

FIVE HOSTAGES

Families whose children were held captive in Syria felt that U.S. officials had abandoned them. So they secretly joined forces.

BY LAWRENCE WRIGHT

Five American families, each harboring a grave secret, took their seats around a vast dining table at the home of David Bradley, a Washington, D.C., entrepreneur who owns the media company that publishes *The Atlantic*. It was May 13, 2014, and in the garden beyond the French doors, where magnolias and dogwoods were in bloom, a tent had been erected for an event that Bradley's wife, Katherine, was hosting the following evening. The Bradleys' gracious Georgian town house, on Embassy Row, is one of the city's salons: reporters and politicians cross paths at off-the-record dinners with Supreme Court Justices, software billionaires, and heads of state.

Diane and John Foley endured two kidnapping ordeals. Their son Jim, a journalist, was abducted in both Libya and Syria.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CARLA VAN DE PUTTELAAR



The families weren't accustomed to great wealth or influence. Indeed, most of them had never been to Washington before. Until recently, they had not known of one another, or of the unexpected benefactor who had brought them together. They were the parents of five Americans who had been kidnapped in Syria. The Federal Bureau of Investigation had warned the families not to talk publicly about their missing children—and the captors had threatened to kill their hostages if word leaked out—so each family had been going to work and to church month after month and reassuring colleagues and neighbors and relatives that nothing was wrong, only to come home and face new threats and ransom demands. After hiding the truth for so long, the families were heartened to learn that others were going through the same ordeal, and they hoped that by working together they might bring their children home.

Bradley, who is sixty-two, has a priestly presence: meek, soft-spoken, hands clasped in his lap. He is pale and nearly bald, with a ring of vivid white hair. His courtly demeanor disguises considerable ambition and persistence. His publishing company, Atlantic Media, has amassed half a dozen titles, from *National Journal* to *Quartz*. He was drawn into the families' tragedy because he had helped to free hostages once before. In 2011, Clare Gillis, a freelancer who had contributed a few stories to *The Atlantic's* Web site, was captured in Libya, along with two other reporters, by soldiers loyal to the government of Colonel Muammar Qaddafi. (A fourth reporter was killed.) Bradley was surprised to learn that the U.S. government was not involved in negotiating the return of the hostages.

Even though Gillis was not an *Atlantic* employee, Bradley felt an obligation to help her. He assembled a small team, drawn mostly from his staff, to identify people who might locate Gillis. On a whiteboard, Bradley drew several concentric circles. The smallest represented people in charge of the hostages, such as guards and wardens; a wider circle included military officers and junior members of the Qaddafi administration; wider still was the circle of senior Libyan officials, including Qaddafi and his family. The largest circle contained any people Bradley or his staffers could think of who might have a connection to those in the smaller rings. Bradley called this a network-analysis chart. The idea was that someone would know someone who knew someone who could locate Gillis. The team pinpointed about a hundred people to approach. One led to an American woman, Jacqueline Frazier, who had once lived in Tripoli, serving as the personal assistant to one of Qaddafi's sons. Frazier volunteered to return to Libya, and she persuaded her contacts in the government to release the reporters, after forty-four days of captivity. It hadn't been that hard to gain Gillis her freedom. But where would she be had no one tried?

At the dinner in Washington, Bradley urged the families to serve themselves before the main course—chicken pot pie—got cold. When everyone was seated, he suggested going around the table, with each guest telling the others about their missing children.

JIM

One of the reporters who had accompanied Gillis out of the Libyan prison was a thirty-seven-year-old freelancer named James Foley. Bradley had never met Foley, but he received a thank-you note after the release. A second note arrived a couple of weeks later, in which Foley said that he hadn't fully understood how much he owed to Bradley and his team. Bradley was touched that Foley had taken the extra trouble, and presented the second letter to his children as a model of grace. Scarcely a year and a half later, Foley was kidnapped again, in Syria, on Thanksgiving Day, 2012.

Foley's parents, John and Diane, live in a small town in New Hampshire. John practices internal medicine. Diane worked as a nurse practitioner until she quit to focus on obtaining her son's freedom. Three of the five mothers at Bradley's gathering happened to be nurses. Diane had already experienced the journey through gray government offices that the others were about to endure. Her anger and weariness were evident, and some of the parents found her off-putting. But to others her steeliness was inspiring. "She could run General Motors," one of the mothers said. Diane became the group's de-facto leader.

As Diane spoke about her son, she mentioned themes that the others recognized in their own children's stories—courage and idealism chief among them. Jim had been an altar boy in an observant Catholic family, the oldest of five children, growing up in "Norman Rockwell country," as Diane describes it. After graduating from Marquette University, Foley joined Teach for America and spent three years teaching history and social studies and coaching basketball in a run-down Latino neighborhood in Phoenix. For years afterward, he kept in contact with the kids he taught, through e-mail and Facebook.

Foley was tall and striking, with his mother's long face and dark features and his father's jutting Irish chin. Women were drawn

to his wide, gap-toothed smile and welcoming eyes. He struck up conversations effortlessly, even in Syria, despite having rudimentary Arabic. He'd pass out cigarettes, trusting in the good will of strangers, while children trailed after him in the streets. Those who knew him well saw another side to him, however—a vulnerability that left him unable to manage the feelings that war stirred up. He was fiercely opposed to violence but helplessly drawn to conflict.

After Foley was freed in the first kidnapping, his relatives joked about hiding his passport. Most of Foley's work had appeared in GlobalPost, an online news service founded by Philip Balboni. Balboni had offered Foley a desk job in Boston, but after a few months he longed to be back in the field. He returned to Libya in 2011, during the fall of Qaddafi, and the following March he was part of the first wave of Western reporters to enter Syria. The country quickly became a graveyard for correspondents, including Marie Colvin, of the London *Sunday Times*, and Anthony Shadid, of the New York *Times*. But the war was heating up, and the migratory troop of war reporters set up camp on the Turkish border. Clare Gillis arrived, as did many of Foley's colleagues from previous wars.

The friends noticed that Foley had become more introspective. It wasn't enough for him to bear witness to the chaos in Syria—he had to do something. He set up an online fund-raising campaign that brought in ten thousand dollars for a used ambulance needed by a hospital in Aleppo.

When Diane didn't hear from Jim on Thanksgiving, she was worried: he always called on holidays. The next day, the phone did ring. It was Gillis. Diane knew immediately that she wasn't calling to chat.

"I felt shock," Diane recalled to me.

"Anger," John added. "Why do we have to go through this again?"

It wasn't immediately clear how alarmed Foley's friends and family should be. After all, he had survived the previous kidnapping. It had become an anecdote—confirmation of his bravado. But it was disquieting that there had been no word from his captors. Where was the ransom demand?

The Foleys believed that the Syrian government was holding their son, and in January, 2013, they publicly called for his release. Bradley wrote a note to Diane offering to help. Initially, she thought it unnecessary. Philip Balboni had hired Kroll, the investigations and security-consulting firm, and the F.B.I. was also on the case, so the Foleys felt that they were in good hands. By spring, however, their opinion had changed, especially of officials at the bureau.

"They kept telling us to do nothing," Diane said.

"And trust them," John added.

"And telling us that our kid is their highest priority. Which we didn't believe."

In April, 2013, Diane asked Bradley if he could put together another team.

Bradley enlisted his general counsel and chief of staff, Aretae Wyler, along with a few others in his office. He also contacted Wendy Kopp, the head of Teach for America, requesting volunteers. This new team, now numbering more than a dozen people, began creating another network-analysis chart.

"Not love. Targeted advertising."

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The F.B.I. and Kroll shared the Foleys' view that Jim had been taken by the regime. It seemed logical: Shiite gangs affiliated with Bashar al-Assad, Syria's President, had kidnapped other reporters. (Some of them remain missing.) Sources claimed that Syrian Air Force Intelligence was holding Westerners in a Damascus prison. That seemed better than the alternative. Syria was in tumult, and more than a thousand armed groups roamed the shattered country. Assad's regime was brutal, but at least it was a government, with interests and alliances that could facilitate a deal. U.S. law forbids paying ransoms to terrorists.

Bradley's team sought out diplomats and journalists who had fixers in the region. They were looking for members of Assad's inner circle. Some Syrians living in exile had maintained ties to influential figures, and these élites would have been educated in American schools. Bradley's team also approached Russian supporters of Assad. But the sources consistently reported that the regime did not have Foley. Bradley recalled, "By summertime, I was of the view that, if this was my child, I'd be looking in the north." That was ISIS territory now—a long way from Norman Rockwell country.

THEO

"Who is this man?" Nancy Curtis had asked upon being told to get in touch with David Bradley. "Why does he want to help us?" Skeptical by nature, she wasn't used to asking for favors. A museum administrator, Curtis lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She is the picture of a New England intellectual: wry and doughty, her white hair chopped into an unruly pageboy. But by the time she attended the dinner her suspicions about Bradley had faded. It was comforting to be among people with the same secret. As Curtis learned about the other children, however, she was distressed to realize that the hostages themselves also carried secrets—ones that could get them killed. That was certainly true of her son.

Peter Theophilus Padnos had a doctorate in comparative literature from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and he spoke French, German, and Russian. He had been working as a bicycle mechanic in 2004, when he abruptly decided to move to Yemen and study Arabic. It was a year into the second Iraq War, and Americans were intensely unpopular in the region. Padnos had a little nest egg from the sale of his first book, about teaching poetry to prisoners, called "My Life Had Stood a Loaded Gun." The title came from an Emily Dickinson poem. That was Theo: erudite but interested in criminals and other outliers,

always drawn to extremity.

Yemen fascinated him. He'd never lived in a society where everybody believed in God. He studied at one of the world's most radical mosques, Dar al-Hadith, where Al Qaeda members had reportedly trained. He wrote a memoir about his experiences, "Undercover Muslim." It wasn't hostile, but it was unsparing in its account of the dead-end lives of the students and the propaganda of the imams. At the mosque, Padnos had declared allegiance to Islam in front of witnesses, and so his book seemed tantamount to apostasy—a mortal sin to radical Islamists.

Padnos formally changed his name to Theo Curtis, in order to continue travelling in Muslim countries, but he never bothered to change certain revealing personal details, such as his Facebook page. In the conspiratorial circles that Padnos often passed through, he had the profile of a spy, if not a very careful one.

In October, 2012, he travelled to Antakya, a Turkish border town that served as the informal headquarters of the press corps covering the Syrian conflict. The city had long been a tourist stop for Christian pilgrims. Now it was overrun with refugees, spies, and jihadis. To the east, across a mountain range, was Syria, where a hundred thousand people had already perished.

About fifty journalists were covering Syria at the time; the battle for Aleppo was under way and the war seemed to be nearing resolution. The wire services were still there, and occasionally the networks sent in a team, but most of the journalists were freelancers. They drank in the same bars and slept on one another's couches and sat in the same cafés in the morning, hiring fixers and making plans for their next trip across the border. They had little money and no security, but they were writing history. Islam was at war with itself, the map of the Middle East was being redrawn, and the freelancers had the story largely to themselves.

Padnos was forty-four, a decade or two older than most of his colleagues. He spent a few days at a ten-dollar-a-night hotel, then rented an apartment with a Tunisian fishmonger. Padnos soon met three young men who claimed to be providing supplies to the Free Syrian Army. At the time, reporters still regularly crossed into Syria: Foley wasn't kidnapped until a month later. The three men and Padnos went to the border and squeezed through a hole in a barbed-wire fence. Padnos hadn't told anyone where he was going. Few people even knew that Padnos had been in Antakya.

Nancy Curtis was puzzled when her son stopped writing. He was helping her buy a woodstove for a vacation home that she owned in Vermont, and they had been communicating daily. After three days, she finally got an e-mail. The subject line said, "Hey." There was no message.

Curtis called her cousin Viva Hardigg. "Something calamitous has happened," Curtis said. Hardigg enlisted two other cousins: Amy Rosen, who was the chairman of the board of the KIPP charter schools in Newark; and Betsy Sullivan, an editor at the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*. Rosen had served on Amtrak's board of directors and knew her way around Washington; Sullivan brought the experience of having been detained by the Bosnian Serb Army while reporting on that conflict. Curtis, Hardigg, Sullivan, and Rosen became known as the All-Girl Team.

Curtis contacted the International Committee of the Red Cross, which often visited prisons. She was hopeful that her son was being held by the Syrian government. The woman she talked to had no information about that, but shared some news. "I shouldn't be telling you this," she said. "But there's another family in New England you ought to call." She gave her Diane Foley's number.

At the time, U.S. government policy was to keep information about hostages strictly secret, for privacy reasons; and yet Diane and Nancy were immensely relieved to learn of another family searching for a son in Syria. They traded information about avenues they had explored and people they had approached—N.G.O. workers, State Department officials, F.B.I. agents—and they rebuked themselves for not having set up emergency contacts for their sons, and for not getting their digital passwords. As each learned more about the other's son, they saw how much the men had in common. What good friends they'll be when this is all over, they often said.

