

Dramatic Functions of Press Coverage

## Myth and the Structure of News

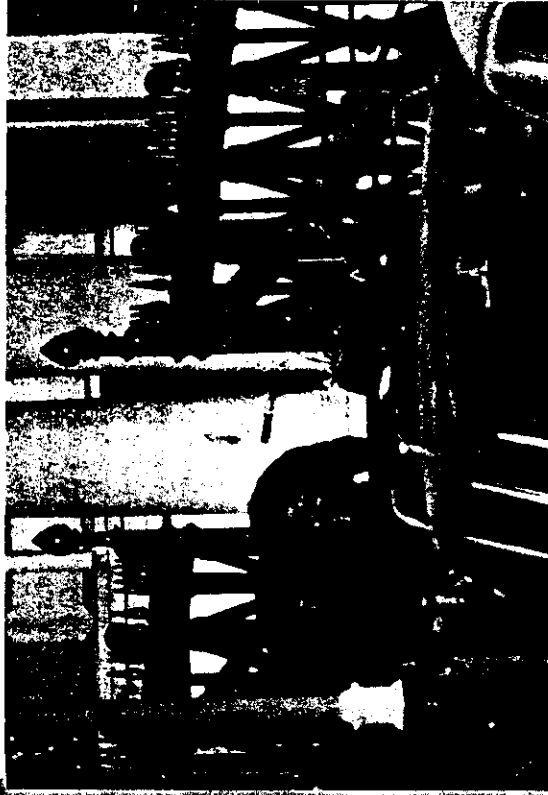
by Graham Knight and Tony Dean

*An analysis of Canadian press coverage of the British recapturing of the Iranian embassy in London shows that myth works through news accounts by developing abstract notions of expertise and legitimacy.*

Dating back at least to Mandeville's satire of private vices and public virtues, there has developed a tradition of social thought which points to the ways in which deviance in general, and crime in particular, can foster social cohesion through moral solidarity. By provoking moral outrage of general proportions, crime is seen to promote an explicit sense of community, a process best summed up in Durkheim's famous remark that "crime brings together upright consciences and concentrates them" (3, p. 102). To perform this function, however, such acts have to become public knowledge. In traditional societies, this is usually achieved through the most immediate channel of communication—word of mouth—and is facilitated by the common practice of public punishment and retribution. This serves, as Foucault (8) has noted, both moral and political functions.

In modern society, on the other hand, the larger and more complex scale of social organization means that the publicity of crime and punishment has become mediated increasingly by the institutions of mass communication, which transform the commission of and reaction to illicit acts into newsworthy events. In doing so, the news media have to some extent assumed the functions of moral and political—in short, ideological—reproduction performed previously (and limitedly) by the

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Man being taken out of Iranian Embassy June 5 on a stretcher (Toronto Sun/UPI)

visibility of the public event itself. It is not accidental that the growing complexity and anonymity of social life has brought about not only the growth of the press, but also the demise of public punishment (cf. 4).

The morally cohesive function of crime news, indeed of "bad news" in general, points to the way in which news accounts, as a major form of constructing and transmitting social knowledge, are fundamentally ideological. A number of recent studies of newswork and content show how they are structured so that certain definitions of reality come to prevail to the exclusion of others (5, 6, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 17). For example, through reliance upon officials and certified "experts" as primary sources of news information, or through the presentation of social disorder as the restoration of order, news accounts not only structure their content to the views of certain groups, but also serve to inscribe more deeply in the social consciousness the fundamental lineaments of order and normality. As bad news enters our heads openly through the front door, so order and normality reenter largely unnoticed through the back. In this respect, the news media draw upon raw materials that are already fashioned in the wider ideology. Bad news is, in most cases, "obviously" bad. Crime, strikes, terrorism, and recession do not have to be explicitly identified as such to be recognized for what they are, and this quality of being already known is necessary if news of such events is to have the kind of effect Durkheim revealed.

Ideology is, however, more than simply a stratification of meanings. Lying behind ideology as a set of beliefs or body of knowledge is ideology as a process, a way of knowing that is, obversely, a way of not

knowing, a form of silence (5, 6, 14, 17). Ideology "works" hegemonically to legitimize and universalize as common sense the interests, perspectives, and practices of the dominant, such that alternatives challenging these dominant views tend to be expelled from normal reality as dangerous, bizarre, comical, and so on. Ideology transforms social practices into ideas and beliefs which it then "naturalizes" by "evaporating," to use Barthes's (1) term, their constitution as the product of real social-historical relations of power and control. Through ideology, society appropriates and intellectualizes nature in order to deny its own existence as something distinct and self-produced. As Schutz (15) points out, common-sense knowledge of the world assumes the form of a "natural attitude": the interacting sum of taken-for-granted assumptions about what is obvious, inevitable, eternal, unchangeable.

