

“Stalling for Time: My Life as an FBI Hostage Negotiator,” by Gary Noesner

Reviewed by Sid Heal

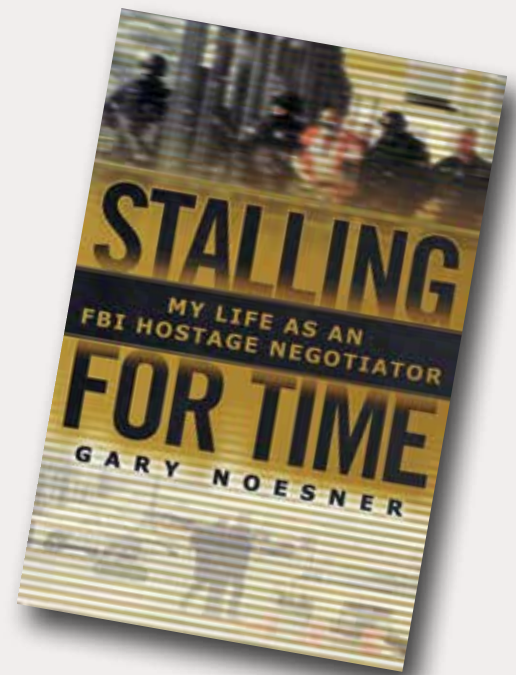
While this book is ostensibly written as an autobiography of the author’s career in the FBI, from a tactician’s perspective, it is far more valuable as a compilation of a lifetime of lessons learned. Interestingly, the opening chapter describes what many negotiators would see as a failure: The author finds himself without viable alternatives, and so the suspect is killed by an FBI sniper to save hostages. The implicit lesson is particularly poignant; the primary purpose of all involved in tactical operations is to save the lives of innocents, even at the expense of the suspect. This is the predominate, albeit implicit, theme throughout the book and really provides a focus for how and why some of the decisions were made.

Many readers will be familiar with incidents described in the book because of their news value at the time, but most will be unaware of the

subtle factors and influences that affected plans and decisions. At a minimum, the identification of some issues to allow compromise and face-saving is often the point where success or failure is determined. Another point the author makes clear is the essential collaboration between tacticians and negotiators so that they support and enhance each other’s efforts rather than hinder them, even accidentally. The book charts a progression of increasingly complex negotiation challenges and the lessons learned from each.

Like his counterparts in all law enforcement agencies, the author began his career with the FBI in less than exciting assignments. Likewise, the author’s calling began simply with a personal interest, followed by study that then led to opportunities to demonstrate the merits of negotiation as a means of peaceful resolution.

Like all new ideas, the negotiation concept at the FBI was most fragile at its inception and suffered setbacks when compared with some early and notable tactical successes. After all, there is no greater obstruction to change than success. Without a critical review, however, it’s impossible to determine if success should be attributed to good tactics or good luck, and some spectacular fiascos served to highlight the dangers of misinterpretation. The



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author resists blaming anyone, and the evolution (and elevation) of negotiations in the FBI is gradually brought to parity with tactical interventions, where it currently stands as an equal in consideration for plans and actions.

I found this book not only to be an easy read but a page-turner that was hard to put down. The writing is clear and concise with no excess verbiage. I did not detect any attempt at massaging the facts to portray anyone in a better or worse light, including the author himself.



This is one book that serves first as a story and second as a reference. It deserves a place on every tactician's bookshelves and in every tactical library.



Being familiar with more than one of the incidents described, it was like listening to radio commentator Paul Harvey's "The Rest of the Story." Factors, influences, events and behaviors that I had always wondered about were presented in context and without elaboration. They helped fill in the blanks of my own understanding.

Many of the subtleties involved had nothing to do with circumstances but rather personalities, politics and perspectives. Noesner does an excellent job in revealing their impact without assigning blame or incrimination. Negotiators and tacticians alike will be quick to recognize their significance,

however, and for the most part, will be impressed with the outcomes.

While the book is written as an autobiography, students of the art and science of tactical operations involving negotiations cannot help but note the complexity of the situations and the myriad of mistakes made and lessons learned. I have but one minor complaint, that there is no index. While I certainly understand the lack of one in an autobiography, it would be nice to have one as a reference to find people, places and events. Regardless, this is one book that serves first as a story and second as a reference. It deserves a place on every tactician's bookshelves and in every tactical library. //

"Stalling for Time: My Life as an FBI Hostage Negotiator," Gary Noesner, Random House, New York, New York, 2010.

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