One night in May, 2013, Amy Rosen was invited to a dinner that was part of *The Atlantic's* Ideas festival in New York. She intended just to drop by for a drink, but she stuck around when she realized that she was seated next to David Bradley. Rosen had met him socially before. She confided in him about Padnos and the failure of the All-Girl Team to find him. Bradley described his theory of concentric circles, but admitted that his team hadn't located Foley. They decided to combine efforts.

The first break in the kidnappings occurred on July 29, 2013, when an American photojournalist, Matt Schrier, escaped from his cell in Syria, after seven months of captivity, and crossed into Turkey. He told C. J. Chivers, of the *Times*, that in January he had been placed in a cell with another American, who was filthy and had a ragged beard. The American said that his captors had accused him of working for the C.I.A. For months, the men were tortured—sometimes by a twelve-year-old who beat them and shocked them with Tasers. They were forced to make videotaped confessions, wearing orange jumpsuits that mimicked the prisoner uniforms worn at the U.S. internment camp in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

Schrier recalled that he and his cellmate had gouged a hole in the wire mesh on one window. Schrier said that he was able to squeeze through, but his cellmate was larger and couldn't break free. Although the *Times* didn't name the other American, Nancy received a call from officials at the State Department two days after Schrier's escape. We have proof of life on Theo, they said.

STEVEN

Shirley Sotloff felt that she was in a movie, watching people act out roles. Even the Bradleys' beautiful home, with servers carrying silver trays, resembled a set. And it didn't seem real when David Bradley said that Secretary of State John Kerry had been at this same table the previous week, and the King of Jordan before that.

Her husband, Art, observed the furnishings in the Bradleys' house with an appreciative professional eye. His business was organizing home shows—exhibitions offering furnishing ideas. He noticed the hand-carved dining set, the chandelier with

actual candles, the pale-yellow fabric covering the dining-room walls.

The five hostages, from left: Kayla Mueller, Steven Sotloff, Peter Kassig, James Foley, and Theo Padnos.

COURTESY FAMILIES (MUELLER, SOTLOFF, KASSIG); STEVEN SENNE / AP (FOLEY); THOMAS PRITZKAT (PADNOS)



The Sotloffs, who were from Pinecrest, Florida, a Miami suburb, brought with them Barak Barfi, a researcher for the New America Foundation. He was the best friend of their son, Steven, a journalist who had been held in Syria for nine months. Barfi, brilliant and assertive, was controversial among the families. He clearly felt that he should lead the group, since he spoke fluent Arabic and was by far the most knowledgeable among them about the Middle East. On August 4, 2013, it was Barfi who notified Art that Steven was missing. Art didn't tell Shirley. He didn't want to worry her in case Steven suddenly showed up, but after four days Shirley suspected something. Art poured himself a Scotch and gave her the news.

Steven had lived in the Middle East for many years, but hadn't done much to disguise that he was Jewish; it could be discovered by a Google search or a look at his Facebook page. In 2005, Steven entered the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, an Israeli college, where he played rugby and joined the debate society. He also took Israeli citizenship. He wanted to become a reporter, and wrote to Barfi, then a producer for ABC News affiliates, asking for advice about studying Arabic abroad. Barfi, who was ten years older than Steven, became his mentor. "He was a young, chubby kid," Barfi recalled. "I told him, 'You can go to Egypt, which has a good teaching infrastructure, but you'll be overexposed to Western influences. You could go to Syria, where you won't be so exposed to the West but will be pursued by security people all the time. The best place is Yemen. There are no Westerners, the state is weak, and you'll be pretty much left alone.'" Steven took his counsel. In Sanaa, he posed as a Chechen-American from a secular Muslim family. "I 'converted' in my first week, so I wouldn't have to deal with all that rubbish," he wrote to a friend. "LOL."

The Arab Spring began in 2010, and aspiring journalists like Sotloff swarmed into the region. Soon he was freelancing for the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Foreign Policy*, and *Time*. He was in Tahrir Square the day President Hosni Mubarak stepped down, in 2011, and in Libya the following year, where he first met Jim Foley. For *Time* he provided crucial coverage of the attack on the U.S. compound in Benghazi, where four Americans were killed, including the Ambassador. He wrote about the flow of arms from Libya to Syria, and in December of that year he reported from Aleppo. During that period, when American foreign policy depended on information arising from these zones of conflict, Sotloff never made enough money to have to file a tax return.

The journalists in Antakya maintained a secret Facebook site that functioned as a message board for reporters and aid workers planning to enter Syria. The Turkish airports and train stations were filling up with foreign fighters who were flocking to the conflict—"beirdos," Jim Foley called them. No one knew what to make of this new element.

Some members of the site began speculating that spotters on the border were selling information about reporters to Islamists. In December, 2012, criminals associated with the Free Syrian Army abducted Richard Engel, an NBC correspondent, and five members of his crew. Two aid workers, an Italian and a British man, were taken in March, 2013; a Danish photographer in May; four French journalists and a German tourist in June. About seventy Syrian reporters had been killed in 2012 and 2013. Because the media observed a blackout on abductions, more reporters kept arriving, not fully aware of the dangers they faced.

Many journalists who were in Antakya at the time speak of having maintained a willful ignorance, even as the risks became obvious. They talked among themselves about the dangers but kept crossing the border, sustained by the adventure, the significance of the story, and the exhilaration of survival. "It's easy to feel invincible, even with death all around," Sotloff wrote to Janine di Giovanni, the Middle East editor for *Newsweek*. "It's like, This is my movie, sucker—I'm not gonna die."

PETER

David Bradley burst out laughing when Paula and Ed Kassig showed up for dinner that night. Earlier, when Bradley issued the invitation, Ed had nervously asked if there was a dress code. "Black tie, of course," Bradley had said. Ed arrived in a short-sleeved tattersall shirt with a black tie that he'd cadged from the concierge at the hotel. It became a running joke between them.

At the dinner, Ed and Paula tried to sort out who was who. Some of the other families had brought along an adviser. Barfi, who came with the Sotloffs, had been folded into Bradley's team, as had Jim Foley's former girlfriend, April Goble, who runs the KIPP schools in Chicago. Several members of Bradley's staff were also present. "But you knew the other parents right away," Ed says.

Paula and Ed live in Indianapolis. She's a public-health nurse; he teaches high-school biology. He was in the classroom on October 1, 2013, when his phone began vibrating. His flip phone was so old that his pitying students could scarcely recognize it. Sometimes, when he left it sitting on his desk, he returned to find coins left beside it.

Ed's phone indicated that he'd received an international call. He assumed that it was his son, Peter, who was doing humanitarian work in Turkey, and sometimes crossing into Syria. "I figured, Well, he'll call back if it's a big deal," he recalls. The school day ended and Ed went outside, where buses were loading. "So it's all this noise of the buses and kids leaving. And the phone rings again. I pick it up—it's not Peter." It was a friend of Peter's. He was trying to explain something, but Ed couldn't hear clearly, because of the racket. It was homecoming weekend, and as Ed moved to a quieter spot a marching band burst through the doors. Ed couldn't break away; the drum line seemed to be deliberately trailing him. The one word that registered through the din was "detained."

Unlike the other families, Ed and Paula received a message from ISIS right away. "It was almost cordial," Paula recalled: "We have your son. We are treating him as a guest." A second, more ominous, note followed. "You say he is an aid worker. We know that all Westerners who say they are E.M.T.s or aid workers are just spies and just sent over as part of the war between the West and the East." The captors asked for a hundred million, but didn't specify dollars or euros. They also demanded the release of all Muslim prisoners worldwide. "Like that was something we were going to be able to do," Paula said.

ISIS warned that Peter would be killed if word of the kidnapping leaked out, so the Kassigs bore the additional weight of having their friends guess what might be going on. People were always asking about Peter's welfare. "I hope he's not in Syria!" people said, and Ed responded, "Don't worry, he's not." He was playing with words: technically, he figured, Peter was in the Islamic State.

Like Theo Padnos and Steven Sotloff, Peter Kassig also had something to hide. He had served in Iraq in the Army Rangers. He left with an honorable medical discharge after only four months at war, and friends weren't sure what had happened. He returned to Indianapolis and trained to be an emergency medical technician, then studied political science at Butler University, but he was restless and looking for direction. He got married, but the union quickly dissolved. Kassig was a "driven soul," his parents acknowledge. During his senior year, he told Ed and Paula that he was spending spring break camping in the Smoky Mountains. A week later, he called them from Beirut, where he was working in a refugee camp, watching people die in front of him. In a few hours, his flight was scheduled to leave, but he couldn't abandon them. He said that he now knew what he was going to do with the rest of his life.

A CNN reporter later filmed him in a hospital bandaging wounded Syrian refugees. He still wore his hair in a military-style buzz cut, and his arms were covered with tattoos. "This is what I was put here to do," he told the reporter. "I guess I am just a hopeless romantic, and I am an idealist, and I believe in hopeless causes."

In 2012, Kassig established his own N.G.O., called Special Emergency Response and Assistance. His goal was to provide food and blankets and medical supplies where they were most needed. He enlisted Ed and Paula to raise money at their Methodist church. In Turkey, he taught emergency care to reporters and photographers on the border. One of his friends coined a verb, "to Kassig," which meant "to selflessly put oneself in harm's way in order to help others in need, all the while looking suave and sexy."

Kassig had been friends with Steven Sotloff, and joined the effort to find him. "We have to be ruthlessly efficient and professional in securing information and his eventual safe release," he wrote to a friend. "Someone we know knows where Steven is and who has him. This can go 1 of 2 ways, either we do right and get our beloved friend back, or this goes south and he gets hurt or worse." But two months passed without any significant leads.

"Guess what face I'm making now."

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Shortly before Kassig was abducted, he admitted in a call to his parents that he was "a little more worried about this trip." He had promised to deliver medical supplies to Deir ez-Zor, the largest city in eastern Syria, where his medical expertise was desperately needed. The city once had about five hundred doctors; now there were only five. Factions and allegiances were shifting, Peter told his parents. Ed and Paula didn't know exactly what he meant, but it sounded dangerous.

Soon after Kassig entered Syria, he called a co-worker. He said that he'd been stopped at a roadblock and told to report to an ISIS commander. If you don't hear from me in several hours, Kassig said, institute the emergency protocol. That was when Ed got the call.

Later, a European hostage who had been held with Steven told Ed and Paula about the day Peter was put in their cell. "Steve!" Peter cried. "I finally found you!"

KAYLA

Carl Mueller was working in his body shop, in Prescott, Arizona, when he got a call from a man he'd never met, Barak Barfi, who said that he knew about the abduction of his daughter, Kayla. Carl froze. He and his wife, Marsha, had stopped seeing friends because people always asked about Kayla, and they didn't want to lie.

Kayla was well known and admired in town. In high school, she received a Presidential medal for public service, and she won a five-hundred-dollar prize for her local philanthropic efforts. She gave the money to charity. At Northern Arizona University, she founded a branch of Amnesty International and a service organization for veterans while also working for peace groups and teaching anger management in the county jail. Despite all this activity, she graduated in two years, impatient to get out into the world.

In India, she worked with orphans; in Tibet, she taught English to refugees. Kayla had grown up a Baptist, but she was fascinated by different religions. She was devoted to the teachings of the Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, and for a time considered becoming a nun in his Buddhist community in France. But Kayla was an activist by nature. In Israel, she worked with African refugees, and in Palestine she stood outside houses scheduled to be bulldozed by the Israeli military. "Let me live on both sides of the wall before I act," she wrote in her diary. In the fall of 2010, she came home, suffering from typhoid and parasites, and recuperated for a year while volunteering at an AIDS clinic—which she took over—and working at a women's shelter at night. She hoped to join the Peace Corps; she had been told that if she became fluent in French she would be sent to Africa, so she took a job as an au pair in France. Before she left, she cut off her ponytail to donate it to Locks of Love, which provides hairpieces for children with cancer. She made Marsha promise to send it.

Given the scale of suffering in Syria, it wasn't surprising that Kayla was drawn there. She was abducted the same day as Sotloff, just before her twenty-fifth birthday.

Kayla had been missing for a few months when Barfi called Carl to say that a wealthy man in Washington, D.C., wanted to help the Muellers and others in the same situation. Carl and Marsha had been dreading that the news of Kayla's abduction would get out and the kidnappers would follow through on their threat. Now somebody knew. What kind of name was Barak Barfi? Was he one of the terrorists? Carl went behind his shop, knelt down, and prayed.