*One of the principal agencies through which ideology realizes this occlusive naturalism is myth.*

Though it is a conceptual tool more commonly associated with the analysis of belief in primitive and ancient cultures, myth has also proven itself applicable to modern forms of culture. Predictably, it has been those regions of cultural production that are most openly "fictional" and manipulative—popular fiction on television and in comic books, advertising—that have proven most receptive to myth analysis. Nonetheless, the tendency of myth is universalistic, doing its work from the most obvious to the most remote interstices of cultural practice, from advertising to the "anonymous utterances of the press" (2, p. 165), as the work of Barthes, in particular, has shown us (1, 2). Adopting the standpoint of semiology, Barthes defines myth primarily as a form rather than a content, a way of knowing about the world whose work is uncritical rather than a body of knowledge that is untrue. The actual, visible substance of myth, Barthes argues, is premised upon myth as a form of talk whose operations remain concealed in its work. Myth is seen as a "second-order" system of signification whose method for establishing meaning is suggestive and evocative rather than declarative, and whose function is the "deformation" of first-order meaning. Myth works by invading straight talk, impoverishing it as pure denotation and preparing it for injection with mythical concepts and meaning.

Myth is a process of signification in which the relationship between form and substance is fluid and unstable. Hypothetically, any text is polysemic, its signs up for grabs. In reality, the text is normally structured in such a way that "preferred" or "dominant" meanings are difficult to resist, and the likelihood of aberrant reading is reduced. Myth is part of this irresistibility; it provides the reader with formulas for

decoding the text, appropriating its meaning without difficulty and effort. On the one hand the text forces activity upon the reader; on the other, myth saves the reader from an exhausting endeavor.

*This article applies the concept of myth to news coverage of the raid by the Special Air Services Regiment of the British army to recapture the Iranian embassy in London in May of 1980, after it was seized by Iranian Arab autonomists.*

At about 11:30 a.m. on Wednesday, April 30, 1980, six men armed with automatics, machine guns, and hand grenades forced their way into and seized the Iranian embassy in London, taking captive 26 staff, visitors, and the police constable assigned to the embassy by the Metropolitan Police. The "gunmen," as they became known in the press, identified themselves as members of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Arabistan, and declared that they would blow up the embassy and its occupants unless the Iranian government released from prison 91 prisoners held for secessionist activity in the region of Arabistan (as it is known to its Arab inhabitants) or Khuzistan (as it is called by the Aryan regime in Teheran). After cordoning off the area surrounding the building, the police established negotiations with the "gunmen" in order to talk them into peacefully surrendering. Over the next five days this strategy not only prevented bloodshed, but also "reduced" the demands of the gunmen to unconditional release and safe passage from the country.

On the sixth day, May 5, however, one of the hostages, an embassy official named Abbas Lavasani, was shot and killed on the orders of the group's leader. The police were informed of this, and more killings were threatened if demands for release and safe passage were not promptly met. Further shots were fired and the (cold) body of Lavasani was dumped through the embassy's front door. The decision was taken by the government to recapture the embassy by force to try to avoid further killings. At 7:26 p.m. three four-man teams from the Special Air Services (S.A.S.) regiment of the British army began an "assault" upon the embassy. After the operation was complete, five of the six gunmen had been killed, as had a second hostage. Apart from minor injuries the remaining hostages and all the S.A.S. men emerged alive (16).

Clearly, the event had all the makings of a prime news story, particularly given the newsworthiness of Iran (rejuvenated by the aborted attempt of the U.S. military to free the American "hostages" in Teheran). This contrast served only to highlight and intensify the central news elements of the embassy story—action, drama, conflict. Thus,

although the event occurred in the United Kingdom, it received prominent coverage in North America, particularly its second stage. After beginning to stagnate as an eventful story in the first five days of the occupation and siege, the killing of Lavasani and the intervention of the S.A.S. rejuvenated the story's newsworthiness, re-formed it as a new breaking story, and once more catapulted it onto the front page with pictures and banner headlines.

We will examine the second stage of the embassy story, specifically how the news talked about the S.A.S. in a way that reveals the work of myth. To do this we shall confine our attention to a comparative reading of the accounts of the story's second stage in the two morning dailies that serve the Toronto area—the *Globe and Mail* and the *Sun*. Both papers have daily circulations of about a quarter of a million (the *Globe and Mail* slightly larger, the *Sun* slightly smaller). The papers are quite distinct, however, in genre and format, implying that they appeal to fairly distinct news markets.

