

Kidnapped Kids Cry Out for Help

By Timothy W. Maier

Insight's investigation of child abductions has initiated widespread concern, but despite plenty of lip service about this issue, the first couple has not taken public leadership.

Hillary Rodman Clinton will be hearing the cry of the children, but not American children, as she heads to London during the second week of May for a seminar on children's rights. At the same time, hundreds of American parents from across the nation will descend on Washington at sunset on May 15 to hold a candlelight vigil for children who remain kidnapped overseas. The vigil is part of a series of events planned for a national conference on international parental child abduction that is scheduled for May 13-15 at the Crystal City Hilton in Arlington, Va., which is just across the Potomac from Washington.

Maureen Dabbagh, whose little daughter Nadia was kidnapped and taken to Syria six years ago and who heads the Virginia-based child advocacy-group PARENTS, is sponsoring the national meeting. She is frustrated by the Clinton snub.

"Many parents wrote letters to Mrs. Clinton to invite her to our conference. But she doesn't respond to American parents and never has," Dabbagh says. Julie Mason in the first-lady's office told Insight that Hillary Clinton cares but had a prior commitment. Indeed, she is off at a children's confab in London while the world's largest international-abduction conference is being held within view of her bedroom windows. "Does she not know there is a problem to be dealt with in the United States?" asks Dabbagh. "Why would she go overseas for answers when the world's largest conference is here with the best of the best?" The gathering will include speakers from the Center for Missing and Exploited Children, the Department of Justice, Child Watch, PARENTS, Committee for Missing Children and most of the best legal and law-enforcement experts on this problem.

President Clinton also could do more, Dabbagh says. He recently demanded the release of three American soldiers kept captive in Yugoslavia. It needed to be done, she adds, but why not also demand release of the some 11,000 kidnapped American children held hostage overseas? In fact critics say that, by doing nothing about the children, Clinton is violating a federal statute: U.S. Code Annotated Title 22. Foreign Relations and Intercourse Chapter 23 -- Protection of Citizens Abroad, most of which originally was codified as the Hostage Act of 1868.

The current law states: "Whenever it is made known to the President that any citizen of the United States has been unjustly deprived of his liberty by or under the authority of any foreign government, it shall be the duty of the President forthwith to demand of that government the reason of such imprisonment; and if it appears to be wrongful and in violation of the rights of American citizenship, the President shall forthwith demand the release of such citizen, and if the release so demanded is unreasonably delayed or refused, the President shall use such means, not amounting to acts of war and not otherwise prohibited by law, as he may think necessary and proper to obtain or effectuate

the release: and all the facts and proceedings relative thereto shall as soon as practical be communicated by the President to Congress."

Not only has the president not taken the public leadership required by law, he has allowed some who did act to be punished for doing so. For instance, Tim Hunter was removed from his post as a U.S. Foreign Service officer in Saudi Arabia after exposing the fact that hundreds of American children were being detained there illegally during his tenure from 1990 to 1995. "The rights of children are a low priority, unless the American citizen is prominent -- which children don't usually happen to be," Hunter tells Insight. "The problem is the mission of the U.S. is projecting strategic and commercial interests, not children's rights. In Teddy Roosevelt's time, he would have sent half the Navy to rescue a single child -- but not today."

Roosevelt indeed invoked the Hostage Act, but Clinton hasn't followed suit for a single American child. The president's inaction has resulted in much anger among parents of abducted children, confirmed by an avalanche of furious letters and e-mail this magazine received after publishing the State Department's official response to Insight's cover story, "Kids Held Hostage" (March 8, 1999). Mary A. Ryan, assistant secretary of state for consular affairs, blasted this magazine for allegedly failing to provide balance by not accurately portraying "the efforts of the Bureau of Consular Affairs Office of Children's Issues to remedy these painful and often intractable problems." Sixteen days later she was rewarded by the Clinton administration by being nominated to the rank of career ambassador, with the confirmation subject to review by any duly constituted committee of the Senate. Senators interested in looking into these matters could call her to discuss her activities under oath -- but to date, none has.

Since Insight's story, however, some child advocates have created Websites such as the Ribbons of Hope Campaign. Others are organizing marches on malls across the nation. Steven Nunnally, who runs the child-advocacy BadTeddy Website, says one of the goals is to have Congress designate May as national missing-children month. Meanwhile, Insight's mail heavily continues to request contact numbers and copies of magazines containing its stories about these issues. Reader's Digest has been inspired to commission a story about the problem, and TV producers are working on a related documentary.