Of all the families, the Muellers were the most isolated. Even at the Bradleys' home, Carl and Marsha were anxious. The F.B.I.

had assured them that Kayla would probably be safe, because she was a woman. Was it wise to get her case mixed up with others?

Marsha quickly felt a sense of solidarity with the other mothers, but Carl remained mistrustful. Bradley seemed like something out of a comic-book fantasy: a person with vast resources who could summon powerful people at will. And, given that Bradley was the publisher of *The Atlantic*, he wondered: Was this just an elaborate way of getting a story?

Less than a month before the dinner, four French journalists had been released by ISIS, apparently ransomed by the French government, along with five members of Doctors Without Borders. One of the journalists told Carl that Kayla had been held in another cell at the prison, and that he'd often heard her speaking French to one of the Doctors Without Borders prisoners. But in recent months Kayla had been in solitary. Sometimes the men were able to leave notes for her in the toilet. The day the French journalists were freed, the guards brought Kayla to them, so they could confirm that she was alive. She gave the journalists a letter to take to her parents, which Marsha read aloud at the dinner table.

"Everyone, if you are receiving this letter it means I am still detained," the letter begins. It was written in tiny script on paper ripped out of a spiral notebook, and full of abbreviations. "Please know that I am in a safe location, completely unharmed + healthy (put on weight in fact); I have been treated w/the utmost respect + kindness." She had wanted to write "a well thought out letter" but had been given the opportunity only at the last minute. "Just the thought of you all sends me into a fit of tears," she wrote. "If you could say I have 'suffered' at all throughout this whole experience it is only in knowing how much suffering I have put you all through; I will never ask you to forgive me as I do not deserve forgiveness."

Kayla listed some things she thought of with special fondness: her little niece, her first family camping trip. She fantasized about how much she'd love the reunion at the airport when they finally met again. The letter ended forcefully: "I DO NOT want the negotiations for my release to be your duty, if there is any other option take it. All my everything, Kayla."

The other parents were moved by Kayla's letter and by the picture Carl painted of their daughter, who seemed like a cross between a bare-footed sprite and a Buddhist saint. He called her Special K. Of course, all the hostages were remarkable people, and their finest qualities had led them to Syria. "If anything bound us together, it was our children, and their courage and compassion," John Foley recalled.

Earlier, Philip Balboni, the GlobalPost founder, had asked how many parents wanted the U.S. military to attempt a rescue. Not a single hand went up. It seemed too dangerous. Now Bradley suggested that the families consider publicizing the kidnappings. The Foleys agreed with Bradley that going to the media might put pressure on the U.S. government and, possibly, the hostage-takers. The Sotloffs were willing to consider this, but the Kassigs were so opposed that the idea was tabled. How could you know if ISIS was bluffing with its threat to kill the hostages?

The families tried to select one member of the team to deal with ransom demands collectively. But who could be trusted with the lives of their children? Barfi desperately wanted this responsibility, but some parents were wary. He was aggressive, and perhaps he was too heartbroken by Sotloff's abduction to think clearly. The Kassigs had brought along an adviser—Peter's partner in his N.G.O.—and they proposed him instead. A power struggle among the family advocates followed, which resulted in no one being chosen for the role. "Either I should have been more restrained or I should have gotten on top of the table and said, 'Your kids are in dire danger,'" Barfi recalls. "They decided to go with unanimity. I said, 'That's like the Arab League—you'll never get anything done. You need a leader.'"

The families signed a statement authorizing Bradley to receive updates about the hostages from the F.B.I. and other government agencies. The families left the dinner feeling hopeful and relieved: Bradley was a powerful champion, and they now had one another. Art Sotloff impulsively hugged Bradley, who recoiled slightly. He has a formal manner, and the families quickly concluded that he doesn't like to be touched.

Before everyone left, Bradley expressed the hope that they would soon meet again—with their children, in the same lovely room.

AT THE WHITE HOUSE

The next afternoon, the families met in the West Wing with Lisa Monaco, the homeland-security adviser to President Barack Obama, and members of the National Security Council. The families had written a letter to Obama. Calling themselves Parents of American Hostages in Syria, they asked Obama to give them a clear idea of what could be done. ISIS seemed to be proceeding in an orderly manner in releasing European hostages, first the Spanish and then the French; an Italian journalist was freed several days after the White House meeting. The released Europeans spoke of enduring torture and starvation. They heard frequent gunfire—presumably, the sound of Syrian and Iraqi prisoners being executed. Some of the Westerners were more abused than others, but the treatment was always capricious and sadistic. These accounts dismayed the families, yet they also were fortified by the knowledge they had gained from the Europeans, many of whom had spoken to Barfi or to family members.

Art and Shirley Sotloff, with their daughter, Lauren. The Sotloffs considered raising a ransom to save their son, Steven, even though U.S. officials threatened them with prosecution.

"This is a moment of opportunity," the group letter said. "We have knowledge of the groups that are holding our children; we have knowledge of their location and the motives of their captors; we have examples of successful releases facilitated by foreign governments." At the meeting, the families asked that Obama appoint someone to coordinate among the White House, the F.B.I., and the State Department, providing the timely information they needed to make life-and-death decisions.

Officials at the White House meeting expressed sympathy and concern, but were vague about what the government might do to help. And on the subject of ransoms the officials were blunt. On this and two other occasions, Colonel Mark Mitchell, the director of counterterrorism at the National Security Council, warned the families that they risked prosecution if they paid

terrorists or tried to persuade an allied power to do so. "I'd rather be in prison myself and have Jimmy home," John Foley said afterward. Nancy Curtis shrugged it off: "I'm seventy-six years old. Let them put me in jail."

The fact that the European hostages were safely home underscored the ineffectiveness of American policy. Didier François, a released hostage, told me that, although French officials publicly deny paying ransoms, "they do negotiate, because every French citizen taken is an attack on French sovereignty." François added, "It doesn't mean we surrender to all the demands of the captors. It doesn't mean we change our foreign policy." Last year, the German magazine *Focus* reported that the French government paid ransoms totalling eighteen million euros for the four journalists. François called this "ridiculous." He explained that captors always start high, but skillful diplomacy can moderate their demands. He added, "As long as it doesn't change the situation on the ground, why should we *not* get our people out?"



The U.S. government's position is that the Europeans imperil everybody by paying off terrorists. In a 2012 speech, David Cohen, then the under-secretary for terrorism and financial intelligence at the Treasury Department, said, "Ransom payments lead to future kidnappings, and future kidnappings lead to additional ransom payments. It all builds the capacity of terrorist organizations to conduct attacks." The U.S. government estimates that, between 2008 and 2014, radical Islamist groups collected more than two hundred million dollars in ransom payments, which allowed those groups to spread. ISIS might not exist in its present rampant form without the funds that kidnapping provided.

The families had mixed feelings about ransoms. The Foleys were already seeking pledges (and eventually obtained nearly a million dollars' worth). The Kassigs stayed up late worrying over the morality of giving money to a terrorist group—yet their only child's life was at stake, and ISIS was already rich. "If we had been able to come up with any ransom, it would have been much smaller than what they were getting daily from the oil fields," Paula observed. Carl Mueller felt that the government was putting its precious policy ahead of their daughter's life; Marsha, however, didn't want ISIS to receive another cent, and didn't think that Kayla would, either. The Sotloffs were considering a ransom. Barfi privately thought the practice misguided. "You're funding terrorism," Barfi told me. "What happens if ISIS uses the money to fund an attack?"

This was the logic behind U.S. policy, and yet the government has paid ransoms to criminal organizations, such as drug cartels. Every Federal Reserve branch in the U.S. maintains a stash of bills to be used to pay ransoms. Corporations routinely take out ransom insurance for employees stationed abroad, and the F.B.I. even facilitates such payments. It's only when the kidnappers are part of an acknowledged terrorist group that payments become illegal.

Hovering silently over this wrenching discussion was the fact of Bradley's fortune. He was already bankrolling the team that was trying to free the hostages; he was absorbing the families' travel expenses; he was flying to foreign destinations himself. His generosity was without question but not, apparently, without limits. Prudent and conservative by temperament, he had forbidden his staff to discuss ransoms. Carl Mueller hinted that he was willing to sell his house, but Bradley didn't bite. The risk of prosecution that made Bradley wary of ransoms posed an obstacle to other potential donors as well. And there was an additional complication: if Bradley was known to be involved, the ransom demands would inevitably increase.

Art Sotloff was incensed by the repeated threats of prosecution. He and Shirley had received the same outlandish ransom demand as the Foleys and the Kassigs—a hundred million euros. The U.S. government could refuse to help them, but why should it stand in their way? At one government meeting, Art excused himself to go to the men's room, and an F.B.I. agent escorted him down the hall. The agent confided that no American had ever been prosecuted for paying a ransom. The families were confounded by the mixed message: if the government actually did prosecute them, wouldn't these very agents have to testify against them?

In any case, because of international sanctions, it was exceedingly difficult to send money to Syria, much less millions of dollars. In September, 2013, Nancy Curtis had tried to wire eight thousand dollars to a fixer in Aleppo, who had heard a rumor that an American hostage had been condemned to death by a Sharia court. The source was willing to investigate further, but wanted payment. Curtis tried to use Western Union to send the money to an intermediary in Beirut, but, when she had to describe the purpose of the transfer, she was refused. The All-Girl Team then divided the sum among themselves. Viva Hardigg, Curtis's cousin, took her children to the bank, and while the kids begged for lollipops the teller put the wire transfer through.

The fixer reported hearing that the American hostage had been killed. The All-Girl Team decided not to tell Nancy Curtis. Several months later, Curtis received a Skype call from someone who claimed to be in touch with Padnos's kidnappers. The intermediary asked for proof-of-life questions that only Padnos could answer. Curtis and the All-Girl Team came up with such questions as "Where is your car?" (In the barn.) The correct answers came back the following day. Padnos was alive.

The intermediary was apparently able to relay messages from Padnos. One of them was "Sorry, Mom, I should have listened to you."

Curtis had previously dealt with intermediaries, and their demands had ranged between three and five million euros. Those conversations never went anywhere. Were the intermediaries really in contact with her son? All the families had to contend with scammers who claimed to represent the hostage-takers. The Kassigs were approached by somebody they called Bitcoin Man, who described in detail how to transmit money through the Internet. Curtis had already calculated that she could raise two hundred thousand dollars in cash, and perhaps twice that, if she sold her vacation house in Vermont. But if she had to sell her house in Cambridge, too, how would she live? Would there be anything left for her daughter and her family? Was it right to throw everything she had into a murky deal with terrorists?

Another intermediary demanded fifteen million euros to release Padnos—triple what had been originally proposed but a fraction of what was being asked for Foley, Sotloff, and Kassig. The price for Kayla Mueller was five million euros. On the advice of the F.B.I., Curtis countered with fifty thousand dollars. The idea was to get the captors to think realistically about what the family could pay.

On May 31, 2014, while this negotiation was under way, the U.S. suddenly exchanged five Taliban leaders held in Guantánamo

for a sergeant in the U.S. Army, Bowe Bergdahl. President Obama justified the swap by noting that military prisoners are routinely traded at the end of a conflict. Evidently, he believed that American involvement in Afghanistan had reached such a point. Some of the families felt deceived—they'd just been told that ransoms and prisoner exchanges were out of bounds. They were also alarmed by the public furor that followed the Bergdahl swap. It seemed certain to make the captors more intransigent and the U.S. government even less willing to act on the families' behalf.

Fortunately, the parents still had Bradley's team on their side. But none of them realized how little time they had left.

THE TITAN

David Bradley grew up as a Christian Scientist, believing that God created man as a perfect being. Disease, death, pain, and evil were imaginary afflictions that could be prayed away. Although Bradley doesn't see himself as especially religious now, many tenets of the faith have left their mark on him. "I remain deeply sympathetic to Christian Science, but, as to evil, I've changed my mind," he says. "There is evil in the world."

"The gluten's back. And it's pissed."

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Katherine Bradley says that her husband has "a fundamental quality of faithfulness, which is not the same thing as faith." Most of the Bradleys' charities concentrate on education and poverty in the U.S. Her husband doesn't seek out additional projects, she says, but when a need arises he has a hard time turning away. She shared a story from the Philippines, where Bradley went on a Fulbright scholarship, in 1977. Ferdinand Marcos then ruled the country. Bradley, who had just received an M.B.A. from Harvard, was studying whether multinational corporations prefer to operate under authoritarian

governments. (They do.) He subsequently set up a child-protection unit at a Manila hospital. Every year, he returns to the city to visit the matriarch he stayed with as a student; she is now a hundred and three. "The Philippines just came into his life," Katherine says. "He attached and never let go."

