

Challenges in International Security: Kidnapping & Crisis Management

Challenges in International Security: Kidnapping & Crisis Management

Gene M. Smith ,
President, Smith Brandon International Inc.

According to the UN, kidnapping is a crime that victimizes more than 10,000 persons each year. Silence (of both the victims and their rescuers) is the rule, not the exception.

If you ever experience this type of crisis, would you be prepared for the ripple effect of confusion, fear and turmoil? Dozens, even hundreds, of persons might be impacted—family members, colleagues, personnel in the country where you work and personnel at corporate headquarters. Other organizations are likely to be drawn in as well—law enforcement agencies, humanitarian groups, Embassy representative.

My question is this: Would you be prepared?

While I will speak about kidnapping in particular, crisis management is the bigger issue. And crisis management can't be delayed until there a crisis. So let's get started.

Principle No. 1—you need to be prepared. Where? Just about anywhere.

Kidnapping is known to be rampant in many countries of Latin America. Prime examples are Mexico and Brazil. These are also the two largest economies in Latin America, where business opportunities may draw businesspersons such as yourselves.

Another country is Colombia. Even today, a prominent citizen and former Presidential candidate remains a hostage since 2002. That's over 5 years held in captivity.

Another country – often lower on our radar screen – has been described recently as among the Top 10 kidnapping venues in the world: Haiti.

Haiti is a good example of any likely cauldron for kidnapping. It has widespread poverty, significant corruption, a dysfunctional government—and (in particular) a problematic law enforcement regime.

This address delivered to the Women in International Regulatory Law Symposium, Annapolis, Maryland, June 2008. Permission has been granted by the speaker to reprint this speech here.

Challenges in International Security: Kidnapping & Crisis Management

Other areas to be conscious of: the Philippines, India, Russia, Nigeria, South Africa. All pose the possible threat of kidnapping or a similar crisis.

Now, we often think of kidnapping as a political crime. And we often think the Americans are not targeted. But, as women, we may consider ourselves more vulnerable. A kidnapping that involves being shoved into the trunk of a car, for purposes of raiding our bank accounts via ATM withdrawals, is still a kidnapping. It has happened in Washington, DC. It can happen anywhere.

A corollary to Principle No. 1 is: you need to have a plan. When? Now.

How many of you routinely travel on business, or perhaps even live abroad?

You should have a clear plan that addresses all travel considerations. And you should also have a checklist that's geared specifically to your proposed city and country.

For travel and arrival in your new country, do you know...

- Your point of contact—at the airport and also at the office?
- Your emergency contact (because your proposed contacts may not be available?)
- Your method of contact? Your cell phone may not work (for whatever reason), and a cell phone may not be available at the airport. The local phones might require a special token. And they might not work at all.
- Your transportation—from the airport to your hotel or new residence?
- Detailed background on your place of destination, including specific hot spots or places to avoid.

At transition points, we are all at our most vulnerable. We don't know exactly what to expect. That very vulnerability may be exploited by those looking to target the unsuspecting.

Let me address the greater likelihood that a kidnapping may be the result of a grand plan, one that has been in motions for days or even weeks or months.

Principal No. 2—you need to have a crisis management plan in place. Preferably one that you have drilled—at least once upon a time.

First and foremost, this plan needs to be accessible. Does everyone here know where your local crisis management plan is located, or who controls that plan? Is it held by your corporate counsel, your internal security office, or your director of corporate security?

Some questions about our specific plan, in case a kidnapping occurs:

- For starters, how will anyone know that you are gone? Do you have a system of

checking in, so that your absence—or any other problem – will be known at once? You don't want your absence noticed only when the ransom demand is made, and the trail may have grown cold.

- Who will be in charge?
- What is the chain of command on such an incident/ (Each incident has its own requirements.)
- Is there a designated outside advisor who is specifically experienced in this area?
- Should you call the local police—or is it smarter to wait to consider informing the local police?
- Do you have a pre-ordained emergency code—a “special word” or (or phrase) that can be recognized as a call for help or an emergency alert?
- Does insurance coverage exist, triggering immediate outside assistance? This is a critical issue for another reason: there's some conjecture that local insurance coverage may provide a roadmap for potential kidnapping targets
- Is there a corporate policy on payment of ransom? To pay or not to pay? Immediate payment of ransom may convince the kidnappers that the company or individual is ripe for a follow-up kidnapping. (Repeat kidnapping of the same victim is a known problem.)
- Is there a business continuity plan? You, or your colleagues, are out of commission. Maybe for an unknown duration. How does the company keep doing business in the middle of a crisis?
- What are the P.R. ramifications? Is the kidnapping made a matter of public record, in order to alert the community to clues that might be useful? Or is the kidnapping kept confidential, to try to work quietly behind the scenes and avoid causing dangerous panicking by the kidnappers? How to keep the competition from exploiting the crisis? Or do you get assistance from the competition, who travel in the same circles and may be equally vulnerable? How do you decide not to abort operations, and risk permanent damage to operations in that particular area?

