

# Hero-making as a Defence against the Anxiety of Responsibility and Risk: A Case Study of US Airways Flight 1549<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

By examining US Airways Flight 1549's glider-like landing on New York City's Hudson River on 15 January 2009, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of the psycho- and socio-analytic aspects of American culture. Using system psychodynamics as a conceptual framework, the essay uses this case study to demonstrate how individual psychology, group dynamics, and systemic influences intertwined to tap a collective societal need for a traditional male hero to salve the cultural disillusionment created by corporate scandals, executive greed, job loss, and terrorist attacks in post-9/11 America. Understanding how this phenomenon occurred helps us grapple with psycho-cultural factors that favour searching for a saviour over recognising collective responsibilities that encourage more collaborative approaches to crisis decision making.

*Key words:* system psychodynamics, crisis decision making, heroes.

'Everything I had done in my career had in some way been a preparation for that moment'.

Captain Chesley B. Sullenberger III, US Airways Captain, Flight 1549, after landing his airliner on the Hudson River (Sullenberger, 2009a)

## THE INCIDENT

On 15 January 2009, US Airways Flight 1549 departed New York City's LaGuardia Airport at 3.25 pm en route to Charlotte, North Carolina. The co-pilot, First Officer Jeffrey Skiles, was flying the aircraft when, about ninety seconds after take-off, the Airbus A320 struck a large flock of Canada Geese, ingesting birds into both engines.

'It sounded like it was "raining birds" ' the captain, Chesley 'Sully' Sullenberger III, recalled. They filled the windscreen, 'large dark birds' like a 'black and white photograph'. He felt vibrations,

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could smell ‘cooked bird’ and felt ‘a dramatic loss of thrust’. ‘He was surprised at how symmetrical the loss of thrust was’; there was no yaw or sideward motion (NTSB, 2009a). It had to be a complete loss of both engines. ‘It was the worst sickening pit of your stomach, falling through the floor feeling I’ve ever felt in my life,’ the captain recalled. ‘I knew immediately it was very bad’ (Couric, 2009a).

Radioing for assistance, Captain Sullenberger reported, ‘Cactus 1539 [*sic*] hit birds. We lost thrust in both engines. We’re turning back towards LaGuardia’ (FAA, 2009).

Air Traffic Controller Patrick Harten immediately stopped all departures and responded, ‘Do you want to try to land runway one three?’, which was the shortest turn for the Airbus-turned-glider.

‘We’re unable. We may end up in the Hudson.’

‘Okay, what do you need to land?’

‘I’m not sure we can make any runway. What’s over to our right, anything in New Jersey? Maybe Teterboro.’

‘Off to your right is Teterboro Airport. Do you want to try and go to Teterboro?’

‘Yes.’

‘Cactus 1529 [*sic*] turn right two-eight-zero. You can land runway one at Teterboro.’

Passing through 2,000 feet and descending fast over New York City, the captain made his decision.

‘We can’t do it. We’re gonna be in the Hudson’.

That was the last radio transmission from Cactus 1549.

With both engines dead, attempts to restart futile, and the water approaching swiftly, Captain Sullenberger asked his co-pilot ‘Got any ideas?’

‘Actually not’, he replied.

Moments later the Airbus skidded across the surface of the Hudson River, sending up huge plumes of water until it came to rest just north of New York City’s 39th Street ferry dock. Less than six minutes had elapsed since take-off. Within moments, an *ad hoc* flotilla of waterway ferries, Coast Guard vessels, and police-, fire- and tug-boats converged on the scene, expeditiously evacuating all passengers and crew safely. Only five people were seriously injured with broken bones, twenty-six were transported to local hospitals and the rest were treated for hypothermia and sent home (NTSB, 2009b).

To many, it seemed as if a miracle had occurred. It was an unprecedented failure in an unforgiving environment with little time to prepare or react. Later, Captain Sullenberger even doubted that the emergency could be effectively mimicked in the flight simulator.

None the less, there is more to learn from this scenario about cultural understanding of response to crisis and risk.

