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The Hijacking of TWA 847  
A Study of Bureaucratic Paralysis

by Whitley Bruner

Seminar F

CAPT Moessner

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# Report Documentation Page

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The Hijacking of TWA 847 SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

Introduction. This paper will attempt to examine briefly the subject of bureaucratic politics, in this case the politics of the bureaucracy responsible for combatting terrorism, through discussion of a specific incident: the hijacking of TWA 847 in June 1985. To narrow the focus further, I have chosen to confine the discussion to the Algiers phase of this incident. This is not only because I am more familiar with this phase, but also because the disarray within the U.S. Government, crystal clear during the Algiers phase, led (as in a Greek tragedy) to the subsequent media circus in Beirut and to events beyond. I will examine first the various institutional actors who played a role in combatting terrorism and will then discuss the actions of their representatives in Algiers. I have not used names, although these are, in some cases, unclassified and could be found on any Algiers diplomatic list. What is important, however, is the institutional aspect of this incident ("where you sit determines where you stand"), not the interplay of personalities.

Background. During the 1980's, counterterrorism (CT) became a leading Washington "growth industry". Terrorism, of course, was not new, but the decade witnessed an increasingly dangerous Iranian-inspired violence, coupled with the high-profile depredations of Palestinian extremists such as Abu Nidal. More disturbing, terrorist attacks appeared to be targetting U.S. interests and personnel with increasing precision. The April 1983 bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut; the October 1983 destruction of the Marine barracks in Beirut; and the March 1984 kidnapping of the CIA Chief of Station (COS) William Buckley, also in Beirut, convinced the official Washington establishment, first, that anti-American terrorism contained all the ingredients of human drama necessary to mesmerize the American public and, second, that responsibility for CT, or at least "a piece of the action", afforded high visibility and, thus, a potential advantage over bureaucratic rivals in the foreign policy/national security arena.

State and the CIA. By mid-decade, the CT arena was becoming cluttered with competing organizational claimants to supremacy. In view of President Reagan's well-known disinclination to choose between bureaucratic rivals, little was done to clarify or to resolve a potentially dangerous situation. In other words, a repetition of the competition between Secretary of State Shultz and Secretary of Defense Weinberger, which had led to the fatal stand-off over the Marine presence in Beirut, could lead to another paralysis in a crisis. In the CT area, however, the primary stand-off appeared to be between Shultz and CIA's Casey. On the one hand, the State Department insisted that, as the agency responsible for the formulation of foreign policy, it should assume the leading role in any terrorist incident. The CIA, on the other hand, argued that countering terrorists depended primarily upon sensitive human-source reporting, both for preemption and for reaction, and that sources and methods needed to be protected, something the State Department could not guarantee. Further, most technical CT countermeasures were under CIA control. Liaison with foreign intelligence services, whether at the site of a terrorist incident or for background insights into the terrorist group involved, was also a CIA prerogative. The CIA thus pushed, if not for supremacy in CT matters, at least for a significant degree of autonomy, outside State Department control.

The NSC. The NSC role in the CT arena increased when McFarlane became National Security Advisor. McFarlane had been deeply involved in the Lebanese imbroglio in 1983 and had "hands on" experience with current CT problems. At the same time, the NSC staff were struck by two related problems: first, the President was getting hurt in public opinion polls by his seeming powerlessness in the face of anti-American attacks (shades of Carter!) and, second, this public perception of powerlessness appeared to stem in large part from the inability of the large bureaucracies, State and Defense in particular but the CIA as well, to react coherently to the terrorist threat. The investigation of the April 1983 Embassy bombing had been botched; the Administration had been unable to retaliate at all to the October 1983 Marine bombing; and Buckley's kidnapping revealed how

ill-prepared the major Washington players were to deal, in any way, with the intricacies of "occupied" West Beirut. It was during this period that NSC cooperation with the other CT agencies began to wane and that the seeds of "Irangate" were sown. In other words, on its own, the NSC began to move, slowly at first, to usurp the lead role in the CT arena.