While the initial story triggered more than 1,000 e-mails, letters and telephone calls from parents with similar heartbreaking stories to tell, many of them (and others) felt inclined to write again after Ryan's critical letter was published. Margaret McClain, whose daughter Heidi was kidnapped and taken to Saudi Arabia two years ago, writes:

"I would like to ask Ms. Ryan why my child has not had a welfare-and-whereabouts check since the time she was stolen. We have located my ex-husband through some very simple investigative techniques -- we called directory assistance. That can only mean the U.S. Embassy in Saudi [Arabia] and the State Department are either (a) incompetent and clueless or (b) corrupt. Ms. Ryan's call for more-balanced information is ludicrous. Since when does the truth require more balance? Why should Insight magazine whitewash government incompetence? They are not in the business of covering up incompetence, but in the business of exposing it.

"For Ms. Ryan's information, my senators and my congressmen (Republican and Democrat) feel the same way. In fact, my senator's office called from Washington to tell me that they had just obtained Insight, and Senator Hutchinson was nice enough to send me a copy personally."

Since breaking the story, this magazine has continued to receive reports of abductions of American children even to war-torn countries such as Bosnia and Croatia. Jean Henderson reports that her son Roman was abducted five years ago by her heroin-addicted ex-husband Randell, who has been traveling with the 13-year-old boy through the Middle East, North Africa and Greece. "He told Roman he would kill him if he ever tried to call me again," Henderson says.

A British mother, Allison Lalic, reports that her children Samantha, 7, and Rebecca, 6, were kidnapped to Bosnia by her ex-husband Ramiz in 1996. She says: "Lots of people I speak to are afraid to tell me about my children. I know he told the children that I was dead and they were better off in Bosnia. How can this be? That country just came out of war and is covered with land mines."

Even some current State Department employees contacted Insight to criticize their own agency. "The commitment is not there at the State Department to help the parents or the children," says one insider. "They whitewash such cases and don't address them as human-rights issues."

Meanwhile, the State Department continues to demean distraught parents in written memos, as pointed out in the first Insight story, which Ryan claimed State would not countenance. This magazine since has uncovered more evidence of such misbehavior. In one internal document a State Department officer describes to another how they can help the kidnapper, which in this case was the mother. The father, one Bubba Smith of Texas, had been given legal custody by the court. "Dad's name is Bubba -- that should tell you something," says the State Department employee, who reports offering assistance to the kidnapper mother to help her file abuse charges. "But she has to get an attorney fast," the memo states.

Documents such as this have helped to convince House International Relations Committee Chairman Ben Gilman, a New York Republican, to request a General Accounting Office, or GAO, investigation into how these cases are handled. Insight's investigative report quickly became a matter of great interest to the GAO, according to sources interviewed by the investigators.

And this story isn't likely to end with the GAO report. Several congressmen already are pushing for remedial legislation -- most of it dealing with preventive measures, such as the Mikey Kale Passport Act. Inspired by Nevada mother Barbara Spierer's ordeal when her child was kidnapped by her ex-husband Miaden Kale to Croatia six years ago, this measure would prevent noncustodial parents from obtaining passports allowing travel with children. "I was one of the lucky ones," she says, noting that her boy Mikey, now 12, was returned safely from the war zone after 10 agonizing weeks. "It was the most traumatic thing to ever happen to me."

Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, a Florida Republican, and Rep. James Barcia, a Michigan Democrat, reintroduced their proposed Child Custody Protection Act shortly after

Insight's story appeared. The bill makes it a federal offense to transport a minor across state lines to circumvent parental-consent laws. It passed in the House last year but failed to receive consideration for a vote in the Senate.

Rep. Chris Smith, a New Jersey Republican, is working on a bill that would require the State Department to publicize child-abduction cases by publishing an annual report on those that fall under the Hague Convention. This is an international agreement requiring the return of children illegally removed from the country where they belong.

Some parents also are lobbying Sen. Jesse Helms, a North Carolina Republican, to drop his opposition to the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child. The United States is one of only three countries to fail to ratify the treaty, which parents say might be used to help bring back children from Middle Eastern countries that are not party to the Hague Convention. But Helms says this could lead to a slippery slope encouraging children to sue parents and putting an international authority above the parents in the normal course of family relations. One of the requirements states that parties "shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child."

Dave Thelon, executive director of the Committee for Missing Children, a nonprofit Georgia-based group, suggests Sen. Helms might write U.S. reservations into the ratification, as a number of other countries have done. The treaty then might be another tool for parents of kidnapped children to use, although even Thelon doubts it would be sufficient.

"The only way to bring children back is to put sanctions on offender countries," Thelon says. And that can be done right now, he continues, if the administration will enforce the International Religious Persecution Act, which focuses on the kidnapping and forced religious conversion of minors taken abroad.

In the meantime, parents of American children kidnapped into foreign jurisdictions will be gathering in Washington to call attention to this problem. Thelon worries that Congress will just do the "two-step Potomac shuffle" and temporize. Besides sanctions, he says, the Congress should provide more funding for nonprofit missing-children agencies and shut down the State Department Consular Affairs Office of Children's Issues, which he says most victimized parents regard as an impediment to justice. These parents want U.S. lawmakers to hear the cries of America's kidnapped children.