### METHODOLOGY

The analysis offered in this article is inspired by two popular research methods used in leadership, organisation, and management studies of disaster: text-based research (Snook, 2000; Feldman, 2004; Brown, 2005; Stein, 2007; Long, 2008; Tempest, Starkey, and Ennew, 2007) and psychoanalytic study (Schwartz, 1987, 1989; Hirschhorn, 1997; Elmes and Barry, 1999; Kayes, 2002, 2004, 2006; Stein, 2004; Fraher, 2004, 2005, 2011; Weick, 1993, 1995) with a specific focus on examining factors that contribute to performance breakdown. Drawing on a wide range of disciplines including psychology, sociology, human factors, ergonomics, and engineering, crisis decision-making studies analyse what went wrong in infamous examples of organisational disasters such as the NASA Columbia and Challenger crash, the 1996 Mount Everest climbing catastrophe, and the Enron scandal, to name a few. In such studies, researchers use text-based research and psychoanalytic study to tease out performance breakdown so that others can learn from previous organisational mistakes.

For example, Feldman (2004) found that time pressure and a privileging of quantitative data over other information sources at NASA created an organisational dynamic predisposed to launch, daring engineers to *prove it was unsafe* to fly rather than the reverse. This distorted safety culture directly contributed to both the *Challenger* and *Columbia* space shuttle disasters.

Elmes and Barry (1999) analysed the 1996 Mount Everest climbing disaster that killed five people, deducing that commercial developments in the high-altitude climbing field fostered the emergence of competitive and regressive dynamics and narcissism in a way that undermined teamwork. Through this lens, disasters are seen to result from the complex 'interaction of particular psychological and sociostructural dynamics' (p. 164), not just individual error.

Stein (2007) examined the 2001 collapse of Enron, identifying micro and macro factors which helped generate an Oedipal mindset in company leaders resulting in arrogance, insularity, and ultimately the company's demise.

And Fraher (2011) analysed several fatal organisation failures such as the USS *Greeneville* collision, the Hillsborough football crush, American Airline in-flight breakup, and the Bristol Royal Infirmary paediatric fatalities, to demonstrate how teamwork is often more important than technical prowess in averting disasters.

Using similar methods – text-based research and psychoanalytic study – to a different end, this essay explores the *successful avoidance of disaster* through the case study of Flight 1549. Analysing data from Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) reports, National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) documents, crew and survivor interviews, books, television newscasts, newspaper and magazine articles, it provides a way to understand how what ‘went right’ on the Hudson River that day combined with other cultural influences to provoke a unique collective reading of this accident in America.

In particular, the article explores the tendency among US media, politicians, and society at large to avoid noticing the extraordinary teamwork in favour of celebrating the actions of one hero-individual that fateful day. Examining micro and macro elements as well as the interaction of psychological and socio-structural dynamics through individual, group, and systemic factors, this methodology enables us to comprehend the deep cultural strands framing America’s enthrallment with individual heroes. Through this systems psychodynamics approach it becomes clear that hero-making can be a collective defence against the anxiety of accepting responsibility and risk. The ideas developed in this article have application as an indicator of broad themes in contemporary culture regarding the use of heroes as a defence, particularly in post-9/11 America.

### THE MEDIA RESPONSE

Almost immediately after Cactus 1549 touched down, the news media began referring to Captain Sullenberger as ‘the hero-pilot’ (Wilson and Buettner, 2009: A1). Within hours, New York’s Governor, David A. Paterson, proclaimed the landing ‘a miracle on the Hudson’ and New York City’s Mayor, Michael R. Bloomberg, himself a pilot, called it a ‘masterful job’. The entire nation became riveted by the ‘hero-pilot’, whose uniform had ‘barely a wrinkle’, tie was hardly loosened and ‘wispy grey hair and David Niven mustache were unruffled’ (Rivera, 2009). Mayor Bloomberg thanked the captain ‘for renewing our faith in the strength of human spirit’, emphasizing how ‘Captain Cool’ (Goldenberg, 2009) walked the cabin aisles *twice* to ensure no one was left behind before he exited (McFadden, 2009).