Growing up in Bethesda, Maryland, just outside Washington, D.C., Bradley developed a longing for power. At thirteen, he imagined becoming the Republican junior senator from Maryland by the age of thirty. When he was twenty, he worked as an intern in the Nixon White House, just as Watergate was unfolding. He then enrolled at Georgetown law school. Deciding that he needed an income to support a political career, he took a year off to start a policy-research firm, the Advisory Board Company, then spun off a division of it, the Corporate Executive Board. Most of his business was in health-care consulting. His office was in the living room of his mother's apartment in the Watergate complex. Twenty years later, he took one of the businesses public; two years after that, he sold the second. These deals made him about three hundred million dollars richer. He now owns one of the buildings in the Watergate complex.

By the time Bradley made his fortune, he had reluctantly abandoned his political dreams. He was not someone who could turn heads while entering a room. His elaborately deferential manner can make him seem aloof or strange, even enigmatic. He speaks in a near whisper, the result of nerve damage to his vocal chords. Although he desires power, he cherishes humility. Such qualities are ill-suited for a political life, and his shortcomings became especially apparent when he compared himself to his next-door neighbor on Embassy Row—an attractive young senator who seemed to be the embodiment of the man Bradley had sought to be. But eventually the life of that senator, John Edwards, took a wrong turn, and the house next door now serves as the Hungarian Embassy. Bradley's search for influence has found other outlets: in wealth, media, and philanthropy. He now considers himself a political independent.

In directing the families' efforts, Bradley was in some respects usurping the role of several federal agencies, and yet the families had largely lost faith in their government. The State Department appointed Carrie Greene, in the Office of Overseas Citizens Services, to be a liaison with the families. She seemed impatient with their independent investigations. "You really shouldn't be talking to these terrorists," she warned. "It's against the law." Viva Hardigg responded, "Excuse me, Carrie, but we are well acquainted with U.S. laws, and if someone you love is being held by terrorists, with whom else should you talk?" Greene ended her e-mails with "Please enjoy your day!"

When Peter Kassig was kidnapped, his parents got a call from a State Department official. Paula recalls, "She basically said, 'We know your son has been taken in Syria. We don't have an embassy in Syria. We don't have people on the ground in Syria. We don't have a diplomatic relationship with them, so we can't do anything to help you.'" In May, 2014, the families had a joint meeting with Daniel Rubinstein, a special envoy appointed to handle affairs in Syria. "He was nice, but when we asked how to contact him we were told not to e-mail or phone him," Diane Foley says. In order to talk with him on the phone, the families had to travel to a local F.B.I. office, so an agent could dial Rubinstein's number for them. When the Foleys drove to the Boston office for this purpose, they learned that the phone line they were using wasn't even secure. They concluded that the only reason for the protocol was to allow local agents to monitor them.

At least three F.B.I. agents were assigned to each family: one supervising agent, one for "victim assistance," and one for hostage negotiation. The bureau deals with hundreds of thousands of crime victims every year. Nancy Curtis describes one of her agents as "professional, compassionate, and committed." But none of the other families believed that the bureau was aggressive enough. "The F.B.I. called me once a week from Washington, every Tuesday between three-thirty and four o'clock, without fail, just to see if I had information for them," Art Sotloff says. "Not to give me information. After three or four phone calls, I just let them go to voice mail."

The F.B.I. is authorized to investigate the kidnapping of American citizens. The bureau has long experience with the crime domestically, but is poorly equipped to handle foreign cases in which the motivation for the abduction is political. The State Department, however, informed Nancy Curtis that it was in charge.

Bradley's team scheduled a meeting for Curtis and the chief F.B.I. hostage negotiator. The agent insisted that the bureau had jurisdiction over kidnappings. Curtis left the meeting frustrated and confused. Not only was there a turf war; it was obvious that the agencies weren't sharing information. Bradley's team set up a meeting with Robert Ford, the last U.S. Ambassador to Syria.

Ford agreed that the F.B.I. does have jurisdiction, but added that the State Department has an understanding of Syrian culture and the region which the bureau lacks. After these meetings, State essentially backed down, leaving the fate of the hostages in the hands of the F.B.I.

"When you look at overseas kidnappings, it has to be a multi-agency effort," a senior F.B.I. official told me. And to the F.B.I. it's natural that it should lead the kidnapping cases. The bureau, he said, pursues three related goals in a kidnapping investigation: "the safe return of the hostage, collection of intelligence about the captor network, and the eventual prosecution of the perpetrators."

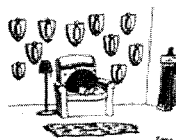
F.B.I. agents felt that Bradley and his team were acting nobly, but also considered them amateurs entering a sensitive and dangerous environment, with American lives in the balance. The bureau does not like its playing field to be crowded with competitors. Bradley's team gave the F.B.I. any leads it turned up, but the bureau made it clear that this was not a partnership. "We're happy to take their information," the F.B.I. official said, but noted that the relationship could not be fully reciprocal: Bradley, his team members, and the families lacked the security clearances that would allow them to look at all the data that the F.B.I. was collecting. The official admitted, however, that "in some of these cases the lack of information passed to the families was simply because there *was* a lack of information."

At certain key points, the F.B.I. forcefully shut down an investigative path that members of the Bradley team were following, usually with the explanation that they had to "deconflict" their effort with one that, presumably, the bureau was conducting on its own. "Swords get crossed," the F.B.I. official noted. But people close to the scene saw little evidence that the bureau was investigating with urgency. After Jim Foley's abduction, in November, 2012, it took two weeks for the F.B.I. to dispatch a pair of agents to Antakya to interview his friends. To be fair, the bureau requires permission from the Turkish government to conduct investigations. As in most other foreign countries where the bureau works, it is forbidden to go undercover there, and it has to get clearance from the C.I.A. before cultivating sources. In Antakya, the F.B.I. agents who showed up seemed woefully out of place and inexperienced—"fish out of water," as Nicole Tung, a photojournalist and a close friend of Foley's, put it. Tung and Clare Gillis, the freelancer who had been abducted with Foley in Libya, worried that Foley was a low priority for the U.S. The journalists on the ground believe that the bureau never interviewed any of the fixers who had been captured with the hostages and then released. (The journalists knew these fixers well.) In any case, that was the last that the journalists saw of the F.B.I. The Bradley team eventually contacted more than a hundred and fifty people. Only a few of them said that they had spoken to the U.S. government.

According to a former federal official, there was a mistaken interpretation of the U.S.'s policy against ransoms: it was taken to mean no negotiating at all; even talking to the hostage-takers was forbidden. Neither the White House nor the National Security Council appeared to step in to clarify the matter, leaving the investigation essentially paralyzed.

The C.I.A., which collects intelligence abroad, apparently gathered little of use about the hostages. Robert Ford told Bradley's team that the agency had no assets closer to Syria than Gaziantep, Turkey, thirty miles from the border. Although Bradley's team and some of the reporters in Antakya identified sites where the hostages were likely being held, there was no drone surveillance until late in the crisis, and even then only one drone was made available—for part of the day. "The President wouldn't authorize it," Barfi says. "He didn't want to get into Syria."

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Bradley lacked the government's resources, but he had connections, and he didn't feel constrained by protocol. Several of the families worried that information on the hostages' social media could be used against them—Sotloff's Israeli citizenship, Padnos's book on Islam, Kassig's experience in Iraq—but the F.B.I. said that it could not gain access to the hostages' accounts, because of privacy concerns. Bradley called Sheryl Sandberg, the chief operating officer of Facebook; Dick Costolo, then the C.E.O. of Twitter; and Brad Smith, the general counsel of Microsoft, and they were willing to work with the families

to help. Facebook, for example, made Padnos's account invisible to the public.

Bradley prides himself on his ability to discover and enlist what he calls "extreme talent." Soon after he acquired *The Atlantic*, he successfully lured away Jeffrey Goldberg, a writer then working for this magazine. Bradley's blandishments included going to Goldberg's house with a trailer full of ponies for his children to ride. In an era when many magazines were retrenching or folding, it was extraordinary for a publisher to court a journalist so lavishly, and the story spread through the trade. Barak Barfi heard about the Goldberg pony gambit in Turkey.

"Why are you doing this?" Goldberg asked Bradley when he heard about the team that had been assembled. After all, Bradley was not the attorney general or the Secretary of Defense. Bradley responded, "When I wake in the morning, I could study online advertising patterns—or I could try in some way to save the lives of Americans who are held by fanatics. When I looked at the options in front of me, it was obvious what was the best use of my time."

Goldberg believed that Bradley's obsession with hostages began with the death of Michael Kelly, the first journalist Bradley hired to edit *The Atlantic*. As Goldberg puts it, Kelly was "hysterically rude and biting funny"—qualities that Bradley admired but certainly didn't share. Kelly and Bradley became close. Kelly was the first reporter to be killed in the Iraq war, in April, 2003. After burying Kelly, Bradley says, "I had trouble letting one of my colleagues do something I couldn't do." The next year, he travelled to Baghdad, where William Langewiesche was reporting for *The Atlantic*. At the time, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq—the precursor of ISIS—was beheading Westerners and posting videos on the Internet. "I found it really scary," Bradley says. At the hotel where he was staying, he was told to shove the dresser and an extra bed against the door. Despite such precautions, a journalist was kidnapped from that hotel a few weeks later.

Bradley kept adding people to the team, paying their travel expenses, and often a salary as well. He installed two young researchers in cubicles in the Watergate office. He recruited a former Syrian diplomat, now known as Noor Azar, who had gone into exile after the revolution. Meanwhile, April Goble, Foley's ex-girlfriend, worked with eleven volunteers from Teach for America, looking for inroads into the Syrian regime.

Bradley also discovered a West Coast lawyer who had moved to Kandahar, Afghanistan, to study insurgencies. “She travelled around on a motorcycle with an assault rifle around her shoulders,” Bradley recalls. “Her job was interviewing potential Taliban recruits and giving reports to N.G.O.s and the U.S. government.” Because the lawyer still works in the region, she asked me to refer to her as Mary Hardy. Bradley’s staff called her the Blond Bombshell.

Bradley sent Hardy to Antakya in June, 2013, when only Foley and Padnos had been taken. Antakya struck her as “a typical bad border town.” The place was filled with intelligence agents, Turkish and otherwise. Jihadists and smugglers and young freelancers had taken over the tourist hotels. Because only Foley’s name had been made public, Hardy recalls, she was besieged by people offering to sell her information about him: “The town was awash in ‘Foley’s alive, Foley’s dead, Foley’s in Damascus, Foley’s coming out tomorrow. Just get in my van and I can take you to see him.’”

Hardy sought out more experienced journalists and aid workers in the area. They had fixers who spoke Arabic and could get the phone numbers of ISIS commanders and the G.P.S. coordinates of their various headquarters. Hardy learned that the people who had abducted Padnos and Matt Schrier were using Schrier’s PayPal account to order such items as sunglasses; the items were delivered to a shop owner on the Turkish border who was known for providing fake identifications. Hardy believed that a gang connected to the shop owner had abducted Padnos. She obtained photographs of the shop owner and the gang members and sent all this information to the F.B.I., along with images of a prison in Aleppo. She suspected—correctly—that Padnos had been held there. The F.B.I. ordered her to shut down her operation. It’s unclear whether the bureau had already acquired similar intelligence on its own.

Hardy thought that the gang who had kidnapped Padnos had sold him to the highest bidder. Foley’s case was more complicated. He had been taken with John Cantlie, a British journalist; they were good friends, although Cantlie had a reputation for recklessness. Once, in Libya, Clare Gillis told me, Cantlie invited her and Foley to get into the car with him to chase down a story in a particularly dicey area. Gillis declined, but Foley went ahead. (To her relief, they returned unscathed.)

In Turkey, Hardy met a British security contractor who had seen Cantlie just before he disappeared. Cantlie had been making boorish jokes in front of a group of Syrians, and his countryman reprimanded him for his cultural insensitivity. Cantlie laughed it off. He had been kidnapped once before in Syria, in July, 2012, by British jihadists. They shot him in the arm when he tried to escape. A week later, he was liberated by the Free Syrian Army. Not long after, he returned to Syria with an assignment to make a documentary about his captivity. He intended to go to the site where he had been abducted—a foolhardy trip, but actual assignments were precious. He apparently enlisted Foley to be his videographer. Within days, they had been captured.

Mary Hardy had developed a theory about staying safe in dangerous places: “One third is good management—how many people do I have working with me, and how many bad guys are out there? The second third is local good will. And the last third is good luck.” She faulted Cantlie and Foley on all three counts. They had been spotted filing their stories in an Internet café, speaking English: bad management. Cantlie’s crude humor: a strike against good will. And both men had been taken before—so their luck had plainly run out.