The *Globe and Mail*, which styles itself "Canada's national newspaper," is a "serious," moderately "highbrow" newspaper catering particularly to the professional, managerial, and commercial middle classes as well as the established political and economic elites. Its tone is generally "conservative," with a strong commitment to traditional liberal principles in matters concerning political and civil rights and the inviolability of the rule of law. The *Sun*, by contrast, employs a tabloid style of presentation, and is more "populist" in the right-wing sense. Its market is drawn more from the lower-middle and working classes, appealing to the innate common sense of the ordinary person on the street. This distinction of genre and format, then, will provide a background of contrast from which to read comparatively the intrusion of myth: just how universalistic is myth in its signifying work?

Table 1 summarizes the papers' coverage of the embassy affair's second phase, in terms of story type, theme, date, and length. The standard imperatives of professional journalism clearly impose constraints on the ways in which a breaking news story can be covered. As a result, divergence between accounts is limited to such matters as the order in which themes appear, the presence or absence of editorial commentary and, most obviously, the new angles of the story that can be elaborated.

In this particular case, it is as a developing news story that accounts in the two papers differ most conspicuously. The *Sun* carried stories on the police constable captured in the initial seizure, on the criminal charges laid against the sole surviving gunman, and on the possible sources of the gunmen's weapons. The *Globe and Mail*, on the other hand, limited its news development coverage to a story on reaction to the S.A.S. action by the Iranian government, and the absence of any similar "counter-terrorist" force in Canada. It did, however, devote more

Table 1: Comparison of coverage by *Globe and Mail* and *Sun*

Date	Story type	Theme	Length (in paragraphs)
5/6/80	News event	Embassy storming	26
5/7/80	Clarification	of details of assault on embassy	28
5/7/80	Editorial	Message of irony to Iran	6
5/7/80	News event	Iran disclaims parallel subplot	9
5/8/80	Background	Origins, development, and connections of S.A.S. with other such forces	22
5/8/80	Background	The hostages' situation and story	9
5/10/80	Commentary:	Assault a boost for regular Saturday column from London	12
5/12/80	Background	No similar force to S.A.S. in Canada	17
5/17/80	Commentary:	Justification of killing gunmen; attractive-ness of British way of life	14
5/27/80	Background	Man who formed the S.A.S.	28
5/6/80	News event	Embassy storming	24
5/6/80	Editorial	Efficiency of British, barbarism of Iran; incompetence and weakness of U.S.	10
5/6/80	Background	Story of capture and occupation by released hostage of	17
5/7/80	Clarification	of details of assault, source of explosions	18
5/7/80	Background	On police officer held hostage; how he concealed his gun from his captors	8
5/8/80	Background	Possible source of gunmen's weapons; clarification of number of deaths	15
5/9/80	News event	Surviving gunmen charged with murder	9
5/9/80	Background	Origins, etc., of S.A.S.	32

SUN

GLOBE AND MAIL

attention to commentary upon the incident through a regular weekly column of commentary from its resident London correspondent. As we shall see later, the effect of this is that the work of myth is more complex and intricate in the *Globe and Mail's* accounts of the incident than it is in the *Sun's*.

Neither paper, significantly, carried any separate background story on the gunmen: their probable reasons for the attack, their history, organization, and so on. As a result, very little was said about the actual causes of the incident beyond what was evident in the gunmen's publicized demands. News of the seizure, occupation, siege, and freeing of the embassy was essentially news of effects and affects of effects: in a word, the disruption of law and order. Here we see the text enlisting the reader in the process of assuming the "obvious." The reader, as active, thinking subject, does not have to be told much about why the incident took place. Through the intertextuality of news accounts, myth steps in to relieve the reader of the burden of an exhausting causal account. All the reader needs to be told *at this point* is that the incident concerns Iran: he or she already "knows" that Iran is bad news. Coming only a matter of days after the aborted attempt by the U.S. military to mount a rescue of the "hostages" so conspicuously (thanks to the news media) "failed," the London affair simply did not require elaborate explanations and background coverage of the gunmen. Anything to do with Iran was by now firmly enveloped in a rich, news-derived mythology.

*In both papers the breaking story of the S.A.S. action was structured primarily in terms of its violence.*

The theme of violence continued to dominate in the follow-up clarification stories, declining noticeably in the subsequent coverage. The *Globe and Mail* in particular intensified the qualitative force of this theme in its clarification story—titled suggestively "Battle of the Embassy"—with a reference in the second paragraph to the incident's being "much bloodier" than first thought. This amplification of violence continues: the gunmen are said to have "paid dearly" at the hands of the S.A.S.; the embassy is described as a "funeral pyre"; and the police are said to be searching the debris for "pieces that were once human." Clearly, for the *Globe and Mail*, this was no ordinary instance of collective death. By comparison, the *Sun* was more restrained; this is particularly noteworthy in light of its tabloid format, which is commonly associated with sensationalism. The breaking story referred to the action simply as an "attack" or an "assault"; the clarification story referred to the action as the "bloody climax" to the occupation, and noted the "terror" of the "rescued hostages."

