

Case of the Missing Diplomat

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The case of a young American diplomat who disappeared mysteriously in north-west Mexico one month ago has been quietly forgotten — by police, press and public.

The 31-year-old vice-consul, John Patterson, vanished on March 22 soon after leaving the consulate in Hermosillo in the company of an unidentified man. Three hours later, a note was delivered at the consulate demanding a \$500,000 ransom in exchange for the diplomat's life.

Since then, however, nothing has been heard from Patterson's kidnappers and the fear is that he may already have been killed and buried in the desert surrounding Hermosillo.

"We've got absolutely nothing new on the Patterson case," a United States Embassy spokesman said here today. "I'm telling people the same as I told them two weeks ago."

Mexico's main detective team has been withdrawn from the case, and coverage of the kidnapping in the Mexican press has long since given way to more topical issues.

Nevertheless, compared to other recent kidnappings in Mexico, this case remains very much of a mystery. For example, there is insufficient evidence to indicate clearly whether leftist guerrillas or ordinary, perhaps American, criminals are responsible. **There is also even the suggestion, quietly promoted by Mex-**



JOHN PATTERSON
... could be dead

ican government sources, that the entire incident may be a hoax.

On the basis of information so far available, however, most observers are prepared to discount the likelihood of this being a leftist guerrilla action.

In the past, when Mexico's guerrillas have kidnapped foreign diplomats, they have sought maximum publicity — by demanding publication and broadcast of their manifestoes — and have made political demands, invariably the release of guerrilla colleagues who are in jail.

In this case, the ransom note specifically demanded that the kidnapping be kept quiet (the news slipped out accidentally in Washington after five days) and it made only monetary demands.

The note was written in English, in Patterson's handwriting, and the ransom was demanded in U.S. dollars and not Mexican pesos.

Evidence pointing to a possible kidnapping by American gangsters includes the fact that both Patterson and his young wife, Anne, come from wealthy backgrounds, that they were conveniently stationed just 150 miles from the Arizona border and that the "unidentified man" seen accompanying the vice-consul on March 22 appeared to be an American.

The many contradictory and unusual aspects of the case led Mexican officials to "leak" the idea that the kidnapping was a hoax aimed at extorting money from the parents of either Mr. or Mrs. Patterson.

The evidence offered by these officials, however, was not convincing and now they are conceding that a hoax

would not normally last for one month.

"We still believe this is a kidnapping," a U.S. Embassy spokesman insisted today. "We have no information to indicate the contrary."

The largest puzzle, of course, is why there has been no important development in the case since the day the vice-consul disappeared. In the event of either a kidnapping or a hoax, some effort to obtain the ransom would normally be made before now.

The most pessimistic explanation is therefore that Patterson's captors believed, erroneously, that police were on their tracks and decided to kill the young diplomat and abandon their plan to extort a ransom.

In that case, neither the vice-consul's body nor his kidnappers will probably ever be found.