“If you go into that environment, you have to do some soul-searching,” Hardy says. “The macho thing is ‘I am willing to take the risk.’ But it’s not just you and your freedom you’re risking.” A conflict journalist should acknowledge that he is also placing his institution at risk. He is asking his friends and his family to potentially stop everything while they pursue his freedom. And he is tacitly demanding that his government risk soldiers’ lives if a rescue attempt is made. Not every journalist, Hardy says, wants to be encumbered by such considerations. But, she adds, “at least that’s an interesting conversation to have at the bar.”

THE QATAR CONNECTION

On June 10, 2014, ISIS forces overran Mosul, Iraq’s second-largest city. Sleeper cells had carried out assassinations that left the city leaderless, and the Iraqi Army had dissolved under assault. Because few journalists were on the ground to document events, the news was shocking. The next day, Tikrit fell. On June 29th, ISIS announced the formation of a new caliphate. In Mosul, ISIS’s leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, climbed the minbar of the Great Mosque of al-Nuri and boldly declared himself the new caliph, demanding the fealty of Muslims everywhere. Henceforth, the territory held by ISIS would be called the Islamic State. Despite the disparagement of many mainline imams, thousands of new fighters answered Baghdadi’s call, animated by the vision of a restored Islamic empire and exhilarated by the savagery practiced by his followers. Fifty thousand Yazidis, an ancient monotheistic community north of Mosul, fled when ISIS announced plans to exterminate them. The U.S. felt rising international pressure to stop an impending genocide. Simultaneously, ISIS forces swept toward the Kurdish capital of Erbil, where American advisers and diplomats were stationed. The hostages were caught in a vise: any American action to halt ISIS’s advance would likely trigger retaliation against them, but their plight was still a secret, so little political effort was being exerted on their behalf.

The White House realized that intervening against ISIS could affect the fortunes of the hostages. “It weighed on everyone’s mind,” Ben Rhodes, a deputy national-security adviser, told me. But, he added, “not to take action in confronting the potential genocide against the Yazidis would be both a failure in terms of enabling the slaughter to go forward and also would suggest our own foreign policy can be held in check by the presence of hostages.” That, he said, would be “the ultimate form of empowering the hostage-taker.”

Meanwhile, the ransom demand for Padnos rose to twenty-two million euros. In July, a video of Padnos surfaced in several American embassies, through intermediaries. He was seated on the floor, wrists bound, with a gun pointed at his head. “My life is in very, very, very grave danger,” Padnos said. “They’ve given me three days—three days to live.” The video had apparently been made two days earlier.

Carl and Marsha Mueller, the parents of Kayla, who was kidnapped while doing relief work in Syria. Carl Mueller felt that Qatari officials—who offered to negotiate for her return—were more helpful than U.S. officials.

On May 29, 2014, at the Peninsula Hotel in New York, Bradley met with Ali Soufan, a former F.B.I. agent whose skillful interrogation of Al Qaeda members had led to the identification of the 9/11 hijackers. Soufan, who is Lebanese-American, has

since founded a security company, the Soufan Group, with offices in New York and Doha. "Let me tell you a story," Bradley said. Soufan's heart sank as he learned of the hostages' plight. He doubted that the U.S. had assets on the ground. There was only one direction to turn. "Let's go to Qatar," he told Bradley.

Late on July 10th, Bradley and Soufan were in the lobby of the St. Regis hotel in Doha, waiting to meet Ghanem Khalifa al-Kubaisi, the head of the Qatari intelligence service. Qatar is a conservative Wahhabi society, but it sometimes plays a subversive role in the region, hosting both the Al Jazeera network and an American airbase. Bradley knew that many rebel groups in Syria depend on Qatari support. He also knew that Qatar provides an underground channel of communication between radical Islamists and the West. Six weeks earlier, Qatar had arranged the exchange of the Taliban prisoners for Bowe Bergdahl.

It was Ramadan, an awkward time to approach government officials. Moreover, Qatari intelligence was preoccupied by the military operation that Israel had just launched in Gaza. That very evening, Kubaisi was briefing the emir. After midnight, Soufan got a call from Kubaisi's chief of staff saying that his boss couldn't meet that night. "You have to," Soufan told him. "We're leaving at three in the morning."

Kubaisi showed up at 1:30 A.M. Bradley had expected him to be a hardboiled veteran, but he was young and soft-spoken, with warm, lively eyes. Bradley presented flyers with photographs of the captives and details about the kidnappings. Kubaisi leafed through them without much hope. "You cannot predict with these groups," he said. "They are so irrational." Yet he paused upon seeing the Padnos flyer. "I think we can help on this one," he said. Alone among the five hostages, Padnos was being held by Jabhat al-Nusra, an Al Qaeda affiliate that had broken away from ISIS in February, 2014. The two factions had been battling each other since then. Qatar maintained influence with al-Nusra; however, sending an operative into Aleppo was extremely dangerous, and the three-day deadline for Padnos had passed. "I was fearful, thinking we had to act fast or they would kill him," Kubaisi recalls. He told Bradley, "I will do it—for the mother."

Last June, one of the remaining European hostages, Daniel Rye Ottosen, a Danish photographer, was freed. The Danish government refused to pay a ransom, but the family reportedly scraped together three and a half million euros. Ottosen's captors allowed him to carry letters from the other hostages, except Foley. In the final months of captivity, Foley and Ottosen had been chained together, and Ottosen secretly memorized a note from Foley to his family. One of his first calls after being freed was to recite the letter to Diane Foley. "I remember going to the mall with Dad, a very long bike ride with Mom," the letter begins. "Dreams of family and friends take me away and happiness fills my heart." Foley downplays the abuse, saying that he has "weak and strong days." He adds, "We are so grateful when anyone is freed, but of course yearn for our own freedom." He mentions each of his three brothers and his sister, Katie, expressing hope that he will attend her wedding one day. "Grammy, please take your medicine," he writes. "Stay strong, because I am going to need your help to reclaim my life."

Diane and a few of the other parents talked to some of the freed European hostages. The Europeans were guarded in those conversations, but they spoke frankly to Barfi and Bradley, and in interviews that they later gave to the press. They said that among their guards was a group of British Muslims, whom the captives called the Beatles. The ones they called George and John were especially sadistic. The Beatles paid particular attention to Foley, because he and John Cantlie had tried to escape. Foley had made it out of his cell, but when Cantlie couldn't break free of his chains Foley surrendered. "I couldn't leave John on his own," he told the others. They were beaten savagely, and waterboarded on one occasion. Later, Foley incurred the guards' anger because he requested extra rations and more frequent trips to the toilets for the weakest captives. He gave his mattress to another prisoner and slept on the stone floor. He never complained about abuse. "They didn't like the fact he would not submit," Didier François, the French hostage, told me. Foley was a pillar of the group, François said. "He tried to establish some balance of forces with the guards—some breathing space."

Foley organized informal lectures. Kassig told stories about hunting and fishing with his father. François described covering the war in Chechnya. Cantlie explained how to pilot a plane. Foley lectured on American literature and his captivity in Libya. The others depended on Foley to keep their spirits buoyed. "This guy, he was a man," Nicolas Hénin, another French hostage, later told *L'Express*. "He remained upright, dignified." He added, "When I see his mother's reaction, I recognize her son. They are made of the same metal."

On August 7, 2014, President Obama authorized limited air strikes on ISIS, in order to relieve the Yazidis and block the jihadi advance on Erbil. "Earlier this week, one Iraqi in the area cried to the world, 'There is no one coming to help,'" Obama said, in a televised address. "Well, today America is coming to help."

Five days later, the Foley family received an awkwardly spelled e-mail, asking, "HOW LONG WITH THE HSEEP FOLLOW THE BLIND SHEPPARD?" It was addressed to "the American government and their sheep-like citizens," and it continued:

You were given many chances to negotiate the release of your people via cash transactions as other governments have accepted. . . . however you proved very quickly to us that this is NOT what you are interested in. . . .

Now you return to bomb the Muslims of Iraq once again, this time resorting to Arial attacks and "proxy armies," all the while cowardly shying away from a face-to-face confrontation!

Today our swords are unsheathed towards you, GOVERNMENT AND CITIZENS ALIKE! AND WE WILL NOT SOTP UNTILL WE QUENCH OUR THIRST FOR YOUR BLOOD. . . .

The first of which being the blood of the American citizen, James Foley!

A week later, Diane got a call from a distraught reporter from the Associated Press. "She was sobbing," Diane recalls. "She asked if I had seen the Internet." The reporter wouldn't elaborate. But within a short time the theatrically staged execution of Diane Foley's son was all over the news. No one called her from the F.B.I. or the State Department. She contacted her primary F.B.I. agent, but he didn't respond. The Foleys' parish priest, however, rushed to their house. "I'll never forget it," Father Paul Gousse told the magazine *St. Anthony Messenger*. "Diane came and hugged me and said, 'Father, please pray for me that I don't

become bitter. I don't want to hate.' ”

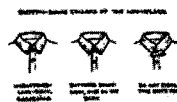
When Nancy Curtis heard about Foley, she collapsed onto the kitchen floor. For the first time since the ordeal began, her spirit was broken. The Bradleys were at their house in the South of France when the phone rang. He was incredulous. “I had never thought that ISIS would kill Jim,” he admits. “The next morning, the implications hit me. For the first time in eighteen months, our search for Jim was over. And we had failed Jim’s family.”

Bradley called April Goble, in Chicago, and told her of Foley’s death. She went outside and sat under a tree. She called Diane, who kept saying that her son was now free. Meanwhile, dozens of Goble’s and Foley’s friends went to Goble’s house. It got so crowded that some people slept on the roof that night.

The next day, the Foleys got a call from the President. He was vacationing on Martha’s Vineyard. Diane remarked that Jim had campaigned for Obama. “He expected you to come get him,” she said.

“Well, we tried,” Obama replied. The President was sharing a secret: the U.S. military had launched a raid to rescue the hostages the previous month, on July 4th. The F.B.I. had finally been able to interview two of the freed journalists, who provided detailed descriptions of the industrial building where they and twenty-one other foreigners had been imprisoned. U.S. officials determined that the building was outside Raqqa—now the capital of the Islamic State. Evidently, the rescue team had arrived three days too late. There was a firefight, in which two ISIS members were killed and an American soldier was shot in the leg. But it was all for naught: no prisoners remained at the facility.

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The video of Foley’s execution begins with Obama making his announcement of air strikes against ISIS. Then Foley is seen on his knees in a stretch of desert, wearing an orange jumpsuit that billows in the breeze. His head is shaved. He looks strong and not frightened. He reads out a statement denouncing the American bombing campaign, saying that his death certificate was signed that day. Then a masked figure in black brandishes a knife. “We’re no longer a part of an insurgency,” he says, in a North London accent. “We are an Islamic army and a state that has been accepted by a large

number of Muslims worldwide. So, effectively, any aggression toward the Islamic State is an aggression toward Muslims.” He grabs Foley’s head and slashes his neck. The next shot is of Foley’s bloody head resting on his back, against his handcuffed wrists, his plastic sandals askew in the sand. Then the executioner is shown with another kneeling hostage, dressed in orange with his head shaved. The executioner points the knife at the camera: “The life of this American citizen, Obama, depends on your next decision.”

It is Steven Sotloff.

A VICTORY AND A DEFEAT

Ghanem al-Kubaisi had sent an operative into Syria to see what it would take to free Theo Padnos. The operative talked his way into an extremist base but was accused of spying. Jihadis threatened to kill him, but he persuaded them that he really was an emissary from the Qatari government, which had taken an active interest in the life of this one American.

The Qataris had repeatedly been told that the U.S. doesn’t pay ransoms to terrorists, but it was unclear how else Padnos could be saved. The All-Girl Team wondered why it was the American government’s business if Padnos’s family arranged for another government to rescue him. But, under U.S. law, conspiring to enrich an Al Qaeda affiliate such as al-Nusra was considered material support of terrorism. Kubaisi understood the constraints, and he is vague about what he proposed, saying only that he exercised influence on al-Nusra through other rebel groups in the area. That might be construed as a ransom payment, which is one reason that the language of terrorism diplomacy is muffled and ambiguous. In any case, al-Nusra had many reasons to placate Qatar, one of the Gulf’s strategic powers.

On August 24th, Bradley received a thumbs-up emoji from Kubaisi. “Done,” he texted.

Ali Soufan had arranged for the handoff to take place in the Golan Heights, on the Israeli border, but the F.B.I. and a dozen American officials were mistakenly waiting on the Jordanian border. Bradley had to call and redirect them. As Padnos was being driven toward the demilitarized zone, the F.B.I. team was driving all night to get in place to receive him.

The terrorists dropped Padnos off at a U.N. observation post. A doctor examined his brutalized body. Then Padnos crossed into Israel, where the American officials had just arrived. Nancy’s favorite F.B.I. agent was with them. The agent patted Padnos’s shoulder and said, “It’s O.K. to cry.”