Both papers sharpened the impact of the incident's violent character by contrasting it with the apparent peacefulness and uneventfulness of

the previous five days of occupation. This discontinuity is registered in the *Globe and Mail* by reference to "violence which had suddenly shattered a previously peaceful occupation," noting later that the occupation period had seemed "remarkably calm . . . almost civilised." The *Sun*, likewise, established a radical sense of discontinuity with reference to an "outburst of violence . . . in total contrast to the peace and quiet" normally found in the area, and noted that although "it all seemed peaceful enough . . . high drama was unfolding inside the embassy building." The *Globe and Mail* did not venture an explanation for the "sudden" change. The *Sun*, on the other hand, attributed it, by way of a police spokesman, to a "definite change in the terrorist attitude. They became tired and irritable." What this explanation amounts to is a psychologism that explains through the imputation of motives to individuals acting as if in a vacuum, and which therefore begs the question. Not only is action reduced to "attitude" and emotion, but the causes for the change in attitude remain unexamined. That the "sudden" tiredness and irritability of the gunmen may have been the result, at least in part, of their relationship with the police throughout the peaceful phase of the occupation is not entertained, and therefore not examined.

Whatever its reasons and causes, the violence of the situation establishes the potential for the S.A.S., as the new agents of the restoration of order, to become contaminated by their contact with terrorism. In any situation of disorder, the forces of order restoration risk compromising their own legitimacy if they publicly and visibly have to resort to the means of disorder in order to accomplish their task. Indeed, by being forced initially to operate on terms set by their opposition, the agencies of order restoration may not only appropriate the means of disorder, but do so more fully, extensively, and effectively, thereby giving rise, through news mediation, to the amplification of disruption (cf. 11, 18). This potential becomes quite real in such a case as the S.A.S. intervention to end the occupation of the Iranian embassy. The very "success" of the action stemmed from the fact that the "terrorism" of the gunmen was overcome by the use of even greater violent force by the S.A.S.

*How did the S.A.S. men fare journalistically in the midst of this violence they helped perpetrate?*

In large part the answer to this question lies in the way in which the news text resolves the problem of who or what are the central agents or battles around which the story revolves and through which it unfolds itself. In most cases, particularly of bad news, the agents of order restoration are readily, obviously recognizable, and are decoded and related almost reflexively through a rich repository of associative myths; the police by their uniforms, their cars with flashing lights and sirens, officials with their press conferences (do, indeed can, criminals,

lunatics, terrorists hold press conferences?), and so on (cf. 1, 2, 7). Their legitimacy and expertise are established mythically, and therefore casually and uncritically, through their routine association with the state's apparatus of law enforcement and order maintenance. In the case of the S.A.S., however, this decoding of the enigma is unusually problematic. In the first place, they are unknown subjects inhabiting an alien news territory. In the second place, the resolution of the enigma proves, as we shall see, to be partly reflexive: the answer to the enigma of the S.A.S. is that the S.A.S. is an enigma.

In the *Globe and Mail*, our first encounter with the S.A.S. occurs in the breaking story of the intervention appearing on May 6, and in the follow-up story the next day clarifying and amplifying the details of the event. In the opening story, the official identity of the S.A.S. is not revealed until almost halfway through the account (paragraph 13). They are first referred to, in the main headline, as "U.K. troops." This is followed by reference to "special counter-terrorist force from the British Army" (paragraph 2), "commandos" (paragraph 6), "crack army unit" and "British rescuers" (paragraph 7), and "armed men in grey jackets and balaclavas" (paragraph 8). The action itself is defined primarily in terms of "storming" (four references) and "rescuing" (four references), together with a single reference to a "lightning raid." In addition, two citations from state officials (a policeman and a politician) announced that the action displayed "meticulous efficiency and great skill" and was an "outstanding success." There were no cited disagreements with these assessments.

These descriptions of the S.A.S. signify to the reader the elements—some inchoate, others more developed—through which the myth of the S.A.S. begins to emerge. The reader's first contact with these men, through the main headline of the story, suggests their *legitimacy* by establishing an institutional connection to the state. These men belong to the military; they are "troops." They are, therefore, distinct from the civil authorities (police) who have conducted the siege thus far. This signifies a break in official practice: new subjects are involved. At the same time, the fact of their "troop-ness" also signifies a continuity: these new subjects are still official representatives of the state, the "proper" agency to be reacting to such business as the commission of illicit acts. This initial legitimacy is then enlarged: these "troops" are members, not simply of the army, armed forces, military, etc., but of a distinct, specific institution: the "British Army." The capitalized letters signify an official institution with a tradition that transcends the immediate present: these men belong to something permanent and ordered.

