

“Hostage/Crisis Negotiations: Lessons Learned from the Bad, the Mad, and the Sad” by Thomas Strentz, Ph.D.

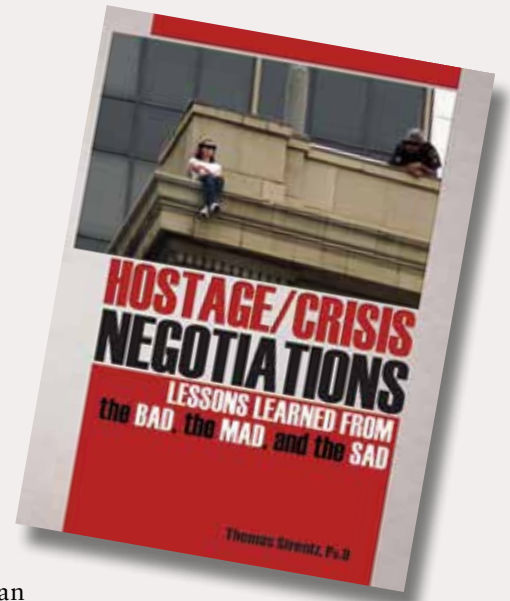
Reviewed by Bob Ragsdale

Anyone who has been involved with crisis negotiations for any period of time will undoubtedly recognize the name Thomas Strentz, Ph.D. Strentz had already achieved a master’s degree in social work when he joined the FBI in 1968, and his advanced degree provided him with valuable insights into psychological disorders. In 1973, as a special agent, he became involved in the new discipline of what was first called hostage negotiations, and from 1975 to 1987 he designed, developed and directed the FBI program at Quantico. He also earned his doctorate at this time after completing his dissertation on hostage survival. Although retired from the FBI, Strentz remains active in hostage/crisis negotiations. His first book, “Psychological Aspects of Crisis Negotiations,” is now out in a revised second edition, and the recently released “Hostage/Crisis Negotiations: Lessons Learned from the Bad, the Mad, and the Sad” is a testament to his 40-plus years in the profession.

This new book is built upon the George Santayana quote, “Those who do not study their history are condemned to repeat it.” Strentz felt a “lessons learned” book about hostage/crisis negotiations was overdue and set out to write one with the intention to save lives. This book works for the same reason that negotiation

conferences always have incident debriefs: not all negotiators will have the same experiences but we can learn from the experiences of others. The best incident debriefs include lessons learned which could be relevant to future crisis negotiations. This is also why the best crisis negotiations instructors weave real world examples and applications of the concepts and techniques into their presentations, so that others may learn from them.

It is only appropriate that the first chapter of this book provides the reader with a brief history of crisis negotiations. For Strentz, it is important that his readers have an understanding of the ways in which crisis negotiations have evolved over time, while never



losing sight of the ultimate goal to preserve human life. The history of negotiations includes the domestic dispute and aircraft hijacking in 1971 which resulted in the federal court decision in *Downs v. United States* that recognized the viability of hostage negotiations as an alternative to force. The New York Police Department is duly credited with developing the first hostage negotiations program in 1973, a program which the FBI adopted and modified to meet its needs. Strentz discusses the process of negotiating, including the effective use of time, the value and the mechanics of active listening, the composition and duties of the modern crisis negotiations team, demands and alternatives to the negative-sounding word “surrender.”

“The Bad, the Mad, and the Sad” in the title refers to the three types of subjects crisis negotiators are most likely to encounter. Strentz describes “The Bad” as the person caught in criminal activity, some of whom suffer from antisocial and/or inadequate personality disorders. “The Mad” categorization “includes those who are severely mentally ill and some motivated by political, social or religious

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delusions or issues. Typically they are insane or psychotic and experiencing hallucinations or delusions.” Finally, a “Sad” subject is one who is contemplating suicide, who, according to the author and HOBAS, “account for the majority of crisis team responses.” Strentz devotes a chapter to each of these personalities and the reader is



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provided with tactics and procedures to assist in dealing with each subject type.

Chapters begin with a psychological perspective to facilitate an understanding and assist negotiators with the development of possible strategies or approaches. Multiple real life situations in the form of incident debriefs are incorporated into each chapter to illustrate negotiations with that specific type of subject. These incident debriefs are a collection of the author’s own experiences and the presentations of other negotiators. Some of the incidents are well-known and factor into the history of hostage/crisis negotiations, such as the Sveriges Kreditbank siege that brought about the term “Stockholm Syndrome,” while others are of a local nature and smaller in scale, but important nonetheless to all involved and readers who can learn from them.



This book is worth reading and adding to your professional library in the pursuit of saving lives.



Many of the incident debriefs have short transcriptions of actual negotiations.

Each incident debrief is followed by a lessons learned section. Some of the common themes running through these sections are intelligence gathering by trained negotiators, the value of active listening skills, the effective use of time, understanding the reaction to stress and crisis, compartmentalizing and dealing with one issue at a time and using the power of the team as a “think tank” to resolve the situation. Other lessons learned are unique to that particular incident.

I particularly enjoyed the passages in which the author interjected his observations and thoughts into the transcription of a negotiation. It was like having a very knowledgeable and experienced secondary or coach by my side. Two new things I found interesting were the author’s comment to those who would misuse the content of the book, and the discussion of possible civil liability incurred today during suicide intervention. In these days of tight training budgets, self-education is important for negotiators. This book is worth reading and adding to your professional library in the pursuit of saving lives. //

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bob Ragsdale is a retired negotiator who served more than 28 years with the Phoenix Police Department. He is the former managing editor of the *Crisis Negotiator*.

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