadlines. When we can't or won't comply with a deadline, talk about it, explain it, forecast it, and save a lot of grief.

- We are arrogant. The most uniform comment from reporters about business people is that we talk like we don't care about people. We talk in terms of bricks and mortar and statistics. We use words like "perpetrator" -- a kind of legalistic, unintelligible language that doesn't have sensitivity, humanness, or the feeling that human beings are involved.

Most of you could solve 75 percent of your media relations problems if you did three simple things in responding to reporters' questions:

- Package your information into little stories with beginnings, middles, and ends.

- Anticipate the kinds of questions you know reporters are going to ask and prepare yourself to respond.

- Eliminate jargon from your answers and talk more about people and in terms people can understand.

Let me remind you again of what reporters are looking for in stories. Reporters look for the:

- Unusual
- Affects on people
- Secret or unrevealable
- Conflicts between people
- Conflicts between or among organizations
- Conflicts between opposing forces or ideas
- Results of mistakes
- Culprits who are responsible

Therefore, when a situation involving your facility has these elements, it's going to be news. The message here is to capitalize on such situations and get clear, concise, constructive messages across to help those with whom the media is communicating on your behalf. But, more about that later.

There are very clear behavior patterns reporters use in covering crisis-related situations. These behaviors occur, in part, because of the reporter's training, lack of knowledge, need for speed, and the professional drive to get a good story.

Understanding reporter coverage behaviors helps us move toward our final goal of understanding the media's needs in terrorist situations and how the terrorist's needs in these incidents are fulfilled by media actions so that we can be ready to deal with both. Incidentally, I'm indebted to Alan Bernstein, the President of PASE, Inc., a New Jersey-based public affairs and security and enforcement firm, for many of the observations on reporter behaviors.

Remember two important things as we move through this thought process: first, the typical reporter with whom you will be dealing in a crisis situation is a generalist and not a specialist; and second, the reporter must develop a story that fits the medium they represent, not necessarily the facts, situation, or needs as you perceive them.

Let's start at the beginning. Reporters find out about situations by monitoring official communications channels and from other leads, sometimes from tips within an organization. In the situation we're describing today, there is no question that their first information will probably come from radio calls alerting authorities that a hostage or terrorist situation has occurred or is in process.

Once the media is alerted, you can count on their trying to obtain information as quickly as possible by whatever means is available. This means your telephone will ring, your door may be pounded upon, or, more importantly, anyone contacted at your facility will be approached for every and any scrap of possible information.

At the same time, the media is looking through its files and background materials for a variety of basic information. For example, how many similar incidents have occurred at your facility in the past, who has handled the situation and served as the spokesperson, the length of time the situation took to resolve, the reporters who covered it, and the like.

By this time some reporters will be on your doorstep wanting to be physically present to observe what is going on. If you block their attempts to talk with you, they will either go over the fence or fly over the fence in their ever-present news helicopters. Plan for their being on-site. Be ready.

If the situation is a major one, as virtually all terrorist situations are, the media will devote extensive resources to it. That means not just one reporter from a media outlet, but perhaps two or three. Networks may send more than one news crew. Some people will be on the ground, some will be in the vicinity and some will be in the air. You will need to service all.

As the crisis develops, the media monitor and watch each other and the story spreads. Often, you can't seem to verify information as quickly as the media, primarily because the media is able to step back and look at the situation from a broader perspective. Therefore, you need to monitor the media yourself.

Information is reported as it happens -- not in context and often without accuracy. It's a fact of competitive media life. The lesson for you is to be there, be accurate, be helpful and, therefore, help reduce uncertainty and poor reporting.

In the truly major situation reporters will share what they have and look to the most senior reporters on the scene for story ideas, leads and content. Woe is the shave-tail local, rookie reporter who turns in a story that doesn't jive with what's coming over the AP or being broadcast live by a highly paid, highly visible network correspondent (whether or not the correspondent is right).

When the available facts have been stated and information dries up, the media become ingenious. If they can't talk to you or if you have nothing new to say, they will find a university professor who is an "expert" on what's happening in your facility to get a comment. If they're really aggressive, they will find two professors, one who disagrees with the first. Then, the next time they talk to you, they will ask you to defend yourself against both. Universities, by the way, have made this a great visibility and marketing technique. Do you know who these university "experts" on your industry are?

