

SUSAN ROCHESTER'S DILEMMA

The case is derived from the original case developed by Dr. Susan Eastman at Indiana University, Bloomington. Though real-life details are used to simulate an actual event, the case is entirely fictitious. There is no public knowledge that ABC or any other network is currently planning a television program of the nature described here.

The city of Detroit and the south side of Dearborn, a nearby suburb, contain over 20,000 middle eastern Americans, including those of Syrian, Libyan, Iraqi and Iranian ancestry. In the geographic cluster there are several churches and mosques, two community centers, a large shopping area, and several schools. The schools are mainly attended by children of Middle Eastern descent. Until recently, the Middle Eastern American communities have enjoyed very good relations with the rest of the city's more than 7.5 million people.

Unfortunately, the September 11 attacks and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan seriously damaged relations between Detroit's Middle Eastern community and the rest of the city. In the immediate months following each of those events, the press reported several incidents of violence toward Detroit/South Dearborn residents. The incidents included several cases of physical attacks, as well as individual harassment, stalking, and intimidating messages left on a community bulletin board. Some Middle Eastern-American businesses also reported cases of vandalism. Several area schools were temporarily closed in the aftermath the September 11 attack for fear of attacks on Arab-American children and teachers.

Community leaders in Detroit and the Office of the Governor of Michigan appealed several times over television for tolerance and peace. Local newspapers reminded residents of the city that the majority of Middle Eastern-Americans are patriotic citizens who despise the terrorists who carried out the attacks on America. The Middle Eastern-Americans also grieve the loss of life as do their fellow US citizens. The local media ran editorials and articles stressing the long history of peaceful relations between the Middle Eastern community and the rest of the city. These efforts of the political leadership and the press had their intended effect, and no major incidents of violence had been reported in the past year.

Now several years after the September 11 attacks, **ABC** has scheduled a special episode of **DESIGNATED SURVIVOR** to air between 10/9c Wednesday night during the upcoming fall season. The plot capitalizes on the public's interest in terrorism and the 18TH anniversary of the September 11 attacks. **ABC** is counting on this episode to boost the show's ratings, which were lackluster last seasons and the show is being considered for cancellation.

At a recent **ABC** affiliates meeting, network executives noted that the loss of even one large city would make it impossible for **ABC** to effectively compete with the other networks (because of loss of audience parity) and they stressed the importance of a strong showing. Consequently, the network has given this episode an unusual amount of hype in the press and in on-air promos. **ABC** has also offered significant co-op funds for multiple TV and online spots and print ads promoting the show. The network has put a lot of pressure on its affiliates to clear the show.

WXYZ is the **ABC** network affiliate in Detroit, the nation's seventh-ranked television market. Susan Rochester is the Program Manager. The station's Wednesday night ratings are sliding, and Ms. Rochester expects this special **DESIGNATED SURVIVOR** episode to boost ratings for the station. She supported **ABC** by running extra promos for the upcoming special episode of **DESIGNATED**

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SURVIVOR during the prior week and persuaded the promotion department to use the network's co-op money to purchase *TV Guide* and local newspaper ads promoting the episode. In addition, in last week's department head's meeting, the General Manager, Paul Rolfe made a big point of the fact that the station needs revenue because it is making very little profit in the current quarter. The agencies and break spots within the one-hour special episode have been presold at top dollar (*about \$18,000 above normal rates*).

This morning at the department head's meeting, WXYZ's General Manager, Paul Rolfe, raised the question of whether the station should air or preempt this episode in light of national and local events. He pointed out that the plot line reflects fears of a new terrorist attack on America. The story involves an Arab terrorist's plans to bomb an industrial city in the northern U.S. Mr. Rolfe further observed that the local Detroit press solidly denounced the one-hour episode both for its stereotyping of certain characters in the show, and for its inappropriate timing for the ethnically divided city. Several people had pointed out the likelihood that the program will rekindle anti-Middle Eastern feeling in the city, and they have ominously predicted more violent confrontations. The General Manager also reminded the department heads of the widely-read editorials in the local press calling for an end to religiously and ethnically motivated harassment, and the supporting public service announcements carried by WXYZ itself.

Before the Paul Rolfe makes a final decision, he formally requested the station's Program Manager prepare a firm recommendation to air or preempt the episode. He also asked that the recommendation be accompanied by a list of consequences for revenue, ratings and public relations. The program has already been cleared, but there are still three (3) business days before the show, so there is time to reconsider the station's position.

Susan Rochester, the Program Manager is inexperienced, having been promoted from the assistant program manager's position a little over a year ago. During the last year, the ratings books have shown a small but consistent decline in the ratings for WXYZ. This makes Ms. Rochester somewhat nervous. It is unusual for the General Manager to make such a request, and even more unusual for him to ask for it in writing. The Program Manager feels it is a test, and that her job is at stake.

THE GROUP ASSIGNMENT:

Instructions: Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the recommendation to air or not to air. Analyze the consequences for revenue, ratings and public relations for either decision as required by the GM- Paul Rolfe. Provide a written response to the questions below. The response should not exceed two pages. Include the group and individual students' names, course and section number. Submit a hard copy of the case in class.

1. List THREE reasons why the station should air the episode, and THREE reasons why the station should not air the episode.
2. Recommend either **YES**, the station should air the episode OR **NO**, the station should not air the episode. Explain the reason for the decision.
3. Describe how you will handle the consequences of your group's decision on revenue, ratings and public relations to the General Manager.