In the days following the accident, both President Bush and President-Elect Obama telephoned the captain offering thanks and congratulations. Captain Sullenberger attended President Obama’s inauguration in Washington DC, the National Football League’s *Superbowl XLIII* in Tampa, the Oscar Awards in Los Angeles, and appeared on several television shows in New York City. Wearing a

Giants jersey inscribed with 'Sully' and '155', the number of survivors, captain threw out the first pitch of the Giants season opener in San Francisco. And even the twice bankrupt US Airway's stock price soared in celebration, up 13% the day after the accident.

With the story headlined everywhere, America was captivated. Yet, while the general public learned about Captain Sully within hours, *The New York Times* did not report the names or describe the brave actions of the other crew members – First Officer Jeff Skiles and Flight Attendants Doreen Walsh, Sheila Dail, and Donna Dent – until *three days* after the accident. The technical prowess of Captain Sullenberger – an Air Force Academy graduate, military jet pilot and thirty-year airline veteran – dead-sticking his airliner to a perfect seaplane-like landing on the Hudson River seemed so compellingly romantic it was difficult not to be seduced.

Yet, although Captain Sullenberger did make an extraordinary landing, the reality was that the successful rescue of all people aboard the jet was the result of excellent teamwork and not only the work of a single hero-pilot. Understanding why teamwork was less well known or emphasised might help us grapple with psycho-cultural factors that favour searching for a saviour to lead us out of crisis over fostering more collaborative decision-making approaches to crisis management.

### THE 'HERO' AS A CONSTRUCT

As a construct, the 'hero' serves many social functions. Historically, the hero was a mythological god like Hercules, religious prophet like Mahomet, or king like Napoleon (Carlyle, 1942). In these roles the hero, part-god, part-human and nearly always male, provided an appealing internal symbol – whether it be of strength, virility, courage, nationalism, cunning, or goodness – which other men could aspire to and pass along in stories to future generations.

One of the major epic examples is Homer's *Odysseus*, a poem about a warrior-turned-adventurer who journeys for ten years after the Trojan War before finally returning home. This story remains popular because of its intriguing allusion to life as an odyssey, a long wandering travail with frequent changes of fortune. Many contemporary heroic sagas display similar patterns, rooted more in myth than historical fact. Like Sullenberger's storybook tale from small town boy to Air Force jet pilot and exemplary airline captain, typically the hero's journey begins with a departure from the comforts of home, a call to adventure, followed by a trial of the hero's skills and commitment. Finally, he returns home and struggles to

reconcile his new hero status and two worlds of life experiences (Campbell, 1949).

As society evolved from an oral tradition of heroic storytelling to the techno-savvy media of today, the notion of the hero archetype changed as well. Helped along by the atrocities committed by self-proclaimed heroes such as Hitler, Mao, Mussolini, and Stalin, interest in hero-worship and the stories of 'Great Men' gave way to different images of greatness (Dubner, 2001). In post-Second World War America, for instance, a backlash against the Vietnam War, corrupt politicians, and middle-class organisational life combined with the increasing influence of social movements and the entertainment industry to generate a new type of American hero. As trust in establishment figures waned, this new archetype 'turned on, tuned in, and dropped out' by 'questioning authority' and 'doing his own thing'. Musicians like Bob Dylan, artists like Andy Warhol, counter-culture leaders like Timothy Leary, and poets like Jack Kerouac gained American favour, while soldiers returning from Vietnam were spat upon. Emerging at just the right emotional moment in history, these iconoclastic heroes became an enduring internalised image, appealing to followers' imagination while satiating their desire to connect to something larger than themselves.

The American hero is a reflection of our fantasised selves – what we wanted the characteristics of 'an American' to be – reflecting society's innermost hopes and beliefs in a public way, a barometer of public opinion (Fishwick, 1969). America has always loved the mythic rugged individual, the phallic hero. No longer interested in the heroes' odyssey, the nation that developed Hollywood and mass media wanted sound-bites about the latest rags-to-riches athlete, movie star, or billionaire, not the whole epic saga.