A second theme, articulated perhaps more strongly, is that of *expertise*. Our first encounter in the news account with these "troops" tells us they are "special," and that their specialness has to do with their being a "counter-terrorist force." The reader is told, inchoately, that the discon-

tinuity of official personnel signifies a change in the status of the gunmen: their action in killing the hostages—which stands in contrast to the previously peaceful, almost civilized character of the occupation—has clearly expelled them from the consensus, thus necessitating the use of special measures by the authorities.

As the gunmen move centrifugally into "terrorism," so the S.A.S. move centripetally to the center of the consensus as the bearers of counter-terrorist expertise. This is reinforced by their "commando-ness," their "crack-ness," and the "lightning-ness" of their action. As "commandos," these men belong to a particular tradition of troop-ness enveloped in an aura of romanticism, derring-do-ness, action-behind-enemy-lines-ness reminiscent of Hollywood's Second World War. By reference to a "crack army unit," the text further evokes their accomplishments: these men are not just abstract experts; their expertise is real, concrete, tested.

Their specialness is, however, twofold. We are told not only of their special skill, but also of their special dress. These men do not dress like normal soldiers: they are clad in "grey jackets and balaclavas." This unorthodox garb suggests they are *mysterious*. This is strengthened in the caption accompanying a photo of two S.A.S. men standing outside the embassy during the assault. Their mystery is not accidental, it is deliberate: these men are "hooded to avoid identification." This connotes secrecy and anonymity that are necessary rather than voluntary: these men must not be known. The enigma code is forced back upon itself for resolution, and a new element to the myth of the S.A.S. emerges from it. We are invited to ask, who are these men, and encouraged to reply, they don't want us to know who they are. But mystery, secrecy, anonymity in the midst of such obvious success implies something sinister, which in turn begins to negate legitimacy and expertise.

This opening account offers (mythical) closure. The action was clearly a "success"; it was undertaken only after the gunmen had signaled a radical change in their actions and, by implication, intentions; and given that the probability of death was high, only the "right" people had indeed been killed—the "innocent" were saved. At this point, there is only a faint glimmer of doubt that the mystery of the S.A.S. may be sinister. It is not until the follow-up clarification story that this doubt is nourished and the dialectics of myth developed. The S.A.S., drawn initially by the "terrorism" of the gunmen and the contingency of their use into the center of the consensus, now begin to be pushed out toward the margins. The comfortable coexistence of legitimacy, expertise, and mystery now begins to fragment: mystery contaminates expertise, uniting with it to question legitimacy.

As we have already noted, the violence of the event is amplified qualitatively in the follow-up clarification story by references to the action's being "much bloodier" than previously thought, to the embassy

as a "funeral pyre," and to the search for "pieces that were once human." This story contains two explicit references to killing by the S.A.S., more than in any other story in the overall account. Early on we are told that five of the six "gunmen" were "shot down by the commando troops," and later that a "commando . . . killed the terrorist" who was about to shoot at him. But what is really important in this account is not action, what happened, but *intention*. What begins the S.A.S. on their journey of expulsion is that their killing was intentional, deliberate: they "entered *shooting to kill*" (emphasis added). New myth can only arise on the shoulders of old: the dialectical character of the myth of the S.A.S. emerges from the broader myth of intentionality as the foundation of action. Here we see the ideality of myth at work: action, behavior is reduced to attitude, motive, purpose, belief—in a word, idea.

*What is sinister about the S.A.S. is not that they kill, but that they intend to kill; they are expelled from the consensus not as the instigators of action, but as the bearers of ideas.*

This dialectic continues to haunt the *Globe and Mail's* story for the remainder of its news life. In the editorial carried on the same day, May 7, the first two-thirds of the text is devoted to a justification of the S.A.S. action, the reestablishment of legitimacy and its compatibility with expertise. The initial police strategy, "the low tension method," we are told, has been shown by "experience in dealing with hostage takings and sieges" (in reality only two incidents: the Balcombe St. and Spaghetti House sieges in 1975) to be the best means to "erode the resolve of the terrorists." This approach, the account continues, appeared to be working in the embassy siege as the "gunmen seemed to be on a course of moderation." Then, "it all suddenly turned ugly" (could tensions have been low after all?—we are not told). Shots were fired inside the embassy, and a body was later "tossed" (casual contempt?) through the embassy's front door, a move that is said to carry "ominous implication[s] that more would follow." The initial "policy of patience" was, however, backed up by a "firm contingency plan . . . that was intelligently conceived and carried out with skill and courage" by a "crack army unit." Force can now only beget force; lethal motives can only be responded to lethally. The conclusion is unmistakable: "It is difficult to see what other course could have been followed by those directing operations around the building." The alternatives duly evaporate; the only realistic response is the one taken. What we witness here is what Fiske and Hartley (7), in their reading of myth in news of the S.A.S. on British television, have termed "clawing back." The deadly intentionality of the S.A.S. revealed in the preceding account has begun to expel

them from the consensus. Now, the impracticability of alternatives is invoked, and begins to claw them back.

