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Courage or Selfishness?

by Rushworth M. Kidder

To some, they are models of bravery, risking their lives in Iraq to report on the war and feed hungry children.

To others, they are exponents of irresponsibility, causing their government huge turmoil and expense to extricate them from danger.

Either way, the three Japanese hostages, released last month after a harrowing televised ordeal showing knife-wielding Iraqi insurgents threatening to kill them, pose a question central to our age: When do individual acts of courage constitute reckless endangerment of the larger society?

Given the weekend escape of Thomas Hamill, a U.S. contractor held by Iraqi militants since April 9, the issue takes on new resonance. But it's not a new question. Examples abound of injured mountaineers airlifted to safety, single-handed sailors rescued from storms, lost hunters found after intensive wilderness searches -- all of whom express courage even as they impose significant costs on the culture that saves them. In these examples, the courage is more physical than moral: While there's nothing illegal or unethical about the acts that got them into difficulty, it's hard to attribute high moral purpose to their motives.

The case of the Japanese hostages is different. Nahoko Takato, 34, went to Iraq to launch a charitable organization to help street children. Freelance photographer Soichiro Koriyama, 32, and freelance writer Noriaki Imai, 18, went to chronicle events of relevance to a nation that has 550 troops stationed there. Moral courage -- which can be defined as the willingness to endure significant danger for the sake of high principle -- would appear to characterize their actions.

In the United States, the return of hostages often inspires a hero's welcome by the public. Indeed, that was the official U.S. response to the Japanese case. "If nobody was willing to take a risk," said Secretary of State Colin Powell, "then we would never move our world forward. And so I'm pleased that these Japanese citizens were willing to put themselves at risk for a greater good, for a better purpose. And the Japanese people should be very proud that they have citizens like this willing to do that."

Japan, by contrast, was anything but proud. Returning home, the three were met with an onslaught of criticism, berating them for shaming their nation. "Reckless," said Yuriko Koike, the environment minister. "They must consider how many people they caused trouble to because of their action," added Yasuo Fukuda, the Japanese government's spokesman. The government, in fact, is billing the former hostages $6,000 for their airfare home. Their misdeed: ignoring a government travel advisory warning citizens not to travel to Iraq, and putting their personal interests above those of their society.

On its face, the case raises fascinating distinctions between Japanese and U.S. culture. The former sets great store in hierarchy, consensus, and the submission of the individual for the good of the community. The latter admires individuality, entrepreneurial daring, and a deliberate rebellion against conformity.

But this situation is about more than culture. It raises equally interesting questions about courage itself. Often portrayed as an unconditional good, courage can in fact morph into selfishness. What keeps it from doing so are the qualities that distinguish moral courage from its physical counterpart -- the deep-seated moral values that give a principled motivation to the willing endurance of risk.

So the real question for the Japanese hostages is about their motivation. Did they, by exposing themselves in Iraq in ways that led to the hostage-taking, further endanger Japanese troops? Did they make it harder for the Japanese government to maintain its troops in Iraq without facing growing pressures to follow the example of Spain and pull them out? If Japan did face these pressures, was that a good or a bad thing? Were these three hostages, like whistle-blowers, identifying an embarrassing problem that needed exposure? Or were they, like teenage joyriders, thrilling to their own adventures with a reckless disregard for the potential damage to themselves and others?

Most U.S. citizens, I suspect, would join Colin Powell in applauding these hostages in their desire to do good. But there's a sobering reminder here that the expression of courage, physical or moral, can often have side effects. Even at its purest, courage can create new hardships for onlookers, bystanders, and members of the families and communities of the courageous ones. We're accustomed to asking, "Who will my courage benefit?" We need also to ask, "Who might it harm?"