American officials drove him to a seaside hotel in Tel Aviv, where he called Nancy: “Mom, I’m in this five-star hotel! And I’m drinking a beer! And there are women here!” It was his first phone call in two years.

The F.B.I. agent instructed him to stay in his room. The moment she left, Padnos headed out to the beach. The Mediterranean was gorgeous. There was a paddleball court and a jogging trail. Padnos strolled down to a youth hostel. Two Canadian guys were sitting outside, and they looked friendly. Padnos impulsively walked up to them and said that he’d just been freed by Al Qaeda. They offered him a drink. The next morning, the F.B.I. agent found Padnos with his new friends passed out on the floor of his hotel room.

There was little time for Bradley’s team to celebrate Padnos’s release. The shock of the Foley video lingered. The parents of Foley, Padnos, and Sotloff were besieged by the press. The word was out that there were other hostages, but only a few journalists knew their names. Bradley asked Emily Lenzner, the communications director of Atlantic Media, to try to keep imperiling details out of the press. Lenzner had to plug one hole after another. She dissuaded a

Washington *Post* reporter from running a story; Ed Kassig says that the reporter told him, “I’m going to publish. This is too big for you.” A Miami television station interviewed some of Sotloff’s friends, and one of them innocently commented on how much Sotloff’s Jewish faith had meant to him. After Lenzner intervened, the reference was snipped from the story. But the wall of secrecy was breaking down. The *Times* reported that an American woman was among the ISIS hostages. Editors at *The Atlantic*—a few floors below Bradley’s office at the Watergate—wondered how they should cover a major news event involving their employer.

Bradley summoned the Sotloffs, the Kassigs, and the Muellers to Washington, in the hope of devising a new strategy. They arrived on Sunday, August 24th—the day of Padnos’s release. It felt ominous to see their circle of families abruptly diminished, one by death and the other by freedom. Bradley wanted his involvement to remain secret, so they met in the conference room of a law firm.

Bradley introduced the families to Nasser Weddady, an activist who was born in Mauritania and grew up in Syria. Bradley described him as a social-media specialist. Weddady proposed that the three mothers make a video, beseeching Baghdadi to spare their children. “The fact that the government and the families have remained silent for so long has allowed ISIS to totally control the process and to dehumanize the hostages,” he contended. “My idea is to reverse that trend.”

The mothers decided against a joint video. Instead, they would each make one. Sotloff had been placed next on ISIS’s kill list, so Shirley Sotloff would release her video at once. Paula Kassig and Marsha Mueller would film similar appeals but wait to release them.

Weddady was soon at odds with Barak Barfi over the tone and the content of Shirley’s statement. Barfi urged her to cover her hair, but Weddady thought it was patronizing and smacked of Orientalism. Barfi had combed through the Koran and Islamic history, trying to find useful precedents for a hostage release. Passages in the Koran discussed prisoners of war, but their meaning was ambiguous. In 624 A.D., the Prophet Muhammad captured seventy prisoners during the Battle of Badr. His closest advisers debated ransoming or killing them. Two were executed. Other prisoners were released, including one who was not a Muslim: the husband of the Prophet’s daughter Zainab. After she sent a necklace to her father, he granted clemency to her husband. “The necklace was symbolic, of course,” Weddady observes. But if the story were cited in a video “it could be misconstrued as if we were inviting a ransom—and that was a no-go zone.”

The more that Barfi argued for including theological references and historical parallels, the angrier Weddady became. He and Barfi had differing conceptions of the video’s audience. Barfi was addressing ISIS’s leadership; Weddady was aiming his message at the Muslim world, in order to undermine ISIS’s authority and appeal. “What I was saying was not being understood,” he recalls. And yet he could appreciate Barfi’s desperation. They were Sotloff’s only hope.

Shirley was numb. The other mothers tried to support her, but they also struggled to maintain their composure. Ed Kassig and Carl Mueller were commiserating with Art Sotloff. They talked about how painful it had been to keep the abductions a secret. Art remarked that, once Steven’s name was out, his friends rushed to support him. Ed and Carl almost envied him.

Marsha Mueller retreated into writing in her journal. She told Weddady that she hoped to give it to Kayla one day, so she would know what had happened in her absence. This detail struck him with unexpected emotional force. The scale of the tragedy in Syria and Iraq was so vast, and this was just a piece of it. Millions of people had been displaced, and hundreds of thousands were dead, and yet the children of these parents had willingly placed their lives in jeopardy. “They went on their own into one of the most dangerous places in the world with the intention of helping the weak and downtrodden, who were being crushed by dictatorship and terrorism,” Weddady told me. “That’s why I see them as heroes.”

While Weddady and Barfi fought about Shirley’s script, Noor Azar—the former Syrian diplomat on Bradley’s team—helped Paula Kassig create hers. The Kassigs wanted the captors to know that their son lamented the suffering of Syrians and wished to help them achieve freedom. Ed talked about how the Kassigs came from a long line of teachers. As a nurse, Paula planned to characterize her son as a caretaker. Azar told them that their approach was all wrong. ISIS doesn’t care about freedom, she said. The militants think it’s a Western notion that has been imposed on the Muslim world. They wouldn’t be moved by the family’s humanitarian legacy. And ISIS was filled with foreign fighters who opposed many Syrian insurgent groups. The whole idea of nationality was anathema to them. Azar persuaded the Kassigs to highlight Peter’s spirituality.

*“I was a weirdo in this town
before anyone even heard of
Comic Con.”*

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Meanwhile, Shirley was struggling. “I was still in a movie that had gone bad,” she said. She read one script after another into the camera, but her emotional affect was wooden. She had trouble pronouncing some names and stumbled over Koranic references. She invoked Baghdadi’s authority as the caliph to grant Steven amnesty, “and to follow the example set by the Rashidun Caliphs, who I have learned were the most just Muslim rulers, under whom People of the Book, like Steve, were protected.” Weddady bridled at this language. “Putting a Jewish woman on TV lecturing to Muslims about Islam is a disaster,” he contended. The video struck him as academic and

labored, and Shirley appeared hypnotized. Bradley agreed that it should be reshot the next day.

That night, Bradley invited the families and his team to his house for dinner. The Kassigs were exhausted and declined. On Embassy Row, the mood was much darkened from the May night when the dogwoods were in bloom. Sensing this, Bradley opened the floor to any idea, however crazy. Azar proposed urging the Syrian regime to do a prisoner swap with ISIS. Bradley worried that Assad would demand something in return—something that Bradley couldn’t deliver, such as spare parts for airplanes. Nor did he believe that the American government would grant such a concession.

Bradley was always hard to read, even by his staff. Aretae Wyler, Bradley’s general counsel, thought that the video idea was a “Hail Mary pass,” but her boss seemed determined to keep pessimism from overwhelming the process. We can’t just sit around and do nothing, he said. Throughout dinner, he sketched possible action plans on a legal pad. Weddady would go to Egypt to enlist the aid of some radical sheikhs. Bradley would go to Kurdistan and meet with its head of intelligence. He would ask the King of Jordan for help. He would return to Qatar. He even aired the notion of hiring a private army to attempt a rescue.

Shirley injected a note of hope. She kept saying, "I know Steve's alive, he's going to survive, I just know it." She said that he got his strength from her parents, who had survived Auschwitz.

The next morning, the Muellers were close to panic. Without revealing Kayla's name, Brian Ross, of ABC, had reported the details of her capture. Other journalists who had kept quiet about Kayla were angry with Emily Lenzner, because they believed, falsely, that she had cooperated with Ross. She begged the reporters to restrain themselves: the lives of three Americans were still on the line.

Bradley's team was cracking under the tension. As Weddady and Barfi shouted at each other over Shirley's script, Wyler took Weddady's laptop, sat on the floor beside Shirley, and quietly coached her to deliver the speech.

"I am sending this message to you, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi al-Quraishi al-Husayni, the caliph of the Islamic State," Shirley says in the final version. Her hair is uncovered. Her fatigue is evident, but she delivers the message potently:

My son Steven is in your hands. Steven is a journalist who travelled to the Middle East to cover the suffering of Muslims at the hand of tyrants. Steven is a loyal and generous son, brother, and grandson. He is an honorable man and has always tried to help the weak.

We have not seen Steven for over a year and we miss him very much. We want to see him home safe and sound, and to hug him.

Since Steven's capture, I have learned a lot about Islam. I've learned that Islam teaches that no individual should be held responsible for the sins of others. Steven has no control over the actions of the U.S. government. He is an innocent journalist.

I've also learned that you, the caliph, can grant amnesty. I ask you to please release my child. . . .

I want what every mother wants—to live to see her children's children. I plead with you to grant me this.

Shirley's video was released on August 27th, and was instantly picked up by news organizations, especially Arabic satellite stations. As expected, ISIS followers on social media derided her plea, calling her Sheikha Shirley, but many other Muslims reacted with sympathy. Still, the overwhelming reaction that Weddady had hoped for did not happen. ISIS's grisly video had made a far bigger impact: the shot of Foley kneeling in the sand before his execution was indelible. The intent of the killing was to prod the U.S. into open war with the Islamic State, a challenge that many Americans now welcomed. In 2013, Americans heavily opposed air strikes in Syria. Now a majority was in favor—an immediate, measurable consequence of the killing. ISIS saw conflict with America as the best way to rally Muslims to its side in the war of civilizations it sought to provoke. For the families of the remaining hostages, there was another omen of their waning hopes: after Foley's execution, a Reuters poll found that sixty-two per cent of Americans opposed paying ransoms for hostages.

Six days after Shirley's video appeared, Art Sotloff was heading out to drop off dry cleaning when a bulletin flashed on his phone: "Second American Hostage Killed." No one had called him. He returned home to tell Shirley. At the same time, Wyler went into Bradley's office and told him. He stared, ashen-faced, at his computer. He and Katherine flew to Miami to sit shivah with the Sotloffs.

"THE PUREST STRAIN OF EVIL"

After this devastating blow, Bradley decided that his team needed a lift. He invited Theo Padnos to dinner, so that the team members could meet one of the people they had worked so hard to rescue. Each of the meals in the Bradleys' pale-yellow room had marked another milestone in the hostage saga. Padnos talked about beatings, solitary confinement, exposure to cold; his captors even buried him alive for half an hour. One assault left him disoriented for days. When he first returned home, he ate and slept little, and wanted to be mainly in the company of women and children. His family worried about him: his thoughts could get scattered, his emotions swinging from elation to fits of weeping.

Padnos recalled that, after ISIS split from al-Nusra, in the spring of 2014, his guards frequently joked about selling him to their rivals, who, they warned, were far more extreme. Several ISIS commanders were placed in adjoining cells.

"Would you ever kill a journalist?" Padnos asked a captured ISIS commander.

Never, he responded. He then promised that the current battles would expand, culminating in the global victory of Islam.

At the dinner, Bradley asked Padnos what he had learned about evil. Bradley had been dwelling on this question. He remarked that the jihadis in Syria embodied "the purest strain of evil and malice and violence I have ever seen in my life."

"No, David, it's not like that," Padnos said. Many of the young people guarding him had acted on principle when they "rejected the West." But they had become part of a dangerously adolescent jihadi culture. Padnos had watched children playing with grenades. If someone was making tea, a kid might place a bullet on the burner, causing it to explode. For twenty of the twenty-two months he was held, Padnos saw women only three times—and always for just a few seconds. The fighters were as isolated from women as he was. Even the married men seemed uninterested in being with their wives. And yet they all wanted to marry American women, dropping hints that Padnos might hook them up.

Toward the end of his confinement, Padnos was taken to a villa. On a television, Al Jazeera was airing an image of a man in an orange jumpsuit in the desert. Text on the screen identified him as an American hostage. It was Foley. Until then, Padnos hadn't known that other Americans were being held. His captors handed him the remote, but when he changed the channel there was Foley again.

After Sotloff was murdered, the black-clad killer, now universally known as Jihadi John, presented the next victim. David Haines, a British citizen, had spent sixteen years as an aid worker. He had been working for a humanitarian group in a Syrian refugee camp when he was kidnapped, with an Italian colleague, in March, 2013. Until the European hostages were ransomed that spring, Bradley's team was unaware that there were more British hostages than John Cantlie. Like the U.S., the United Kingdom forbids ransom payments, and the Foreign Office had barred the families

from discussing the abductions.

Nancy Curtis and her son, Theo Padnos. Three cousins joined her effort to save Theo. The group was called the All-Girl Team.

Haines was beheaded, and an execution video was released on September 13, 2014. Another British man, a cabdriver named Alan Henning, who had spent his savings on buying a used ambulance to help Syrian refugees, was placed next in line. Peter Kassig was still not named. Until David Haines was killed, the executions had been ordered by nationality. Bradley took hope from this violation of protocol: perhaps there was still time to bargain for Kassig's life.