The return of the S.A.S. remains incomplete, however. The dialectical motion of the myth is renewed in the *Globe and Mail* background story on the S.A.S. of May 8, titled "New U.K. Heroes Never Give Enemy an Even Break": expulsion from the consensus begins afresh. Though the title to the story establishes the S.A.S. as "U.K. heroes," it also tells us that they never give the "enemy an even break." Heroic but inequitable: the contrast sets the form within which this story, indeed the entire account, is largely structured. It expresses, methodologically, the practical imperative of impartiality to which professional journalism subscribes: an "on-the-one-hand-on-the-other-ism" by means of which journalistic "balance" is accomplished.

In this instance, however, the balancing of accounts once again regenerates myth's dialectical motion. Our first encounter in the text itself with these "heroes" establishes the apparent moral distance of the balanced account: they are nothing more nor less than a "bunch" who are not "a bit like the clean-cut lads who used to defend the empire" in the stories in boys' comic books. There is, in other words, nothing fictional, ideal, "mythical" in the empiricist sense about these men: myth works here by implicitly denying itself, its own force of signification, "replacing" itself with a new myth, that of the realist account. The realism of the S.A.S. consists in its contrast to the idealism of popular fiction: these men are a "shadowy gang" who "dress in sinister black" (despite the fact that we have earlier been informed that they wore grey). We are told that they "cover their faces with balaclavas like bank robbers," and once again that they "never give the enemy an even break." This lethal intentionality distinguishes the S.A.S. from the rest of us, and removes them from the consensual center of ordinariness: "They attack without warning," we are told, "and they *always* shoot to kill" (emphasis added).

The removal of the S.A.S. continues apace with a summary account of their role in the embassy siege and its termination. The reader is told that they "blasted" their way in, and "killed five of the six gunmen" in an operation that was not only "ferocious, lethal," but also "chillingly efficient." This efficiency—"chilling" because it is so efficient, intention realized in pure form, without mistake—is, we are told, the "trademark" of the S.A.S.: it was no accident, but rather a routine performance. After the intervention was complete the S.A.S. again "melted away" in naturalistic fashion. They left nothing concrete with which to be associated—"no interviews, no triumphant pictures, no names or faces"—merely symbolic memories, the "symbol" of the "winged dagger," and the motto "Who Dares, Wins." The realism of the S.A.S.—a realism of effect—is therefore abstract, symbolic, ideal: winning comes from dar-

ing, success from moral motivation. Myth's dialectic is now firmly in motion: efficient but chilling, successful but ferocious and lethal, representatives of the legitimate state but dressed like criminals, heroic but always shooting to kill.

*In these contrasts we witness the radical idealism of myth at work, reducing action to moral intentionality.*

Both sides of the official response to the embassy seizure are presented to us as evidence of moral character and purpose: "discipline." On the one hand we see disciplined patience, calm, humor; on the other, disciplined ruthlessness, swiftness, deadliness. But these two sides are never allowed by the text to develop the full force of a contradiction that would undermine myth and its power. Both sides are simply the obverse of the same discipline, a discipline that gave us an "assault" that was "brilliant" and, not but, "ruthless." This resolution begins again to claw the S.A.S. back into the consensus. They are simply one representation of collective social discipline. Whichever face this presents at any moment, its safety is ensured by its being deliberate. Each side of this discipline is part of a "formula" which obviously works: "The result: a famous victory against international terrorism."

Yet again, however, the process of clawing the S.A.S. back into the consensus begets its own negation. The regular weekly column of May 17—"The facets that matter"—is devoted to "a couple of thoughts that gnaw" in the aftermath of the "magnificent" storming of the embassy. The first three paragraphs begin the S.A.S. back on their expulsion from the consensus. Sources have revealed that some of the gunmen were "almost certainly unarmed and trying to surrender when they were cut down" by the S.A.S. This action is called an "execution. Some might call it murder." And even though the situation was one of "war" and terrorists who have already killed hostages "don't deserve any favours, nonetheless the 'calm brutality of the action gives one the chill bumps.' But expulsion, just like clawing back, remains incomplete. The S.A.S. myth is still double-edged.

*The intricate dialectics of myth that we see in the Globe's coverage of the episode are generally absent from the Sun.*

There is movement here, but it is simpler, less elaborate, more direct. The question of the legitimacy of the S.A.S. and its uneasy relation to expertise and mystery that is the central axis of myth's development in

the *Globe's* account is eschewed in the *Sun*. What we receive instead is a myth of deadly expertise and sinister mystery. The S.A.S. are not drawn initially to the center of the consensus, but left on its margins, a lethal reminder to those who contemplate any threat to its integrity.

