

Negotiator-in-Chief: Stop the saber-rattling. We need to talk, even to terrorists

By Frances Stead Sellers October 7, 2014

In the weeks following U.S. journalist James Foley's brutal beheading by the Islamic extremist group ISIS, a public debate developed over [the Obama administration's no-ransom, no-concession policy](#).

One of the country's experts on hostage situations is Gary Noesner, who spent a 30-year career at the FBI as an investigator, instructor and negotiator. Noesner responded to crises ranging from prison riots to sieges, embassy takeovers, hijackings and more than 120 overseas kidnappings of American citizens. The author of "Stalling for Time," Noesner retired from the bureau in 2003 as the chief hostage negotiator and now works as a crisis management consultant. He offered these views on the the government's current policy and how it changed in the wake of 9/11 terrorist attacks:

Does the U.S. government's refusal to pay ransoms make sense to you?

Our current inflexible policy has not been proven to prevent or secure the release of kidnap victims. However, my view is that it remains appropriate and necessary for the U.S. government itself to avoid paying any ransom to kidnappers. That being said, I do not believe the government should attempt to prevent families or victim corporations from paying a ransom to save a life.

Has the policy – or its interpretation – changed since 9/11? And if so, how?

The policy has not changed. However the government now seems to have become far less flexible in allowing families and victim corporations to pay a ransom (generally significantly less than a government would be expected to pay). This was not the case pre 9/11.

What should the government's role be in relation to families and companies whose relatives or colleagues are kidnapped?

The government in the past and currently has been supportive of families and should continue to undertake all reasonable measures to secure the safe release of the hostage, but should not attempt to obstruct family initiatives.

If it were possible, what would the benefit be of negotiating with a group like ISIS?

I believe dialogue (in essence negotiation) should always be undertaken, even if there is no plan to acquiesce to demands. Keeping a channel of communications can create a host of exploitable opportunities. Remember, we kept a dialogue open with the Russians throughout the Cold War.

As I have long urged and lobbied within and out of the government, we need to drop the "saber rattling" self-limiting declaration that "we will not negotiate with terrorists." In reality, we have and always will. We should limit all governmental statements to saying "we will not make substantive concessions to terrorists." This allows us to open up a dialogue which can often make the difference between life and death for a hostage. We need to be smart, not just rush to sound tough.

Frances Stead Sellers is senior writer at The Washington Post magazine. She joined the magazine in 2014 after spending two years as the editor of the daily Style section, with a focus on profiles, personalities, arts and ideas.

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