

Never Pay a Ransom

We shouldn't play by ISIS's rules.

By [William Saletan](#) | SLATE



President Obama speaks in response to the beheading of James Foley, at Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, on Aug. 20, 2014. Obama knows the next step is to punish, not pay.

Photo by Nicholas Kamm/AFP/Getty Images

On Tuesday, ISIS released a video of the beheading of American journalist James Foley. Did the United States cause his death?

That's the question many people are asking. According to the *New York Times*, while European governments have ransomed their citizens from ISIS, the United States and Britain have refused. American commandos tried to rescue Foley and other prisoners but failed. Two weeks ago President Obama authorized U.S. airstrikes on ISIS. The militants say they killed Foley to punish us for the strikes. Critics say it didn't have to end this way. We could have been more flexible. We could have saved Foley.

When somebody does something awful to you or to a person you care about, it's natural to react this way. What could you have offered the mugger to keep him from shooting your wife? But that's the wrong way to look at the situation. The most powerful weapon bad people use to control good people isn't knives, guns, or bombs. It's fear. They train you to think about your options within a framework they control: You make the decisions; they impose the consequences.

That's the message of the video in which ISIS murders Foley. (You can read the transcript, without watching the video, on this page provided by the SITE Intelligence Group.) It begins with a clip of Obama announcing the airstrikes on Aug. 7. Then Foley delivers a message prescribed by his captors: "I call on my friends, family, and loved ones to rise up against my real killers, the U.S. government, for what will happen to me is only a result of their ... criminality." Foley says U.S. officials "effectively hit the last nail in my coffin with the recent aerial campaign in Iraq." He tells his brother, a U.S. airman, "When your colleagues dropped that bomb [against ISIS], they signed my death certificate."

In the video, Foley's executioner concludes: "Any attempt by you, Obama, to deny the Muslims their rights of living in safety under the Islamic Caliphate will result in the bloodshed of your people." Then he beheads Foley. The video ends with an ISIS fighter displaying another captured American journalist, Steven Sotloff. The fighter warns, "The life of this American citizen, Obama, depends on your next decision."

We, not ISIS, must be the punishers.

David Rohde, a Reuters columnist and former *New York Times* reporter who was kidnapped in Afghanistan—and escaped after the U.S. refused to ransom him from the Taliban—accepts this framework of enemy-imposed consequences. While blaming ISIS for Foley's death, he writes that the gap between U.S. and European ransom policies "can doom the Americans" held in captivity. The headline over Rohde's column asks: "Did America's policy on ransom contribute to James Foley's killing?" On Wednesday, Foley's brother said of ISIS's hostages, "There's more that can be done. The footprint has been laid by some of the other nations." That sounds like an appeal for European-style flexibility.

James Traub, writing in *Foreign Policy*, argues that Obama "has an obligation to consider the consequences of his decisions." The rationale for bargaining, he notes, is that it's wrong "to place the life of the abductee in a balance with abstract goods, like 'sending a message' that kidnapping doesn't pay." Traub adds that "the consequences of capitulation are remote and hypothetical; the life is terribly real."

But the lives of future hostages, and of the Syrians and Iraqis slain by ISIS every day, are just as real. As *Vox*'s Zack Beauchamp points out, research has shown that kidnapping, like other profit-seeking enterprises, increases in response to payments. Investigative work by *New York Times* reporter Rukmini Callimachi shows that al-Qaida and its affiliates have followed this logic. They've snatched more than 50 foreign citizens in the last five years, and the price for their release has gone up. A decade ago, it was around \$200,000 per hostage. Now the highest

reported payment is \$10 million. For Foley's release, the *New York Times* says ISIS demanded 100 million euros, about \$132 million.

If you pay the ransom, you're not just fueling the kidnap market. As *Slate*'s Josh Keating notes, you're also funding ISIS's war and its atrocities against civilians. Callimachi found that al-Qaida and its affiliates reaped a minimum of \$125 million in ransoms in the last five years, and \$66 million just last year. It's now al-Qaida's main revenue stream. And the demands won't end with money. In addition to Sotloff, ISIS reportedly has at least three more American hostages it's threatening to kill. It also has some Brits. The *New York Times* says ISIS "has sent a laundry list of demands for the release of the foreigners, starting with money but also prisoner swaps." Altogether, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, ISIS and other extremists in Syria have about 20 foreign journalists.

I fear for those reporters. I'm horrified by Foley's death, and I know Sotloff is probably next. But we have to think about the next 20 hostages, and the 20 after that. Every time we ransom a reporter, we put a price tag on the next one. The only way to extinguish the market in kidnapping is to make it worthless. That means refusing to pay. And what about the Iraqi and Syrian civilians ISIS slaughters every day? If we halt our airstrikes to appease ISIS, as the executioner in the video implicitly demands, aren't we sacrificing them for a few Americans?

Ultimately, we have to reverse the psychology of imposed consequences. We, not ISIS, must be the punishers. Obama, like President Bush, understands this. "We will be relentless," he said in response to the video. "When people harm Americans, anywhere, we do what's necessary to see that justice is done."

In the end, Obama insisted, "the world is shaped by people like Jim Foley," not by terrorists. That's true even if Foley, Sotloff, and the other hostages die. ISIS can kill you or me. But people like us—people who, in Obama's words, build rather than destroy—will prevail, as long as we refuse to accept the enemy's rules.