In the breaking story of May 6 the S.A.S. are most commonly referred to as "commandos," as indeed they are throughout the entire coverage. This establishes their specialness, and breaks the ground for discovering their expertise. This is achieved through references to "crack-ness" (twice), to speed ("acting swiftly," "element of surprise," "swift and sudden"), to preparation ("highly trained for just such a situation," "brilliantly planned and executed attack"), and to their skill ("Astonishingly, none of the hostages . . . was killed," "Their skill can be judged by the fact that only a few [of the hostages] were injured"). But for the most part, the evocation of the event in this account is of the violence of the *situation*: the S.A.S. themselves do not figure especially prominently, and there is certainly no question raised about their deployment. At this point, even their sinisterness and mysteriousness are only briefly glimpsed: they are "dressed in black," and "did not stop once inside to politely ask the gunmen to hand over their weapons."

Their use and effect are simply obvious, a matter of course, as the title of the editorial that same day conveyed with simplicity: "Brits Know How." The reader is encouraged, in light of the myth of Iran-as-bad-news, to ask why the S.A.S. were not used earlier, as the rather restrained tone of the editorial suggests—"The British are usually adept at these situations." As for the S.A.S., all that they warrant is simply "admiration." Why? The answer implied is that these men simply did their job, what they were supposed to do—something the American military so conspicuously failed to do in its "bungled" attempt to rescue the hostages held in Iran. The S.A.S. deserve congratulations for a job well done, but nothing more.

Their commitment to the job plants them firmly (but, compared to the *Globe and Mail*, relatively unobtrusively) in the consensus. This firmness means that their sinister mysteriousness, mixed with expertise and effectiveness, can safely be embellished in a way that appears to move the S.A.S. to the very margins of exclusion, but does not succeed in pushing them over the edge. This movement of the myth of the S.A.S. occurs in the final story in the account's sequence, the background story on the S.A.S.—"Britain's grim reapers"—which appeared on May 9. Like the *Globe and Mail's* background story on the S.A.S., only more so, the deadliness, ruthlessness, sinisterness, etc., of the S.A.S. are given full play. A sampling of descriptions of the S.A.S., their actions, their past, their training, etc., will suffice, since their meaning is now familiar: "Deadly efficient," "secret and stealthy," (they return) "into the dark-

ness," "murderous mixture," "near total anonymity," "definitely didn't play by cricket field rules," "not-too-savoury a reputation," "SAS troopers," "so good at [their] bloody work," "killers," "loners," "experts in the art of interrogation [where they] leave little trace of torture [on] squealing prisoners," "masked," "chilling, killing efficiency." We see again that these men stand out on the grounds not simply of what they do, but of their intentions. They embody a moral purpose and character that is made frightening by the very fact that it is realized so readily.

Yet while we may accept the S.A.S.'s sinisterness to be true, as law-abiding citizens we do not feel the need to take it seriously. Despite their sudden prominence in the news spotlight, the S.A.S. can fade easily and quickly from memory once the spotlight is turned elsewhere. Throughout these accounts the sinisterness and so on of the S.A.S. is contained, and their safety and remoteness continually reinforced. The perimeters within which myth can move are established early on—in part by the reader's interpolation of the "already known" about the illegitimacy of terrorism and the legitimacy of the democratic state—and are strengthened by the very progress of that movement.

*In both news event and background stories the violence of the S.A.S. is depicted in ways that are primarily abstract rather than concrete.*

The stories involve violence and death by association rather than actual commission. The bulk of references to violence are *not* to specific concrete instances of killing or dying, but to the generally violent character of the situation as a whole: to smoke, gunfire, flames, explosions, attacks, assaults. This pattern is reaffirmed in the two background accounts of the S.A.S., which inform us of their origins, training, organization, etc. Here we are told of the deadliness and ruthlessness of the S.A.S. in ways that are essentially abstract rather than concrete. We are told of the exploits of the S.A.S. in remote places at obscure times, exploits that earned them "reputations." The legitimacy of their use and their activities, the reasons for their involvement, the wider political context of their deployment are questions that are never raised. Their reputation, in other words, is abstracted from real time and space. This gives the S.A.S. a remoteness: the abstracted empiricism of the news text serves, paradoxically, to render the S.A.S. remote from ordinary lives, and thereby makes them safe.

This safety is reinforced by the text's establishing the *dependent instrumentalism* of the S.A.S. and their actions. The S.A.S., we are told, did not initiate their own participation in this affair. Rather, they were "told . . . to go in" (*Globe and Mail*), were "called in" (*Sun*) by others.

The *Globe and Mail* in particular informs its reader that the decision to use the S.A.S. was made by a top government minister in consultation with the prime minister. This was no decision made by some faceless, appointed official, but a carefully considered move by a democratically elected and publicly responsible representative. The autonomy of the S.A.S. made so evident to us once they are in action, is now put in check. They are no longer the autonomous force they initially appear; they are now an instrument in the service of the democratic state.