Defense and JSOC. Further, in the aftermath of the Marine bombing, DoD, or at least its more activist elements, had become a major CT player due to the increasingly higher profile of JSOC/Delta Force within the CT establishment. By 1985, JSOC, the only viable American military force capable of putting an end to an ongoing terrorist incident, was commanded by MG Stiner, who had been sent to Beirut by the JCS in 1983 to keep an eye on JCS/DoD equities at a time when the Marine contingent appeared to be increasingly an active participant in the Lebanese civil war.

FBI. Finally, the FBI had also become a key player in overseas terrorist incidents, because neither the State Department nor the CIA, and certainly not JSOC, had the judicial authority, when crimes against American citizens had been committed, to build a legal case which could lead ultimately to the prosecution of terrorist "criminals" in U.S. courts.

The Incident. On June 14, 1985, TWA 847, departing Athens, was hijacked and taken to Beirut. The hijackers were Lebanese Shi'a who were closely tied to the Buckley abductors. From Beirut, on June 14 and again on June 15/16, the aircraft was twice flown to Algiers. The hijacking incident in fact ended in Beirut once again, many days later, amid the glare of intense and highly embarrassing (for the Reagan administration) publicity. The Algiers phase provides an instructive microcosm of the interplay between the institutional CT players through representatives on the spot. It is also interesting to note that, during the Algiers phase, beyond the institutional bureaucratic rivalries, within State, DoD, and CIA, internal strains emerged between the nascent (but growing) CT elements and the more "traditional" national security elements.

The U.S. Ambassador in Algiers. The Ambassador, a career Foreign Service Officer,

was just ending a three-year tour in Algiers. Although he had previously served as Chief of Mission at important posts elsewhere, the Ambassador had been out of step with the Reagan Administration and had been criticized for management flaws by the Shultz State Department. This was a man fearful for his future who was unlikely to go beyond "safe" bureaucratic parameters. The Ambassador, in particular, believed that his major achievement in Algiers had been the painstakingly slow improvement in relations with the suspicious Algerians. The Ambassador believed that maintaining these improved bilateral ties, at any cost, might offset the State Department sniping about overcautiousness and managerial lapses. Perhaps because of these quarrels with the State Department on intra-department matters, the Ambassador was a strong believer in the primacy of the State Department in the foreign-policy field. A man at odds with his own constituency is an unlikely champion of "jointness". During TWA 847, the Ambassador was strongly negative (even in official traffic) about NSC activism; about CIA efforts to coordinate with the Algerian security service; and about JSOC efforts to move Delta Force into a position where, if called upon, it could terminate the terrorist incident. Whatever the momentary wisdom of his views, the Ambassador's rigidity during the Algiers phase of TWA 847 rendered a coordinated American approach difficult at best.

Background on EST. An Emergency Support Team (EST), made up of elements from CIA and Delta Force and nominally "headed" by a State Department representative, is deployed during terrorist incidents in support of possible intervention by Delta Force. Previous to TWA 847, there had been no EST, but rather a Direct Support Team (DST) made up of CIA CT experts who were assigned directly to a CIA Station abroad for technical support during a situation involving possible military intervention. The State Department had insisted that, as the primary foreign policy body, any such "support" element should be headed by a State Department representative, assigned as an "advisor" to the Ambassador. Normally, this State representative came from the Office for Combatting Terrorism (M/CT), then headed by Ambassador Oakley. M/CT battled for bureaucratic breathing room both against State's geographic

bureaus, in the Algiers case NEA, and against the activist NSC.

