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# Executive Kidnappings: The Role of the Recovery Consultant

E.C. ACKERMAN\*

Recovering hostages isn't easy. But writing about the recovery process for publication may be even more difficult. The problem of course is that nothing can be said which could be even remotely useful to kidnapers and potential kidnapers who, we must assume, will have access to this journal. The discussion of some aspects of the recovery process will have to be severely restricted, and some subjects—such as possible negotiating strategies—passed over entirely. The reader is therefore forewarned that this essay may well raise more questions in his mind than it answers, and his understanding and indulgence on this score are earnestly solicited.

This discussion will center on the classic executive kidnapping, that is, the instance in which a terrorist group or criminal gang abducts a corporate executive, holding him at an unknown location under threat of death pending his corporate sponsor's fulfillment of the kidnapers' communicated demand or demands. In corporate kidnapping cases the demands are normally monetary or at least in part monetary. Criminal elements of course normally levy only cash demands. In terrorist kidnappings there are, in addition to monetary demands, sometimes political demands as well, such as the publication of a political manifesto in a newspaper or selection of newspapers, or the corporation's intercession with governmental authorities to obtain the release of terrorist prisoners. In one recent case in Spain, Basque terrorists abducted the chief engineer of a nuclear plant and levied no monetary demand whatsoever. Their only instruction to the engineer's sponsor, a Spanish utility, was to begin demolition of the \$1.6 billion plant within a stated time period, and when the utility failed to comply the engineer was murdered.

Obviously, from a corporate point of view, it is generally easier to deal with monetary demands than with political. But nothing in a recovery operation can be called easy. Even under the best of circumstances it is a tough, grueling process, laden with all manner of snares and dangers. After all, the recovery, by its very nature, takes place in the shadows, under con-

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ditions wherein normal business processes simply do not pertain. Take the matter of communications, for instance, which can be especially troublesome. The kidnapers of course control communications, but even they are severely restricted in their ability to communicate by their fugitive status. And yet a communications snafu—a telephone call that is misunderstood or not dealt with in a competent manner or a written message from the kidnapers that fails for one reason or another to reach the hostage's corporation—can take a recovery operation completely off track or even cost a hostage his life. The corporation, for its part, has little opportunity to do more than respond to messages from the kidnapers. And it is under these difficult conditions that corporate representatives must: (1) seek verification that the individuals with whom they are in contact are the actual kidnapers and that the hostage is alive in reasonably good health; (2) negotiate the kidnapers' various demands, including the size of the ransom; and (3) work out satisfactory arrangements for its delivery.

Dealings with police and governmental authorities can constitute another problem area. In the United States we are blessed with law enforcement agencies that possess both high standards of professionalism and a humanitarian regard for the safety and survival of the hostage. But this fortuitous combination of standards and attitudes does not pertain in more than a handful of countries. Police agencies in some countries, while they may be extremely competent, are guided by a national philosophy—and a very defensible national philosophy—which places maximum emphasis upon the apprehension of kidnapers, and especially terrorist kidnapers, and only secondarily considers the well-being of the hostage. And in still other countries the police possess neither profound concern for the safety of the hostage, nor acceptable levels of professionalism. Thus multinational corporations victimized by kidnappings are faced in many parts of the world with the problem of working at cross-purposes with local law enforcement authorities.

Still another sensitive and most difficult area for victim corporations is their dealings with the families of hostages. The hostage's relatives are quite naturally going to look over the shoulder of the corporation throughout the recovery process. If that process can be accomplished in days or even weeks, chances are that the family will be satisfied with the pace of the operation and will not become a problem. But many recoveries take months to effect, and a few cases have dragged on for years, and in these protracted efforts an adversary relationship almost invariably develops between the family and the corporation. After all, the family is interested in only one thing: the release of the hostage at whatever cost. Corporate officials, on the other hand, need to be concerned also with the protection of assets and the safety of other employees stationed in the country in question and in other high kidnap-risk areas. They certainly don't want to acquire a reputation as easy payers. Thus corporations may find themselves threatened by family-instituted lawsuits—alleging that they failed to offer

sufficient protection to personnel stationed in high-risk areas or that they fumbled recovery efforts—or they may be faced with family-generated hostile publicity. The latter may have a particularly negative effect upon a recovery operation, as the general rule for such efforts is that any publicity whatsoever may jeopardize a felicitous outcome.

