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Prisoner Dilemmas: The American Obsession with POWs and Hostages

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Abstract

For centuries, the issue of American hostages and POWs has had incredible emotional and political resonance. Driven by a combination of idealism, wrath, and concerns over reputation, the status of captive Americans can become a national obsession. While deeply moral in many respects, this intense focus can encourage risky rescue operations, deepen conflicts, and lead to more Americans being captured abroad. Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan both suffered grave political damage from hostage crises, and the recent capture of an American by Somali pirates highlights the continued danger that a hostage crisis could overshadow the presidency of Barack Obama. U.S. officials should publicly downplay the issue of hostages and POWs, and work quietly behind the scenes to free the men and women concerned.



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