New American archetypes emerged whose achievements were often based on materialistic success. A gradual yet continuous movement away from the idea of heroism as a journey of public service, character development and commitment to others, towards singularly unique talents often based on good luck and individualism took place. Investors like Warren Buffett, software entrepreneurs like Bill Gates, economists like Alan Greenspan, hedge fund managers like George Soros, and real estate developers like Donald Trump captivated America's attention, often simply because of their astounding wealth and power and the lifestyle it afforded them. A Google search of any one of the individuals mentioned generates millions of world wide web hits – Warren Buffet tops the list at 5.7 million – evidencing this fascination.

After 9/11, America's definition of heroism continued to evolve. No doubt influenced by terrorist attacks, Iraq and Afghanistan wars, and the contentious politics of the time, Americans now reportedly define heroism as 'risking oneself to benefit others', 'acting selflessly', and 'confronting risk' (Rankin and Eagly, 2008, p. 414). This represents a huge shift from previous decades' studies, which often found fictional characters like Superman or actors like Tom Cruise named in polls of the most admired (Jolley, 2007, p. 24). Today, Americans are more likely to identify activists like Martin Luther King Jr, politicians like Abraham Lincoln, rescuers like fire-fighters, and defenders like soldiers as American heroes (Rankin and Eagly, 2008).

America has had a long fascination with heroes and, perhaps more than any other nation, has perfected the 'art of hero-making'. Who can forget the image of Charles Lindbergh landing in Paris, Martin Luther King Jr marching on Washington DC, or John F. Kennedy asking us to 'ask not'? Just as enduring are the images of US marines raising the American flag atop Mount Sarabachi during the Second World War, or New York City firemen charging up the stairs to rescue people from the World Trade Centre Towers in 2001. Although these individuals and teams were obviously *real*, their heroism also reflected a social construction that reflected the motives, ideologies, and needs of observers at the time (Boorstein, 1987).

For instance, after initially suffering large numbers of casualties in Asia during the Second World War, the Mount Sarabachi photograph was used to symbolise a turning point in the war, bolstering public support. Upon seeing the image, President Franklin Roosevelt ordered the photographed marines stateside for a savings bond tour which generated over \$26 billion, twice the initial goal. Similarly, 9/11 images of dedicated fire-fighters, police, and other rescue workers selflessly charging into the collapsing twin towers and searching the rubble for survivors were used to enflame already raw public emotions, building support for President Bush's 'war on terror' and the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

What does the social construction of Captain Sullenberger as the pilot-hero tell us about the needs of Americans in January 2009? In other words, let's explore some of the possible purposes it served for America to make Captain Sullenberger the hero-pilot at this point in time.

## A DECADE OF ESCALATING FRUSTRATIONS

In the opening years of the twenty-first century, Americans endured shocking examples of corporate scandal and flawed regulatory

oversight such as Enron and Arthur Andersen in 2001, WorldCom, Halliburton, and Global Crossing in 2002, Peregrine in 2003, and Tyco in 2004, among many others. Frustrated by greedy executives who lacked any semblance of personal ethics or commitment to the greater good, along with the bursting of the dot.com bubble, many Americans moved their money out of the stock market and into real estate, pursuing the 'American Dream' of home ownership (Patsuris, 2002).

Capitalising on low interest rates and easy credit, these home purchases drove real estate values to record highs and the quality of mortgages to all-time lows. Bank executives devised new ways to let home buyers leverage themselves to the hilt through sub-prime mortgages, while protecting themselves against risk through suspiciously complex, yet apparently legal, financial strategies. Working in cahoots with other agencies, lenders such as Countrywide Mortgage used regulators like Moody's Investor Services, the oldest and most prestigious US credit-ranking agency, to inflate their ratings and attract investors, generating billions of dollars in revenue. The house of cards fell in 2007 when banks' investments in the sub-prime market turned toxic and home owners defaulted on their ballooning mortgages. As anxieties escalated, the stock market plummeted and financial panic spread unabated, leading to corporate cut-backs, downsizing, and record numbers of employee layoffs.

The four months preceding Cactus 1549's Hudson River landing were equally tumultuous on Wall Street, creating a ripple of shockwaves throughout America. Venerable institutions such as Bear Stearns, Lehman Brothers, Washington Mutual, Wachovia, Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, and the American International Group (AIG) stumbled into bankruptcy, often after hefty government bail-outs. Although each of these failures was significant in its own right, when faced in rapid succession, the sudden collapse of such long-established organisations caused the US economy to screech to a halt, prompting comparisons to the 'Great Depression' as unemployment reached the highest rate in nearly three decades (Goodman and Healy, 2009).

