

The Taking Of a President



Arthur Hoppe

AT THE TIME, the President's noble decision to "set a good example" for energy-short Americans by flying on commercial air lines seemed fraught with risk.

While millions of Americans did, indeed, follow his example and renounce flying on Air Force One, the public couldn't help worrying about their President, not to mention his baggage.

Sure enough, their worst fears were realized February 7, a day that shall live in infamy.

At 12:32 a.m. the President boarded Flybynite Airlines Supereconomy Coach & Bingo Parlor (that being the only space available) for the flight from Washington to Key Biscayne.

Scarcely was the craft airborne when a strange and triumphant voice was heard over the public address system. "Salaam, effendis," it said, "this is your new captain speaking."

The news that the President had been hijacked stunned the nation.

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THE FIENDISHNESS of the plot became apparent when Vice President Ford received a ransom note in the mail. "Give us 10 billion shekels in small unmarked shekels," it said in crude letters. "or you will never see your President again!" And it was signed by that most fiendish Arab of all, Al J. Fatah.

Mr. Ford dispatched the note to Capitol Hill, where it was referred to the House Appropriations Committee, which promised to give it "a thorough and exhaustive study."

Meanwhile outraged Republican leaders caucused to demand speedy action.

"We need our President back to lead us to victory in the fall elections," cried one.

"We do?" inquired another.

And after several moments of thought and no debate, the Republicans unanimously adopted the patriotic motto: "Millions for defense, but not one shekel for tribute!"

This, in turn, outraged thoughtful Democrats. They patriotically rallied behind the President to the man, demanding speedy payment of the ransom — by mid-October at the latest. Angry Republicans promptly accused them of "playing partisan politics with the fate of the nation" and threatened to filibuster any shekel bill in the Senate.

As the debate raged on, the honest and decent Mr. Ford governed the nation honestly and decently. Watergate news was squeezed between the truss ads. A new mood of confidence and serenity pervaded the country.

Mr. Fatah's notes to Mr. Ford grew plaintive. "Gerry: How about 5 billion? Or just a couple of hundred to show good faith? — Al."

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ALL MIGHT have gone well if Mr. Kissinger hadn't bumped into Mr. Fatah on one of his trips and hadn't instinctively started negotiating. He brought back an offer America couldn't refuse.

Mr. Fatah agreed to return the President along with 16 tankersful of Ethyl, 150,000 trading stamps and a set of matched steak knives.

Democrats waited jubilantly to greet their President, but neutral observers weren't so sure.

"I knew those Arabs were fiendish," said one, shaking his head. "But I didn't know they were that fiendish."