The EST "Chief". Although the EST "chief" (i.e. the State representative) arrived in Algiers shortly after the second departure of TWA 847 and thus played no direct role, it is true that the Ambassador was well aware of his pending arrival and strongly opposed it. In fact, the Ambassador was required to meet with senior Algerians to obtain approval for the arrival of the EST "chief" and members of his team and there was ample opportunity for the Ambassador, angry at interlopers on "his turf", to reinforce the Algerians' inclination to allow the aircraft to depart a second time, without making any attempt to keep the aircraft in Algiers. The EST "chief", although also a career Foreign Service Officer, was not from the Ambassador's "old school" mold. The EST "chief", who fancied himself something of an intellectual, had not prospered in overseas assignments and had, for long stretches, served in State's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) on various Middle Eastern desks, prior to assignment to M/CT. The EST "chief", who had no relationship with the other members of the EST and spent his entire time in Algiers in the Ambassador's outer office, considered himself a representative of the CT establishment and something of an "advance man" for Delta Force. He was impatient with the Ambassador's repeated warnings that the Algerians would reject out of hand any role, no matter how limited, for Delta Force. The role of the EST "chief" was further complicated, however, by the fact that the rapid deployment of both the EST and Delta Force abroad was the result of strong pressures by the NSC on both the Department of Defense and the Department of State, who would have preferred caution. The pressure by the NSC upon the Defense Department for immediate Delta Force deployment resulted in leaks to the press concerning Delta activities which were picked up by the Algerian authorities. Thus, when the Ambassador met with President Bendjedid on the incident, the Algerians were already worried about possible "unauthorized" Delta Force intervention.

The Defense Attache (DATT). The DATT, an Army LTC approaching the end of his two-year tour in Algiers (with an assignment to the JCS staff ahead), had spent

considerable time jousting with both the Ambassador and the CIA for influence with, and access to, the Algerians. Algeria is a country where the military predominates politically: Bendjedid and his cronies are military men and the primary intelligence organization belongs to the Ministry of Defense. Despite the military affinity, the DATT had had a difficult time gaining access to the suspicious Algerians, who obtained their military equipment from the Soviet Bloc, and the Ambassador had not been willing to share his high-level politico-military contacts with DIA. Further, in the wake of the Iranian hostage crisis, during which the Algerians had played a positive mediatory role, the CIA had moved to establish links with the primary intelligence organization, called Military Security. This cooperation focused primarily on the CT arena. This had left the DATT somewhat out in the cold, despite the fact that DIA's General Williams had visited Algeria and the Military Security organization in late 1983, because the NSC had determined that the link to Military Security should be maintained by CIA. As a result, as the TWA 847 crisis unfolded, the DATT and the Ambassador were operating virtually independently and, as the possibility of a Delta Force deployment increased, the Ambassador attempted to keep the DATT "out of the loop". Further, under DIA prodding, the DATT was still attempting to secure some sort of a tactical or strictly military exchange with the Military Security organization and this required not contesting at that time with CIA its primacy with Military Security. DIA was hoping that CIA might be induced to share its relationship at a later date. Finally, the DATT was receiving conflicting signals in his own channels concerning TWA 847. In regular DIA channels, the reluctance of Secretary Weinberger to see precipitous military action was reflected, but the JSOC point of view also reached the DATT, particularly, at a later date, through EUCOM channels. As a result of the ambiguity of his position, the DATT, who could (and should) have been a major "player" during the Algiers phase of TWA 847, remained largely silent.

The Chief of Station (COS). The COS, the first to deal officially with the Military Security in Algiers, had not been scheduled to arrive PCS until later in

the summer and was TDY during the TWA 847 crisis. During the previous year, the COS, during numerous TDY visits, had been discussing with the Algerians primarily American efforts to secure the return of Buckley. The CIA and the COS were concerned during the TWA 847 crisis with two priorities: first, the nascent CIA links to the Military Security organization should be consolidated (i.e. no actions should be contemplated which might complicate the relationship); second, Algerian efforts to assist in the release of Buckley (Military Security had direct links to the Hizballah elements holding the former Beirut COS) were critical. Preliminary intelligence indicated that the hijackers of TWA 847 were linked to Buckley's kidnapers and, thus, more was at stake than a simple hijacking. Further, the CIA, under considerable pressure from the NSC and the White House to do "something" against Libya's Qadhafi, was hopeful of persuading the Algerians to pressure Libya in some way. These concerns dictated an approach during TWA 847 which ignored the State Department's claim to primacy. As a result of vital, but somewhat parochial, concerns, the COS, while in full agreement with the Ambassador on the inadvisability of using Delta Force, could in no way be considered the Ambassador's ally during the Algiers phase and, in fact, worked to undercut the Ambassador within the CT establishment in Washington.