Meanwhile, another shocking example of overwhelming executive greed and ineffectual industry oversight emerged in late 2008 when Bernard L. Madoff confessed to orchestrating the world's largest Ponzi scheme. Cosy with industry regulators, Madoff's \$65 billion international fraud continued for decades, only unravelling when investors, rattled by the economic downturn, began withdrawing funds faster than Madoff could replenish. In a sign of the liminality of the hero image, after the hoax was revealed, one dumbfounded

Madoff colleague noted, Bernie 'was a hero to us. The head of Nasdaq. We were proud of everything he had accomplished. Now, the hero has vanished' (Creswell and Thomas, 2009).

The proverbial last straw for many Americans – several million of whom had lost their jobs, homes, and middle-class way of life – was executive bonuses. Despite executive mismanagement, crippling corporate losses, and multibillion-dollar government bail-outs, many Wall Street employees and corporate executives still collected an astonishing \$18.4 billion in bonuses in 2008, one of the largest paydays in history (Story, 2008). Perhaps most shocking was AIG, which received \$170 billion in taxpayer bail-out money yet still paid \$165 million in employee bonuses, in some cases to the very same people who caused the financial crisis (Andrews and Baker, 2009). Outraged, President Obama committed to pursuing 'every single legal avenue to block these bonuses' (Andrews and Calmes, 2009) while Congress rushed to pass a 90% retroactive tax to show angry taxpayers that they intended to recoup their money (Hulse and Herszenhorn, 2009).

Still another outrageous example was when America's 'Big Three' car manufacturers, hit hard by the economic downturn, consumers' inability to borrow money, and their own poor management decisions, turned to the US government for aid. Even as executives travelled the 525 miles from Detroit to Washington, hat-in-hand, to beg for a government bail-out, they could hardly contain their gluttony: each flew in a separate personal jet (Long, 2008). New York Congressman Gary L. Ackerman enquired, 'Couldn't you all have downgraded to first class or jet-pooled, or something, to get here? It would have at least sent a message that you do get it' (Schwartz, 2008).

As Fishwick (1969) observes, 'Heroes are mirrors of the times' (p. 2). Americans, fed up with corporate corruption, executive greed, managerial whining, and regulatory shenanigans, were desperate for an old-fashioned, stand-up guy; a mascot for the working man. Perhaps that is part of Captain Sullenberger's hero appeal, he does appear to '*get it*', a hardworking man with a high sense of personal ethics and commitment to the greater good. A man aware of his role, focused on his task, in touch with the risks, yet committed to the outcome. Meticulously dressed, perfectly manicured, selflessly humble, rock steady, and pragmatically articulate. He served his country, did his job, and loves his family. He offered America an image of how heroes could behave: selflessly with great competence, and a sense of the greater good in mind.

It seemed that the American media had finally found someone who could measure up to the 'good' image of authority internalised in

their youth. Making Sullenberger the hero-pilot allowed Americans to collectively heal, reintegrating mythological definitions of heroism as service, character, and commitment with more modern notions of those possessing unique talents and good luck, exemplars of American individualism. Like John Wayne's veteran pilot character in the 1954 film *The High and the Mighty*, Captain Sullenberger had the emotional intelligence, cool headedness, and confident courage under pressure to do the right thing, no matter the odds. Not since well before 9/11 did US citizens feel so collectively proud of being an American as they did following the Hudson River landing.

### **SPLITTING: THE 'GREAT REGRESSION'**

Psychodynamically speaking, groups often split-off uncomfortable negative feelings and project them on to others, scapegoating individuals and groups while retaining positive feelings for themselves. In January 2009, the extraordinary lack of ethics in corporate America made it easy for people to condemn self-serving bankers, weak industry regulators, and greedy executives as 'all bad', a symbolic repository for negative images of the hero. Keeping the problem external unconsciously relieved individual Americans of responsibility for their role in creating the catastrophe, acting as a defence against accepting risk and responsibility. Few wanted to acknowledge the repercussions of America's demand for low priced goods, hunger for high investment returns, and obligation to expensive homes and mortgages.