These are only a few of the issues to be addressed, but among the most issues.

What about your personal plan in the event of a crisis? Are you prepared to have your employer, your company, address? Even your personal concerns? Think – Do you have a personal plan where time is measured in seconds and minutes, not in hours or days or weeks? The crisis you face may be a kidnapping or a car accident; it may be a tornado or a tsunami; it may be a plane crash or a bombing. It is a crisis; and it will unroll on top of you, without stopping.

Challenges in International Security: Kidnapping & Crisis Management

If you should be so lucky and have such presence of mind as to hang on to your cell phone (and manage to conceal it), who is the one person you would call? Can you name that person now, and—presuming you have a rented cell phone—do you know that person’s phone number without speed dial? Could you immediately dial the correct number for work, at home, at their summer beach house or at their weekend ski lodge?

Personally, I have two options: my husband, a Captain with the DC police department, or my business partner, former career FBI. I know when my husband is asleep after midnight shift, he is untouchable. I know when my partner is traveling, he may be on the other side of the world, following that remote schedule. I even have a back-up plan to those two primary contacts.

But let’s get down to the dealing with the kidnapers themselves. A few tips:

- Make yourself human. Give your name; try to get the first names of your captors.
- Try to converse. Be patient. Be earnest.
- Draw parallels; try to find things in common. Speak of your children, and how upset they will be. Maybe avoid talking of your husband or significant other, to avoid triggering competition or jealousy.
- Keep your temper completely in check. Use every opportunity to relate to your kidnapers—and to remember as many details about them as possible.
- Play dumb or follow the line of thinking of your captors. Use your intuition. If you know your corporate policy is “no ransom” –this is not a good topic for discussion. If you know the kidnapers are driven by ideology this is not the time for a political debate.

Let me be clear: The best kidnapping defense is to prevent the kidnapping to begin with.

Know the local environment.

Avoid areas where there is potential danger. Follow the principle of safety in numbers—and make that number at least two together at any time, even for an early departure from a dinner engagement to a nearby hotel. Know your driver. Don’t be afraid to request physical security; and be prepared to justify your request for security—even if the security is only an armed driver. You all know about need to vary your daily routine: it causes havoc in any effort to carefully plan your abduction.

On question I really can’t answer for any of you: To resist or not to resist. You will have to consider that on your own.

It may depend on the circumstances, such as overwhelming odds against resistance, or an approach by a person with no apparent weapon.

I will draw to a close with a couple of anecdotes.

One is from a Latin American country. My colleague there has worked with me, off and on, for over 20 years.

Among many other business and security functions, he has developed a niche that involves delivering ransom to kidnappers in exchange for hostages. His words of advice: “I tell my clients, generally the family of the victim, to not call the police right away. Call me first. Otherwise, when I drop off the ransom, I don’t know who I fear most—the police or the kidnappers.”

In my experience, in certain countries, the police and the kidnappers may be one and the same.

Another brief anecdote, from Colombia. Some of you may recall the movie, “Proof of Life,” starring Russell Crowe as the kidnapping negotiator. (You all may recognize “proof of life.” It refers to a security measure used to affirm that the hostage is still alive; a common example is a live phone call from the victim (not a recording), or a photo of the victim holding a dated newspaper. This movie is based on a real-life incident, and it shows the tension, the confusion and the uncertainty that are inherent in any kidnapping. The character played by Russell Crowe, in fact, was our colleague, a former FBI agent and native Spanish speaker, who has remained close to the family of the kidnapping victim. That was a successful negotiation, where the hostage was released.

Finally, you all may have some corporate resources at your disposal to address the threat of kidnapping or other critical incidents. One in particular that I will suggest to you:

US State Department Travel Alerts and Travel Warnings. Available online at www.travel.state.gov. These are advisories on places to avoid or to travel with fore-warning—short term (Travel Alerts) and long term (Travel Warnings). These alerts are updated frequently and have tremendous detail about specific security concerns in countries around the world. Speaking with you shortly will be my colleague, who will address evacuation assistance provided by the US Government. (I’ve talked with you about facing some of these issues head-on; she’ll talk to you about getting you OUT.)

I wish safe travel to all of you. The truth is: The world we live in has changed radically since we were young career women. Part of that change has opened up to us lives that we could not even imagine in our youth. But part of that change also means that we have to accept that buildings are bombed without warning and that crises will confront us—whether we’re ready or

Challenges in International Security: Kidnapping & Crisis Management

not.

Remember this: Crisis management can't be delayed until there is a crisis. Prepare now.