The above is by no means a thorough catalog of the problems facing corporations involved in recovery operations. Many, many other difficulties pertain—pages can be written on the difficulties in just amassing and protecting small-denomination ransoms, which in some cases fill a dozen or more large suitcases—but the reader is at this point probably prepared to acknowledge the complexity of the process. And the ordeal is a particularly traumatic one for a corporation, and specifically for corporate decision-makers. These senior executives build their careers and reputations on their decisiveness. They, more so than the rest of us, are accustomed to making all manner of decisions, all manner of decisions that is save one: on the life or death of a subordinate.

Recovery consultants don't necessarily make this decision-making process less painful for corporations—none but the charlatan pretenders to the craft would claim an ability to effect an "instant recovery"—but they can make it more rational and more orderly, and, we believe, substantially increase the chances for recovering the hostage in the shortest possible period of time and at the lowest possible cost. How is this possible? Simply because the veteran recovery consultant has "been there before" and therefore has an experience base upon which he can draw. He can contribute in a number of different ways to a recovery, but all of these basically turn on the experience factor.

How precisely can the consultant serve the recovery process? Well, he can start long before a kidnapping by preparing a corporation to face such an emergency. Specifically, he can advise the corporation on the pre-assignment of responsibilities in a crisis situation, and then instruct the assigned officials in the decisions they will probably face in the event the balloon goes up, thus obviating the need for on-the-job training in an emotionally charged situation. He can assist in establishing lines of communications from overseas subsidiaries which will ensure prompt notification of the corporate headquarters in the event of an emergency. He can help the corporation assemble medical data on employees who bear particular risks, data that may mean life or death to a wounded hostage or one who has an illness requiring daily medication; and he can help assemble handwriting samples, fingerprints and the like on these employees, material which may prove indispensable in authenticating the legitimacy of messages received from a hostage. And he can prepare corporate supervisors in high-risk areas to receive extortion demands in a competent manner. Finally, corporations which utilize the services of an experienced recovery consultant in planning their reaction to an emergency will reap yet another benefit. They will be able to bring their consultant aboard early in the recovery process—

sometimes within minutes of the abduction itself; and thus won't be faced with having to "go it alone" during the crucial first hours after a kidnapping while they fumble through an effort to identify potential sources of assistance.

Those first hours are indeed crucial, and the recovery consultant can play an important role in assuring that the operation gets off on the right foot by providing his client corporation with the benefit of his experience with recovery scenarios in the country in question and with his assessment of the attitudes and professionalism of the local law enforcement authorities. If he is worth his salt, the consultant will either already possess or begin immediately to develop a book of sorts on the modus operandi of kidnapers operating in that area, a compilation of information which will serve as the basis for the development of a recovery strategy. He should also be prepared to analyze any messages from the kidnapers—fluency in the local language is of course a prerequisite for this activity—and to assist in the origination of the corporation's reply. In some cases it may even be appropriate for him to talk by telephone or meet personally with the kidnapers. He may be used to interface between the corporation and law enforcement authorities and, in some cases, even to reassure the hostage's family. And finally, he will be prepared to assume responsibility for the protection of ransom funds. The one role that any responsible recovery consultant will decline is that of decision-maker. It is the consultant's function to facilitate the recovery process in any way he can, and in this connection it is perfectly acceptable for him to place alternative strategies before corporate officials. But it is corporate management's prerogative, and indeed its responsibility, to decide on a course of action.

If the foregoing has conveyed to the reader an impression that a kidnap recovery is among the least savory activities in which a corporation may become involved, it has fulfilled one of its principal intentions. The kidnapers know that they have the corporation at an extreme disadvantage, and they are not at all reluctant to exert pressure. Except for those rare instances in which a hostage has been rescued from his captivity without the fulfillment of any kidnapper demands, there is in fact no such thing as a truly successful recovery operation. Sure, we can recover hostages. But at what cost? Those of us who have participated in the delivery of ransoms are keenly aware, despite the momentary satisfaction of having assisted in the liberation of a decent human being, that we have not only contributed important financial resources to a malevolent cause, but have also, in all probability, set the stage for the next round of abductions.

Anyone who has ever been close to the wrong end of a kidnapping can attest to the fact that there is no substitute for a conscientious effort at prevention. There are of course no guarantees that such an effort will be successful, but a compelling case can be made that multinational corporations can today decrease their kidnap risks substantially: (1) by keeping abreast of the status of the kidnapping problem—which, as far as corporations are

concerned, is actually limited at present to but a half dozen or so countries; (2) by limiting their exposure in those areas through reducing personnel levels to the bare essential; and (3) by upgrading protective measures for those employees who must reside in or visit high-risk areas. These measures are often inconvenient. They can be somewhat costly, although they certainly need not be inordinately expensive. But they are far, far better than the alternative.

