

What a Day It Wasn't

The media creates a crisis

Fifth Estate Collective

1981

What a Day!

Hostages Go Free; Reagan Sworn In

—*Detroit Free Press* Headline, January 21, 1981

"Kill the hostages; Turn them into sausages."

—from "Kill the Hostages," punk song by Benedict Arnold & the Traitors

"He gazed up at the enormous face. Forty years it had taken him to learn what kind of smile was hidden beneath the dark mustache. O cruel, needless misunderstanding! O stubborn, self-willed exile from the loving breast!... everything was all right, the struggle was finished. He had won the struggle over himself. He loved Big Brother."

—George Orwell, 1984

DETROIT— The unexpected intensity of the patriotic outpouring surrounding the arrival home of the 52 hostages at the end of January, shocked us at the *Fifth Estate* to the point where we were considering producing an extra edition of this newspaper as a small way of combating the reigning hysteria. But almost as rapidly as the hoopla dissipates after a Superbowl game is played, so did the hostage issue quickly disappear from popular attention and daily life returned to its normal routine.

However, while it lasted, the politicians and their media stooges gloried in a limelight of induced importance long denied them by a mood of general cynicism and distrust among the American people. Cleverly (and expectedly) the event was presented as the capture by foreign barbarians of American innocents no different from you or me and as a calamity worthy of being elevated onto the plateau of "national concern."

Indeed, if the truth were generally known of the Iran embassy's role as a key outpost of U.S. global militarism and its personnel's responsibility in keeping a despicable despot in power, it is doubtful whether many would have been willing to shower the concern on the hostages they did. In fact, it would be naive to think it would take this particular moment for the politicians and their mouthpieces to suddenly come clean when such an opportunity for them presented itself. Through utilization of the worst brand of manipulation, a "crisis" was declared which, in any real terms, only concerned the captured spies and their bosses, but was inflated into one that millions came to believe affected us all.

This ability of rulers to turn their concerns into the concerns of the ruled is, of course, nothing new, but television's repetitious and pervasive nature allowed this incident to be hammered into people's consciousness in a manner no Hearst paper of yesteryear could ever have hoped to achieve. The incessant coverage of every aspect

of the prolonged holding of the hostage spies on a nightly and sometimes hourly basis through the electronic media carved the impression of a matter of earth shaking proportions—"America Held Captive" and "Day 387—The Hostage Crisis," etc. All of this created a collective consciousness that defined reality in exactly the terms the rulers desired. Even if you didn't accept the official version of the incident or have sympathy with it, you still were made to realize that what was occurring had significance beyond the normal day's events, so powerful is the media in defining our reality. And it is that capacity which characterizes power itself—the ability to define reality and make it act in accordance with that definition.

It never really mattered exactly how many people actually bought the patriotic hysteria and to what degree. There were enough millions who did, and when the homecoming of "our" hostages happened, the media could represent the cheering crowds as being all of America with only the oddballs and cranks outside of the unity of a "joyous nation." Although millions of people were outside of the patriotic consensus and stood unmoved either through disgust or apathy, they never were presented coherently or as having any significant dimension. This meant that dissenters from the approved ideas, no matter what their total numbers, could only view themselves as one person pitted against a mass, coherent, socially sanctioned body of public opinion.

Once the media had established the context of the "new patriotism," it quickly received official support for the grand illusion it was creating. It was local governments and corporations which went on the heaviest yellow-ribbon-tying orgies and, for instance, to encourage a large turnout for the Jan. 30 New York City ticker tape parade (actually tape is no longer used in stock brokerages, so the hostages had reams of computer print-out pages rained down upon them), Wall Street businesses gave their employees extended lunch hours and the city high schools were given the day off to attend the parade. Also, in a city whose population is at least 50% black and latino, the crowd in attendance was overwhelmingly white.

Here in Detroit, where the population is 60% black within the city proper, it was like the event was not even occurring so sparse was the display of recognition. However, in the suburbs, local municipalities sent city employees out on ribbon-tying sprees, businesses distributed free ribbons, whole office buildings were swathed in yellow and cops cars had yellow bands tied to their antennae. These were the areas in which public sentiment took the hostage 'return as important.

This is not an attempt to underestimate the numbers who did succumb fully to the onslaught of the stage-managed patriotism. How deep it was is another question, though. One friend suggested it had all of the depth of the "Who Shot J.R.?" question and most probably involved the same constituency. Certainly, the displays of affection coming from both the viewers of the TV serial and the hostage parade spectators seem to have similarities. Fans of the seemingly ordinary TV drama about a rich Texas family meet inquiries as to the show's immense popularity by stating that they feel like they know the "Dallas" Ewing family. Identical sentiments were expressed at the Jan. 20 New York City parade. CBS radio carried interviews from along the parade route with spectators, some near to tears, who said, "I feel like I know them (the hostages)," and "I feel like they are part of my family." These emotions expended on strangers in an era when people feel it difficult to express intimacy with those immediately around them testifies to the power of the spectacle and its ability to build a pseudo-community through television. But television is not an irresistible device (although it does have certain physical hypnotic features, see *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* by Jerry Mander); it necessitates a willingness on the part of the viewer to participate in the deception being perpetrated. The apparent ease with which the people seem to be willing to accept a whole variety of obvious delusions seems to point to an almost inherent desire/need that humans possess to participate in a collective identity and there are those who will accept even a pitifully false community when faced with the loneliness of none.

While we may stand in wonderment at how anyone could be moved to welcome a "nest of spies," Marsha Fishberg could stand with 200,000 others in West Point, New York, as the hostages arrived in the U.S. (fittingly at an Army facility), and say to ABC radio news, "This is the most important thing that's ever happened to me; I know this is going to be part of history."

In reality, of course, absolutely nothing happened to Marsha, but her participation in an officially ordained spectacle gave her the feeling that she experienced something of great worth—that she was connected to something that connected her with others. The process she actually was involved in stretches back in its origins to the creation of the nation state itself, but takes its modern spectacular dimension from the use of the electronic media. The

phantom community Marsha feels allegiance to is one without a substance greater than the cathode rays behind her television screen and the little dots projected into her brain which coalesce to form the images and symbols to which she is beckoned to signal her allegiance.

There are no authentic bonds which tie Marsha to the released government operatives and the community she feels she shares in is one which was established and is maintained by men with guns who arbitrarily define geographic borders and a political structure. Once this is done, the administrators of the state—kings, presidents, commissars—erect symbols recognized by rulers for eight millennia as having the power to make masses of people submit to the project of the state and through it, their own subjugation. The uniforms, flags, state buildings, parades, adulation of leaders, the entire pomp of authority which it bestows upon itself, are the mechanisms nation-state dwellers internalize as part of their own character structure. When millions do this, a mass personality emerges which directs the ruled to identify the concerns of the rulers as their own and having a monumental quality, while their own concerns appear trivial by comparison.

To refuse this process is to rebel against the modern world and its political character. The Marshas of the world select the opposite course and fall all over themselves trying to signal their assent to the ruler's symbols. What she and her counterparts do not want to face is the thorough emptiness of the *Detroit Free Press* headline at the beginning of this article; it really wasn't "What A Day!," because almost all of us went to work at dull jobs, attended meaningless classes, or stood in the unemployment or welfare line, shopped at the supermarket or watched TV. No stupid inauguration or phony welcome-home can change that reality.

The real celebrations will commence with the liberation of this society, when we no longer need newspapers and TVs telling us what kind of day it was.



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