A few days later, the Kassigs and the Muellers returned to Washington, to meet Obama. The President had just announced that the bombing campaign against ISIS was expanding into parts of Syria. He knew that the families were angry. Art Sotloff had refused to accept a condolence call from him. At the White House, Obama expressed his sympathy to the two remaining hostage families. But they felt he didn't offer any indication that the government could help. "He said if one of his daughters were taken he would do everything he could to get her home," Carl Mueller says. "Marsha took that to mean that we should go out and get the money. I didn't think that at all. The government continued to block our efforts."

There was a rumor that Qatar had paid a ransom to al-Nusra for Padnos; Bradley was concerned that he not be accused of soliciting funds for terrorists. Before flying to London to see Ghanem al-Kubaisi, he took his legal counsel to the U.S. Treasury to consult with David Cohen, the under-secretary for terrorism and financial intelligence. Cohen told Bradley to remind the Qataris that ransoms could not be paid.

In September, 2014, ISIS made a surprising adjustment in its propaganda campaign, releasing the first of a series of videos in which John Cantlie offers news commentary on behalf of the Islamic State. In the first video, Cantlie wears the orange jumpsuit that signals his likely execution. "I want to take this opportunity to convey some facts that you can verify," he says, striking a tone of reasonableness. He sits at a wooden desk against a black background, as on "Charlie Rose." He notes that he was captured two years earlier. "Many things have changed, including the expansion of the Islamic State to include large areas of eastern Syria and western Iraq," he observes. He says that, in subsequent videos, he will explain the motivations of the Islamic State, and how Western media outlets—"the very organizations I used to work for"—distort the truth.

It was macabre to watch a man under threat of death attesting to the legitimacy of his captors' goals; the video itself was a form of psychological torture. The apparent goal of the Cantlie videos was to divide Western opinion and, perhaps, to appeal to Muslims offended by the slaughter of hostages. Indeed, Cantlie soon developed a fan base on social media.

On October 3rd, Henning's death was confirmed, and this time Kassig was named as the next to die. Ed and Paula had seen reporters camped out on the Sotloffs' lawn for the deathwatch. They established two safe houses, and filled their car with enough food and water to last a week. But an odd thing happened. Journalist friends of Peter's from the Turkish border began arriving in Indianapolis to help. "They spent the entire day at our dining-room table, shooting e-mails, every one of them doing everything they could to bring Peter home," Ed recalls. Jodi Perras—a former A.P. reporter who taught Sunday school with Paula—volunteered to be their spokesperson. "We were watching social media," Perras recalls. "The theme ISIS was trying to push was 'Here's an Army Ranger who fought in Iraq and deserves to die.' And we were pushing the counter-narrative of a humanitarian who was helping the Syrian people and who, in fact, had converted to Islam."

Peter Kassig had been interested in Islam long before his capture. He had read the Koran while working in Palestinian camps in Lebanon. On a trip into Syria to supply Deir ez-Zor, he spent hours discussing religion with a sheikh, and when he returned he told friends that he had stopped drinking. He fasted during Ramadan. After his capture, a Syrian cellmate taught him how to pray, and he adopted the name Abdul Rahman, which means "servant of the merciful God."

Indianapolis has a large Muslim population, including Syrian exiles. The Islamic Society of North America has its headquarters nearby. A friend called Ed and Paula and asked if they would meet some local Syrians who had gathered at an interfaith center. Ed and Paula said yes. As Paula was looking at the building directory for the room number, Ed heard the sound of weeping. "It's this way," he said.

The Muslims were moved by Peter's commitment to Syria, and they and the Muslim organizations joined the campaign to pressure ISIS to spare Peter's life, holding prayer vigils in universities and mosques. Paula and Ed made their own video. "I'm a schoolteacher, and my wife is a nurse who works with refugees," Ed says into the camera, with Paula sitting beside him, her hair covered. "Our son is Abdul Rahman, formerly known as Peter." Muslims who had worked with Peter in Syria added testimonials. More surprisingly, an Al Qaeda commander tweeted that Peter had saved his life at a Syrian field hospital, performing "a successful surgical operation" while "under bombardment" from the Assad regime. The commander called Peter a "humanitarian activist." Jodi Perras kept up a stream of videos, tweets, and testimonials from Kassig's friends and Muslim supporters. She felt that she was personally waging the war on terror through her MacBook Air.

Two days after Peter's name was revealed, the Kassigs released a letter that he'd written. One of the freed European hostages had given it to them. "I figured it was time to say a few things that need saying before I have to go," Peter writes. He says that he is underweight but not starved. "I'm a tough kid and still young so that helps." He had cried a lot in his first few months, "but a little less now".



They tell us you have abandoned us and/or don't care but of course we know you are doing everything you can and more. Don't worry Dad, if I do go down, I won't go thinking anything but what I know to be true. That you and mom love me more than the moon & the stars.

I am obviously pretty scared to die but the hardest part is not knowing, wondering, hoping, and wondering if I should even hope at all. . . . If I do die, I figure that at least you and I can seek refuge and comfort in knowing that I went out as a result of trying to alleviate suffering and helping those in need.

He added that he prayed every day, although he was in a "dogmatically complicated situation here." The Europeans who were incarcerated with Kassig attest to his genuine faith, but ISIS follows an apocalyptic creed that challenges the beliefs of even orthodox Muslims.

Stanley Cohen, a New York attorney who has defended members of terrorist groups, including some in Hamas and Hezbollah, read Kassig's letter. According to the *Guardian*, Cohen enlisted several radical Islamists to try to persuade ISIS to free Kassig, by arguing that doing so could prompt the release of Muslim prisoners in Guantánamo. Cohen persuaded a Palestinian living in Jordan, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, who is revered among jihadis, to join his effort, but before Maqdisi could act the Jordanian government arrested him for promoting terrorist organizations.

The executions had been taking place every two weeks, but for six weeks there was a pause. Finally, on November 16th, a new ISIS video appeared. Its theatrics are markedly different from those of previous execution videos. The ceremony begins with the simultaneous beheading of about twenty hostages, many of them Syrian Air Force pilots. Then, in a separate scene, Jihadi John appears with Peter Kassig's head at his feet. There is no body. "Here we are, burying the first American crusader in Dabiq, eagerly waiting for the remainder of your armies to arrive," Jihadi John says. Dabiq, a town in northern Syria, is where ISIS followers believe that an apocalyptic battle between Muslims and Christians will take place.

After the video aired, there was speculation that Kassig had died in a bombing, or had been shot. (He appeared to have a wound above one eye.) He apparently did not make a statement denouncing American policy. Former Army Rangers wondered if Kassig was honoring their creed, which concludes, "Under no circumstances will I ever embarrass my country."

Another significant detail of this video is that neither John Cantlie nor Kayla Mueller is named as the next victim.

The first memorial service for Peter was held at the Al Huda mosque, outside Indianapolis. An imam from Damascus led the prayers. "There were people from almost every continent," Ed recalls. Among them were many of Peter's friends, who then showed up at the Kassigs' home that night. Ed remains especially grateful for that display of solidarity: "We had people sleeping in our camper, we had people draped across couches, on the floor. At about three in the morning, they made a circle and everybody went around and told Peter's story. And I really got to know my son, the man, that night."

As expected, President Obama called with condolences. He was on Air Force One, returning from Asia, and his voice sounded tired. Ed told him, "You've got one last chance to make this right. Save Kayla."

ENDGAME

The two Syrians who were working on David Bradley's team had to bear the additional emotional weight of watching their homeland being destroyed. They had felt helpless about the Syrian conflict until Bradley had infused them with an entrepreneurial spirit and a sense of possibility. "At last, I could do something," Nasser Weddady said. Bradley sent him to Istanbul, where he recruited a tribal sheikh who had influence in Syria. Bradley then flew to Istanbul himself to meet the sheikh; that's where he was when he got the news of Kassig's murder.

Noor Azar, the former Syrian diplomat, was born in Raqqa, and still has relatives there. She had also been excited when she joined Bradley's team; at the same time, she was shocked by the U.S. government's inaction. Syrians grow up knowing that their government doesn't value their lives, she says, but their image of the U.S. is formed by countless movies of Americans being rescued by the police or the F.B.I. or the Army. "When did it happen that the policy became more important than the actual U.S. citizen?" she asks. "Or was it always a myth?"

Although Azar never met Jim Foley, she looked at so many photographs and videos of him that she felt she had come to know him. His brutal death hit her hard. She went to two therapists. Despite having migraines, she kept coming into the office to work on the other hostage cases. But she was afraid to look at a picture of Kayla.

Azar tried to find Kayla's jailers, who were assumed to be women. Through Skype and Facebook, she narrowed her search to five female Europeans. She even got in touch with one of their husbands, who gave her permission to talk to his wife. When Azar relayed her findings to the F.B.I., the bureau told her to stop her investigation. "Contact with ISIS is breaking the law," she was told. Azar felt doubly threatened, because her visa status in the U.S. was uncertain. Though the F.B.I. claimed to be pursuing its own inquiry, Azar was doubtful that it could succeed. "I don't think they have a woman who has the accent of Raqqa," she told me.

The Bradley team always held out more hope for Kayla than for the others. It helped that she was a woman, and her ransom demand—five million euros, plus prisoners—was relatively low, closer to what the European governments had reportedly paid. The Muellers solicited private donations, but they were rebuffed by wealthy people who, like Bradley, feared being prosecuted. "They would always say they were so sorry," Marsha says. Bradley was secretly considering paying the ransom himself, provided that the prisoner demand could be dropped. "If it were my child, I would pay, whether it was against the law or not," he said. "But, since it was not my child, I decided it was not my place. It was a sixty-forty decision."

There had been a threat, in July, that Kayla would be killed in thirty days if the ransom wasn't paid. But August 14th, her birthday, passed with her still alive. The tone of the demands for Kayla softened. "We feel they really did want to release Kayla," Carl says. Yet the captors' demands expanded to include both the release of a female Al Qaeda prisoner held in the U.S. and a halt to the bombing of ISIS positions. The F.B.I. crafted replies to each message that Carl and Marsha received. "They were

writing the communications, and we'd just hit 'send,'" Carl says. The agency focussed on lowering the expectations of the captors, and never made a proper counter-offer.

Meanwhile, in Qatar, Ghanem al-Kubaisi summoned one of his operatives in Syria. He wanted a message passed to ISIS: "We hear you're going to kill Kayla. Before you do, let us know. We might be interested." Kubaisi heard back that the hostage-takers did not yet intend to kill her.

According to several freed hostages, Kayla was not tortured or sexually abused. Didier François, the French journalist, sometimes heard Kayla asking her jailers for fruit or sanitary napkins. The male hostages wondered who she was. At one point, they heard a guard say that she was Muslim, and Kayla corrected him. The guard was impressed. "She's stronger than you," the guard told another prisoner. "She doesn't pretend."

In October, 2014, a Yazidi girl in her mid-teens turned up at a U.S. Special Operations command center in Iraqi Kurdistan. According to *Foreign Policy*, she had been taken as a slave by Abu Sayyaf, a senior ISIS commander, along with two women—one of them Kayla Mueller. The Yazidi girl had escaped, but she told American interrogators that Kayla had stayed behind to take care of the other hostage, who was older and may have been wounded by shrapnel. The girl knew Kayla well enough to describe a tattoo of an owl feather that Kayla had on her torso.

Two months later, Navy SEALs attempted to rescue two hostages—an American photojournalist, Luke Somers, and a South African teacher, Pierre Korkie—in Yemen, where Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula was holding them. During the raid, the captors killed both hostages. President Obama said that he authorized the raid because the captors had threatened to kill Somers within seventy-two hours; the South African, however, had been ransomed and was about to be freed. Carl and Marsha Mueller had previously told the White House that they supported a raid to save Kayla, but now they stressed that they wished to be consulted before such an attempt. "We had David and his team—we had people in Qatar and London and here working on things," Carl says. "We didn't want to have a plan in place and then have Kayla killed."

Bradley had been working his diplomatic contacts, and one day he got a call from the chief of staff for Qatar's foreign minister, claiming good news: "Kayla has converted and is married. She is happily living with a family and doesn't want to come home."

"You don't believe that, do you?" Bradley said. He couldn't imagine that Kayla would not want to see her parents.

"Is that what you'd like me to communicate to the foreign minister?" the chief of staff asked.

"Exactly."

But there were rumors from other sources that Kayla was indeed married. The F.B.I. told Bradley's team that she had been seen living in a "home-type environment." This intelligence had apparently come from the Yazidi teen-ager.

Kubaisi and Ali Soufan suspected that the story of Kayla's marriage was a negotiating tactic—a way out for ISIS, which could say, "We don't have her. Go talk to her husband." It might also provide the U.S. government or private individuals with a way to dodge the ransom problem.