As a result, the violence of the S.A.S. becomes instrumental also, a tool which is sometimes rendered necessary by the actions of others, and not an end in itself. Their violence is legitimated so long as it responds to the illicit violence—"terrorism"—initiated by those who disrupt social order. Thus, the safety and acceptability of the S.A.S. is bound up intrinsically with the danger and unacceptability of the gunmen. The legitimacy of violence by the former is the obverse of its illegitimacy for the latter. Accordingly, throughout these accounts of both stages of the embassy affair, those who seized the embassy are designated instrumentally, identified by the means they employ rather than the goals they profess to seek. These men are either "gunmen" or "terrorists"—the users of guns and terror—never autonomists, irredentists, independence fighters, or any other label that would associate them with their stated aims. Unlike the S.A.S.—whose *objective* identity vis-à-vis the democratic state is assumed, despite their enigma—the gunmen have, for the news media, no objectively ascertainable identity beyond the means they "obviously" employ.

This instrumentalism not only allows the violence of the S.A.S. to be legitimized, but also resolves the potential paradox of the gunmen as well. As opponents of the Khomeini regime, these men stand initially in a position to reap sympathy from the reader as victims of (a myth of) oppression. Like the American "hostages" in Teheran—by now seen in the North American press as a metonym for the West as a whole—the gunmen represent those wronged by the new Iranian regime. This is brought out most forcefully in the *Sun*'s breaking story of the S.A.S. intervention. The gunmen, we are told, are "demanding autonomy for their area" of Khuzestan, which "Khomeini has responded [to] by shooting and imprisoning hundreds of Arabs in that area." But by defining these demanders of autonomy as the users of guns and terror, myth intercedes to neutralize our sympathy and the potential it carries to contaminate the S.A.S. as state terrorists. Though these men appear to oppose Khomeini, their deviant instrumentalism serves to assimilate them into the myth of Iran-as-bad-news. Notwithstanding the justness of their professed aims, their use of violent means—epitomized by the execution of one of the hostages—isolates them from favorable senti-

ment. Iran, after all, is bad news; the gunmen are now simply one more proof of this.

*The violence of the S.A.S., while also identified and contained as instrumental, is made clearly dependent and conditional as the response to prior violence on the part of others.*

In this way, the relationship between the forces of disorder and order restoration assumes the character of a "game" with "natural" rules. Just as in the marketplace demand is considered naturally to initiate supply—from which model of political economy modern myth draws much of its signifying form—so too does terrorism beget official violence as its natural response. As the *Globe and Mail* succinctly phrased the matter: "the gunmen had broken the rules by executing hostages" (emphasis added). These rules are natural because they are obvious: we do not have to be informed of them beforehand to know what they are. Thus, by breaking natural rules, the actions of the gunmen naturally occasioned the legitimate intervention of the S.A.S. and what followed from it. By informing us that the gunmen killed first—which both papers do scrupulously whenever they mention killing by the S.A.S.—the news text prepares the way for the entrance of the S.A.S., and their violence as a natural part of the natural balance of a mechanistic social universe.

Finally, no matter how ruthless, chilling, murderous, deadly, or unsavory the actions of the S.A.S., they are ultimately efficient. In his studies of the use of physical violence in television drama, Gerbner (10) has shown that "heroes" often use force to achieve their—and therefore society's—ends. So long as their heroic quality is also established in other ways, and so long as force is used with economy and efficiency, their mythical goodness remains intact, indeed is strengthened. This notion of efficient violence is, it must be stressed, both contingent and selective. Villains, no matter how smoothly, quickly, or fully they execute their plans, are not seen as efficient. Likewise the gunmen in the embassy affair: though they appeared to occupy the embassy with little trouble, their actions are not portrayed as efficient. In contrast, the S.A.S., by virtue of their none the less violent conduct, are seen as efficient since they are in other ways endowed by the text with legitimacy and approval.

This efficiency of the S.A.S. is partly nostalgic, partly futuristic. In an era of domination by large bureaucracies, with their reputation for impeding the smoothness of life through imposing unnecessary regulation, the speediness and thoroughness of the S.A.S. evoke the myth of simpler, more direct times. This is the myth of the early capitalistic marketplace where the absence of state intervention allowed "hard" and

"tough" (two favorite media terms) competition to foster the necessary moral virtues of straightforwardness, hard work, individualism, and so on. It is the myth of a direct political and moral economy that ensured the prompt satisfaction of social wants through disciplined conduct. At the same time, the efficiency of the S.A.S. feeds upon a myth of technological optimism for the future. Their exotic technology—a testament to human ingenuity—combined with their moral force signifies hope for the future, a way to escape both the stagnation of bureaucratic routines and the disruptiveness of terrorism. The mythical efficiency of the S.A.S. renders them simultaneously the bearers of both excitement and order.

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