

***Understanding the Police Response to the
Takoma Park Bank Robbery Hostage Incident***

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When law enforcement officers were notified of the bank robbery incident in Takoma Park, Maryland, they knew from their experience that such incidents can present great risk to the safety of all involved. Armed robbers can be desperate, unpredictable, and extremely violent. Accordingly, officers responded to the scene with due haste and at great personal risk. They immediately attempted to understand what they were facing. Usually, initial reports and information provided by dispatchers is very sketchy at best. Their first job was to locate where the incident was taking place and then position themselves to contain it. They did not know how many perpetrators were involved, whether death or serious injury had already taken place, what type of weapons were being used by the perpetrator(s), or how many hostages were inside. Early eyewitness reports are often inaccurate and dependable information often doesn't emerge until an incident is stabilized over several hours or longer.

Ideally, responding officers are able to safely secure the immediate perimeter to protect innocent civilians nearby and prevent the spread of risk beyond the confines of the bank. Then, SWAT teams and trained hostage negotiators are called to the scene and an effective crisis management apparatus is put in place. With this approach there is a high probability the incident can be peacefully resolved without loss of life. However, it usually takes time for these

additional dedicated specialty elements to arrive at the scene. In the meantime, the incident is handled by an ad hoc group of police first responders who do their best to safely stabilize the incident.

When a robber is trapped in a bank, threatening to harm hostages gives them a defensive shield to block any contemplated police action. Threatening hostages can also be used to press their demand to be allowed to escape. However, it is fairly uncommon for a bank robber to suddenly try to “break out” of a bank with a hostage in tow. They usually realize that such an escape attempt places them at great personal risk. Experience suggests that most bank robbers simply want money and don’t want to die. It’s hard to say what prompted this robber to suddenly break out of the bank using the frightened hostage as a protective shield. I suspect that his actions were driven from desperation and a desire not to go to jail. As he emerged from the bank, police officers at the scene, while exposed to great personal danger, attempted to convince him to drop his weapon and surrender.

It’s important to note that the robber approached the officers with little warning, not the other way around. The officers were correct in holding their ground. Had they dropped their weapons or backed off, the robber and his traumatized hostage could have departed the area. Could the robber have tried to hijack a nearby car and driver, or harm an innocent bystander, thereby endangering additional life? Might the robber have later harmed or killed the hostage or someone else who got in his way? The answer to these questions is yes. Knowing this, the brave officers properly stood their ground. This firm response prompted the robber to back away from his planned path of escape and in so doing slip on the ice. That allowed the hostage to break away from him. In pursuit, the robber followed the hostage into a group of police officers brandishing his

weapon. In response, these officers righteously discharged their weapons in order to prevent the robber from harming anyone else. Thankfully, they succeeded. Any hesitation in discharging their weapons earlier in the incident was no doubt based on their professional restraint and their reluctance to take a life. In the end, left with no choice, they did what they had to do.

As with all shooting incidents, the police departments involved will thoroughly review this incident and examine their training and procedures to learn lessons and make sure that the actions taken were appropriate. The officers involved are dedicated public servants who risked their lives for us. They deserve the benefit of a doubt in situations of extreme danger where split second decisions must be made, decisions that can mean the difference between life and death and for which there is no opportunity for a “do-over.” Arm chair pundits and so called experts who criticize police actions should be careful to rush to judgment when they were not there in the situation these brave officers faced. We all owe these officers our respect, admiration, and gratitude.