Suddenly, an opportunity arose. In December, 2014, news broke that Lebanese authorities had arrested Baghdadi's alleged former wife and one of his children, who were trying to slip into Syria using false identification. There was a discussion of a prisoner exchange involving captured Lebanese soldiers. Soufan flew to Doha, where he and Kubaisi discussed the possibility of adding Kayla's name to the list of prisoners to be swapped. Then Soufan told Bradley that the Muellers should come to Qatar right away.

Carl and Marsha packed their best clothes, called their son to pick up their dog, and rushed to the Phoenix airport. They arrived in Qatar nearly twenty hours later, shortly before midnight. Several government officials were waiting for them, along with Soufan, whom they hadn't met before. They all got into Mercedes sedans and drove into Doha. The whole city seemed to be under construction. Carl felt that he was in the twenty-second century.

Soufan had not explained what prompted his summons, and the opportunity to do so had already passed: that day, the Qatari foreign minister had cancelled talks after one of the Lebanese soldiers was killed by jihadis. But Soufan felt that Carl and Marsha could still take advantage of being in Qatar. He introduced them to Kubaisi, who wept as he heard Kayla's story and learned of her humanitarian deeds. "It was very emotional for me," he admits. Privately, he hoped that—even with the complication of the ransom prohibition—he would one day escort Kayla home.

The Muellers were staying in a five-star hotel jammed with people attending a convention of political and economic figures. The next morning, when Carl went downstairs for breakfast, he was seized with paranoia. Everywhere he turned were Arabs in traditional dress. "I was beside myself," he says. "Who were these people? Were they going to kidnap me? We went back to the room and tried to take a nap."

"There's kale in every dish here, but you don't even taste it."

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That morning, the Muellers met with Kubaisi's deputy director, Abdullah al-Assiri. The Qataris seemed puzzled by America's reluctance to pay ransoms. "I don't know anything about this," Carl said. "I'm an auto-body man." Assiri took Carl to his cousin's house to show off an impressive car collection, and talked about drag racing, a passion of Carl's. Assiri persuaded Carl and Marsha to stay a few more days, to get to know the country. They were moved to another five-star hotel. Carl noticed the Lamborghinis and the Aston-Martins parked outside. "It impressed on me the kind of people we were in with," he says. When they entered their immense suite, the television displayed a message: "Welcome! General al-Kubaisi." Carl finally felt that the government was taking care of him—only it wasn't his government.

obscure personal reasons. Experienced reporters usually keep their distance from such people, because their naïveté not only gets them in trouble; it can get others killed. Such a tragic chain of events began in the summer of 2014, when Haruna Yukawa, a forty-two-year-old Japanese citizen who called himself a security consultant, crossed the Syrian border.

The first person he put in jeopardy was a man he deeply admired, Kenji Goto, a Japanese journalist and pacifist. They had met in Syria in the spring of 2014, when Yukawa passed through a camp of the Free Syrian Army, where Goto was reporting. That August, Yukawa was taken into captivity by ISIS. Goto apparently felt obliged to try to free his inexperienced countryman. The two Japanese turned up again in January, 2015, kneeling at the feet of Jihadi John, who demanded two hundred million dollars within seventy-two hours. It was the same amount that Japan's Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, had pledged in the fight against ISIS. When the deadline expired, Yukawa was beheaded.

On a video, Goto read a statement saying that ISIS wanted to exchange him for an Iraqi woman, Sajida Mubarak Atrous al-Rishawi, who had participated in the 2005 hotel suicide bombings in Amman, which killed more than fifty people. (Rishawi's suicide belt failed to detonate.) It is one of the most notorious terrorist events in Jordan's history. The swap didn't happen. Goto was killed.

There was a hostage the Jordanians were willing to exchange for Rishawi, however: Moaz al-Kasasbeh, a pilot in the Jordanian Air Force, whose F-16 had crashed near Raqqa on Christmas Eve. The Jordanians asked for proof of life before initiating an exchange. ISIS could not provide it. On February 3rd, the group released a video of Kasasbeh being burned alive inside a cage. Rishawi was hanged in revenge the next day.

These deaths were a prelude to one more.

When Carl Mueller got the news, he called the sheriff. The local police had already made plans, in the event of Kayla's death, to seal off the road that leads to the Muellers' house, in the red granite hills outside Prescott.

On February 6, 2015, ISIS tweeted that Kayla had been killed in a bombing by the Jordanian Air Force. The U.S. and Jordanian governments denied this, although the building where she was supposedly killed—a weapons-storage facility—had been struck by coalition aircraft. Carl and Marsha asked Kayla's captors to provide proof of her death. ISIS sent them several photographs of her corpse. The captors called Kayla "our sister."

It was two days after the hanging of Rishawi, in Jordan, and most people on Bradley's team suspected that Kayla had actually been murdered in reprisal. Carl and Marsha agreed. (Lisa Monaco, the homeland-security adviser, suggested to me that Kayla had died in a bombing of unknown provenance. "We have no information that it was one of ours," she said. "Nor was there any information to support the claims that it was a Jordanian plane.")

"You must share the same deep sadness and sense of defeat that Kayla's execution brings to me," Bradley wrote to his team. "While there was Kayla still to save, it was possible to look forward after Jim, then Steve, then Peter's death. But, now, it's hard to look any direction but back, at the string of defeats and unending pain created at the hands of ISIS. I don't have anything good to say here. It feels like evil won."

On Jim Foley's birthday, October 18th—two months after he was killed—a memorial service was held at his church, in New Hampshire. Theo Padnos attended, and afterward he asked Katherine Bradley, "Why did your husband save me?" She responded, "Because Jim Foley wrote a second thank-you letter."

Recently, Marsha Mueller's sisters came to Arizona for a visit. They went into Kayla's room. In the closet, there is a trunk filled with dozens of diaries. Carl has been slowly going through them. When Marsha placed something on one of the closet shelves, a bag fell down. It contained Kayla's ponytail, which she had left for Marsha to give to Locks of Love.

The Foleys sent the Sotloffs a magnolia sapling, which Art planted in his back yard, next to a towering palm tree that he and Steven had grown from a coconut when Steven was a boy. Sometimes, Art sits beside the magnolia and has conversations with Steven. "Why'd you do that?" he asks. One night, he thought that he heard Shirley listening to television. She was online, watching Steven's execution. Art said, "They don't really show it." Shirley responded, "You see his neck, you see his foot move."

Ed Kassig told me, "I have friends who say we'll get back to doing stuff the way we used to do. That's gone. Now we're looking for a new normal, and where that will be, frankly, I don't know."

According to the F.B.I., hundreds of Americans are kidnapped abroad every year. Currently, thirty-one Americans are being held overseas, a number that includes those taken by drug cartels and other criminal elements. Joshua Boyle and Caitlin Coleman, a married couple, disappeared in Afghanistan in 2012 and are presumed to be held by the Haqqani network. Austin Tice, a photojournalist from Houston, went missing in Syria in August, 2012, several months before Jim Foley was taken. There may be others, but the White House refuses to specify how many Americans are being held by foreign terrorist organizations.

Political kidnappings pose a dilemma for U.S. Presidents. Americans in captivity can, in a sense, hold the entire country hostage. Jimmy Carter's Presidency was destroyed by the Iranian hostage crisis. Ronald Reagan was personally invested in the plight of American families who had relatives held in Lebanon, and members of his Administration authorized the secret sale of arms to Iran, leading to the Iran-Contra scandal. Since then, Administrations have kept Presidents from getting too close to such situations. Obama's predicament was particularly delicate: he had the choice of protecting thousands of Yazidis and Kurds at the risk of a few American lives. It was a gamble that he lost, although it might not have made any difference for Foley, Sotloff, and Kassig.

After the Americans were executed, the U.S. government initiated a policy review, led by the White House and coordinated by Lieutenant General Bennet Sacolick, the director for strategic operational planning at the National Counterterrorism Center.

Sacolick commanded the Delta Force during the second Iraq War. One of his jobs was rescuing hostages. "We never had one killed," he says. His personal view is: "If I ever get taken, I want those guys to rescue me." As an Army man, he adds, "It's got to be the Green Berets."

For the policy review, two dozen American hostage families were interviewed about their experiences with the government. Recently, a proposal went to the White House for Obama's approval. It envisions the creation of a "hostage recovery fusion cell," initially led by the F.B.I., with deputies from State and Defense. These officials would report to a new division of the National Security Council: the hostage-response group. The goal is to fold the expertise of various agencies into a single government unit that will be represented at a high level in the White House. "What we saw in our review was that our hostage policy and the mechanisms in government for engaging with the families were constructed for a different era," Lisa Monaco told me. Third-party efforts, like that of Bradley's team, will have a greater voice, and efforts will be made to share information more freely. "Nothing is going to be satisfactory to parents unless they get their kids back," Monaco says. "But we gotta do better."

The no-ransom policy was never up for review. "The U.S. government will not pay ransoms or make concessions, but it's not going to abandon families when they make private, independent decisions about engaging or negotiating with hostage-takers," Monaco said. "What guides us is a focus on the families' safety and security—are they in jeopardy, are they going to be defrauded?"

I asked Ben Rhodes, the deputy national-security adviser, what he thought the government's responsibility was when Americans are kidnapped abroad. "We have two obligations," he said. "One is we warn our citizens beforehand about places where they may face greater risk. We also have a responsibility to any American citizen to do what we can to get them home."

"You should be aware that we already have a strong in-house candidate."

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Whatever diplomacy the State Department engaged in, it was ineffectual, although Secretary John Kerry made numerous calls, some of them at Bradley's request. Bradley's team, along with the journalists on the Turkish border, repeatedly produced leads that the F.B.I. failed to pursue. When Padnos came home, he was surprised to discover that his iPhone, which had been confiscated by his captors, could still be digitally monitored. He could track the phone's location through various apps that were being used. Jim Foley had also carried an iPhone; April Goble had given it to him. A year after

his kidnapping, she asked an F.B.I. agent if he was following the phone. "Have you got the serial number?" he asked. Even without using the Find My iPhone app, intelligence agencies can locate mobile phones, and can eavesdrop on conversations while the phones are turned off.

The July, 2014, raid on the Raqqa facility may have been a masterpiece of coordination, as General Sacolick called it, but it came too late. The intelligence community was slow to contribute drones and other tools that might have helped the military act more quickly. (The White House told the *Wall Street Journal* that the military's sole request for drone surveillance came just before the Raqqa raid.) The government's greatest failure, however, was its handling of five American families under extraordinary duress. Bradley's team did not succeed in bringing four of those children home, but it did give the families hope and comfort.

Bradley has been trying to learn from his experience. When hostages are taken, U.S. government officials often consider the families and their advocates a distraction; yet such people frequently have resources and networks at hand, and they bring a commitment that is unequalled. "Washington might benefit from positively encouraging this public-private partnership," Bradley says. "The majesty of the American government—plus all its protocols and procedures—can make for slow going. Whereas the rest of us can pick up the phone to call, say, a just-released Italian hostage, the government must labor through diplomatic channels. I don't envy them."

On May 16th, seven months after learning of Kayla Mueller's presence in the Abu Sayyaf household, the Delta Force conducted a raid that killed Abu Sayyaf and about a dozen fighters. The raiders also captured Abu Sayyaf's wife, Umm Sayyaf. American intelligence believes that she was selling female captives as slaves.

Marsha and Carl Mueller think that the U.S. government was leading them on by asking them to send so many e-mails to Kayla's captors. "What is so hard for us is that we had a way to get her home through negotiation, but it was used to stall in hopes of finding these people and getting them," Marsha says. After Kayla's death, representatives from the F.B.I. and the State Department asked the Muellers to sanction a reward for information leading to the capture of Kayla's kidnappers. The reward would be between five million and seven million dollars—about the same as the ransom demand. Carl and Marsha declined.

Theo Padnos sometimes feels burdened by the fact that he remains alive. He is still in touch with his captors, who he thinks might have been able to intercede with ISIS to free the other hostages. Often, when he was in captivity, he imagined being in a bicycle race in which he'd dropped out of the pack, forcing him to finish on his own. "Which brings me to Kayla Mueller," he wrote, in a blog post. "She seems to have been in a mood similar to mine during her captivity. I'm sure she also spent a lot of time in private, telepathic conversations with her family." Padnos quoted from her letter:

None of us could have known it would be this long but know I am also fighting from my side in the ways I am able + I have a lot of fight left inside of me. I am not breaking down + I will not give in no matter how long it takes.

"I'm gonna stop for a moment and talk to you directly, Kayla," Padnos wrote. "If you happen to be reading this, which I think is just maybe possible, I want to tell you: I'm so sorry we let you down. I just cannot imagine how we could have done this. Sweetheart, take care of yourself. O.K.?" ♦



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