As a last resort, the media will often offer to cooperate with your request to keep information private or control certain data if they can at least have access to it in a timely fashion. This is a straight guts and trust call on your part. My basic recommendation is not to cooperate in these circumstances, but to make information available to everyone as appropriate. However, only those on the scene, your negotiator and your response team can help you decide whether or not to respond to individual reporter circumstances.

Until now I haven't focused on the terrorist for two reasons. First, you already know a lot about how terrorists operate. Second, understanding media needs, how they operate and what to expect from them, is critical to our discussion of the terrorist's needs.

Now that we have some perspective and with the definition of terrorism in mind, let's again look at the terrorist's seven essential needs in achieving their audience impact objectives. The terrorist needs:

1. An act of sufficient magnitude to gain audience attention;

2. A setting for the act which facilitates communication;

3. Timing to suit the objective;

4. Collaboration or collaborators to carry out threats and coerce compliance;

5. Demands sufficient to achieve the goal, yet retain some uncalculated flexibility;

6. Media access because that is the only way to reach the audience the terrorist is trying to affect; and

7. A way out.

With this set of needs, it is easy to see why the media absolutely has to cover these events.

And now let's come back to the news media and their needs during these situations. Those needs fall into three categories:

- Access
- Operational space
- Verification resources

1. The media needs access to the:

- Terrorist
- Negotiators
- State spokesperson
- Witnesses
- Security forces/authorities in charge
- Hostage or victim
- Hostage or victim's relatives

2. The media needs operational space for:

- Equipment
- People
- Newsfeeds
- Interviews

3. The media needs verification resources to:

- Clarify facts
- Check information
- Get credible comment
- Validate their stories

What is fascinating about looking at these lists, especially those of the terrorist's needs, is how strongly they parallel the construction of news stories. And it is here, at this point in this intellectual journey, that we recognize the inevitable necessity of a marriage between the terrorist and the media. It is a grizzly, predictable, often necessary dance of death, one in which each of you, should you be confronted with the circumstance, will play the role of orchestra leader.

The ultimate question you face in this sort of situation is who gets to call the tune?

Thank you very much for this opportunity to be with you today. Many of you look anxious to ask important questions.

Question #1: Why does the media cover these situations? Why can't the media simply ignore them so that the incentive is gone and they will stop?

They are covered because they are newsworthy, people's lives are at stake, and there is potential for conflict. Often international policy is involved.

Question #2: Why does television need to have video of the dead bodies, close-up?

I'm not sure why that kind of video is needed. I don't think I'd recommend that you permit it.

Question #3: Why does the media insist on talking to the grieving victim's relatives or the victims in or out of danger?

The most interesting news is the news of human drama, of the cataclysmic change in the human condition. The most graphic stories are those of human heroism, human suffering, human involvement in surviving. There is no getting away from the fact that readers, viewers and listeners everywhere are interested in these kinds of stories. Do they love the media for doing them? Hardly. Do they still want to read, view or listen to these dramatic stories? Absolutely.

Question #4: The media is often very interested in our plans for negotiation and our contingency security plans in the event a terrorist incident occurs. Should we brief them so they are able to cover the story more accurately when it happens?

While it's tough to generalize, in short my answer is no. However, it depends on media relationships and how prepared you are to get your messages across to the publics, the collaborators, other media, and potential sympathizers.

Although our time is nearly up, let me add a couple additional concluding thoughts. The communications opportunity that is presented by the crisis situation is virtually unparalleled. But I can assure you that if you

are not prepared to get your message across as a part of your response to news inquiries, those messages will not be divined by the media in your best interest.

If your message is that anyone breaching security will be dealt with severely, say it and say it often. If your message is that no details will be forthcoming until terrorist organizations comply with certain demands, then state those clearly, unequivocally, and often. Your actions must match your words.

There is one question that did not get asked and so let me ask it for you. Should you willingly and knowingly give out false information to the news media to affect the accomplishment of a rescue, detainment or covert action against terrorist accomplices? The answer is, unfortunately, no. Don't do it without the media's knowledge. They must be given the opportunity to cooperate in the process.

It's probably true that if you achieve successful deception, and the outcome is favorable, no one would look back over their shoulder or yours. Deception is extraordinarily difficult to carry out, and worse, a situation which may not be survivable in the face of failure. The media has historically cooperated in life-threatening circumstances even if it is only to remain mute and not ask obvious questions as you give out information.

The best way to call your tune successfully is to be on-the-record, on-the-table, in the open and as responsive as possible.

Thank you very much. I hope and pray that you never have to use the information we've shared today.

# # #