

British media coverage of “Iran Hostage Crisis”: The naming of Faye Turney

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Global Research, April 06, 2007

New Statesman 6 April 2007

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

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The Iranians may have paraded her on television, but not before the British press and British television had shown us – and them – just how vulnerable she was

In the view of Jill Parkin, writing in the Daily Mail, when the Iranians found that there was a woman among their captured British sailors they probably couldn't believe their luck. "They recognised immediately that a woman in uniform is a much more powerful propaganda weapon than a man," wrote Parkin. "That's why they paraded her on television, forced her to praise their compassion, and got her to write a letter to her parents."

This seems plausible, and depressingly it appears to confirm an assertion in the same paper by a former chief of defence staff that so long as there are women in military uniform, there is always a risk they will be used as propaganda trophies. You have to wonder, though, about the timing.

The 15 Britons were captured on a Friday, but it was not until the following Wednesday that Leading Seaman Faye Turney appeared on our television screens. Why did the Iranians wait? Perhaps they were debating amongst themselves what to do, or interrogating their captives, or waiting for Turney to become so distressed she would say what they wanted. On the other hand, perhaps part of the answer lies in what was happening in Britain in those five days.

When the 15 were seized, the Ministry of Defence decided not to name them or give out any details about them – it did not want, as one official put it, to "hand information to the interrogators". The ministry also asked the families of the captives what they felt, and all said they didn't want publicity. And so, as the diplomatic manoeuvring got under way over that first weekend, the people at the eye of the storm remained unknown to the public.

This could not last. As the MoD knew, every story needs a human face, so the longer the group remained in Iranian hands the more certain it was that the news media would identify them and start writing about them as individuals. That one of them was known to be a woman made the story all the more irresistible.

And so it was that on the Tuesday, the fourth morning after the Britons were seized, the Sun had a scoop. Under the headlines "Let Mummy go" and "Wren kidnapped by Iran has daughter, 3", the paper named Faye Turney and explained that her husband, Adam, was also in the navy and that they had a three-year-old called Molly.

From that moment, Turney was front-page, top-of-the-bulletin news. Pictures of her –

holding little Molly, or sitting with Adam, or on duty, gun in hand – were everywhere, as were the touching interviews she had given to reporters before her capture.

Suddenly this affair had a face, and it was the face of a wholesome young mother who was missing her little daughter. It is surely no coincidence that the temperature of the crisis rose sharply at the same time, at least in the press. “Why is Britain being so craven?” asked Melanie Phillips in the Mail . The case “would fully justify the use of force”, warned the Times .

It was only after this that Turney turned up on Iranian television and her letters, so obviously dictated by her captors – and so poignantly mentioning Adam and Molly – began appearing in print. Was it coincidence that, after hiding their British captives away for five days, the Iranians put one of them on show as soon as she had become a celebrity at home? Or think of it another way: had Turney told the Iranians about Adam and Molly, or did her interrogators learn about them from the British papers and British television?

The responsibility for the fate of these 15 people obviously lies with the Iranian government, and as Jill Parkin argued, it would be naive to imagine that they did not, from the outset, see a female captive as a trophy. But when the time comes to learn lessons from this affair, editors might address the question: did naming Faye Turney make her more vulnerable?

We know too much

We have had a couple of interesting insights lately into how our government operates. First, it emerged that a study putting the Iraqi death toll since 2003 at 655,000 – publicly pooh-poohed by British officials and ministers when it was reported in the Lancet – was in fact regarded as academically sound by the chief scientific adviser at the MoD.

Then we learned that Gordon Brown rejected warnings from officials about the likely impact of his pensions changes in 1997, something the Conservatives are taking as proof that he is responsible for many of the country’s current pension ills.

What these two insights have in common is that we owe them to the Freedom of Information Act. Because we now have a right to know, the government was forced to divulge the relevant documents to the BBC and the Times , respectively. Little wonder, then, that the government is about to alter the act in such a way as to ensure we are not allowed to learn such things in the future.

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