The DST Team Leader. When State's EST "chief" belatedly arrived in Algiers, he brought with him several CIA technical experts, led by a DST chief from CIA's CT group. The DST chief, who was under the operational control of the TDY COS, represented rather a different CIA constituency than did the COS. As in the State Department, CIA overseas operations were divided among geographical divisions and specialized world-wide staffs with separate chains of command. CIA's CT group had been fighting hard to maintain its "turf" in the face of State, NSC, and JSOC onslaughts and there was nothing the DST chief would have liked to see more than a Delta Force intervention in Algiers, backed up by solid technical support from DST elements. This denouement would have underlined the "fifth wheel" status of State's EST "chief" and would have gotten the "politicians" out of the way of

effective cooperation between CIA and JSOC. Although there was little that the DST chief could accomplish on his own in Algiers, the COS was concerned over the steady flow of communications via SATCOM between the DST in Algiers and CIA CT elements remaining with Delta Force elements at Sigonella, in Sicily. In addition, the indirect influence of the remaining major CT "player", the FBI, made itself felt through the DST chief. The DST chief wished to pressure the Ambassador to allow FBI debriefers access to the passengers released from TWA 847 in Algiers, in addition to requesting that the Algerian Military Security respond to FBI questions and to identify "mug shots" of possible hijackers. The Ambassador, seeing other agencies attempting to crowd onto State's traditional turf, stonewalled. The COS, fearing a stand-off between FBI's legal niceties and the Military Security's third-world sensitivities, played for time until the Beirut media circus occupied everyone's attention.

Conclusions. In many ways, the Algiers phase of TWA 847 was a sideshow, or more precisely a prelude, to the media extravaganza which subsequently engulfed the hijacking in Beirut. The importance of the Algiers phase, unfortunately, is to underline the bureaucratic infighting and jockeying for position within the Washington CT establishment which totally precluded a unified approach to the hijacking in its initial stages. Perhaps it is only "Monday morning quarterbacking" to suggest that, faced with a strong and unified American position on TWA 847, the Algerians might have been willing to shoot out the tires of the aircraft and to have the drama play out in Algiers under less hysterical circumstances. As one who knows the Algerians well, I can only say that, two months after President Bendjedid's trip to Washington, the Algerians wanted to be of help. Of course, this did not involve facilitating an assault in Algiers by Delta Force, but this was never a viable option politically. Perhaps it is also "20/20 hindsight" to suggest that, had the CT establishment managed somehow to speak with one voice when faced with TWA 847, certain elements of the NSC might not have been tempted to go off on the course which eventually led to arms-for-hostages. When faced

with TWA 847, unfortunately, the only option which official Washington could seemingly agree upon was to place pressure upon the Israelis for release of their Shi'a prisoners, a key demand of the hijackers. Regardless of Israeli culpability vis-a-vis their Lebanese prisoners, it was a sad day for American CT efforts when the only solution to a hijacking was to place pressure upon a smaller and weaker ally to knuckle under to terrorist extortion. It is no wonder that elements within the NSC concluded that, if this were to be the game, it would make more sense to work secretly with the Israelis on the hostage issue. Finally, the Algiers phase of TWA 847 and subsequent events in Beirut served to confuse other nations, including Algeria, concerning America's seriousness on the CT front. The Algerians were roundly applauded after TWA 847 for securing the release of some of the passengers, although they did allow the aircraft to depart, twice. What a contrast to the post-Irangate KU 422 hijacking of April 1988, which also involved Lebanese Shi'a hijackers and also went to Algiers. There were no Americans on board, but the hijackers once again were involved with the American hostages in Lebanon. The Algerians tried to replay the TWA 847 scenario, wheeling and dealing like the Americans in June 1985. The Americans, embarrassed by Irangate, castigated the Algerians for dealing too seriously with dangerous terrorists. The irony was pretty hard to miss. The seeds of many future problems, it appears, were planted during the bureaucratic paralysis of the Washington CT establishment, a paralysis evident during the TWA 847 affair.