Emerging at just the right emotional moment, Captain Sullenberger provided the 'all good' image Americans desperately needed to internalise. He became a barometer of public opinion, a reflection of our fantasised selves – selfless hardworking Americans who act for the greater good, not greedy Americans interested only in themselves and materialism – reflecting society's innermost hopes and beliefs in a public way. As a result, the emerging 'Great Recession' with its stock plunge, job losses, and foreclosures contributed to a collective 'Great Regression' in which strong paternal symbols kept the world safe.

An earlier example of this heroic image-making occurred in November 2008 when, amid great hope for the future, Americans elected Barack Hussein Obama as the 44th President of the United States. Quickly developing an unprecedented \$787 billion stimulus plan to jumpstart the economy, Obama promised to create new jobs, modernise the nation's infrastructure, enhance energy independence, expand educational opportunities, improve health care, provide tax

relief, and protect those in greatest need. It seemed America had created another hero.

Yet, what seems intriguing about these two examples of hero-making is that although followers were ready to make each man a Messiah, they were both reluctant heroes. Each was humble about his achievements, recognising that his team's accomplishments were no miracle but rather the result of hard work and preparation. As Captain Sullenberger calmly observed, 'For 42 years, I had made small, regular deposits of education, training and experience and the experience balance was sufficient that on January 15th, I could make a sudden, large withdrawal' (Sullenberger, 2009a).

In another example, just five days after the Hudson River landing, President Obama focused the nation on the work ahead in his Inaugural Address by holding America responsible for 'our collective failure to make hard choices and prepare the nation for a new age' (Obama, 2009). Similarly, Captain Sullenberger spoke to a Congressional hearing about 'what is really at stake' in air safety, describing the impact of consumers' desire for cheap airfares, bankruptcies, mergers, and weak management as 'an economic tsunami' on airline safety. 'I am worried,' Captain Sullenberger confessed, if things do not change 'the airline piloting profession will not' continue to 'attract the best and the brightest.' Future pilots will be 'less experienced and less skilled' and this will have 'negative consequences' for 'safe air travel and our country's economy and security' (Sullenberger, 2009b).

Both President Obama and Captain Sullenberger used their authority to refocus the country's priorities, urging Americans to take responsibility for what the USA had become as a way to unite the fragmented 'good' and 'bad' images in a healthy way. Yet maintaining this unity can be difficult. We do not like to face the anxieties that these defences were created to shield us from. Although we love and admire the hero because he saves us, there is a negative side to heroism as well. We envy the hero for his courage and hate him for his independence. We cannot control him and this frightens us because it feels dangerous. And, because he does not need us the same way we need him, we fear his power and influence, making it easy to scapegoat (Hirschhorn and Young, 1993).

#### **TEAMWORK: THE UNTOLD STORY OF COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY**

If the hero-pilot was not the singular saviour averting crisis on 15 January 2009, but rather was created through the collective needs of

the American psyche, then what prevented this extraordinarily challenging situation from escalating into disaster and what anxieties about responsibility and risk are masked by ignorance of these other factors mitigating disaster?

For starters, excellent teamwork displayed by Patrick Harten and his fellow air traffic controllers (ATC) prevented the already dire situation from deteriorating into tragedy. A ten-year ATC veteran, Harten communicated with fourteen different people in fewer than five minutes, diverting other aeroplanes while assisting the aircrew with their final landing decision. Unlike previous accidents where ATC distracted pilots from completing critical tasks, Mr Harten allowed the aircrew to set the pace. When required, he asked specific pertinent questions to make sure the entire team was on the same page. And when asked a question, he replied with a short, specific answer. Working collaboratively with the crew, he helped them identify the resources available and set a tone of calm professional support, all under incredible time constraints (Lowy, 2009).

Second, the actions of the experienced professionals on board the aircraft were also essential in averting disaster. Initially, First Officer Skiles was flying the aircraft. A thirty-two-year aviation industry veteran with over 20,000 flight hours and significant experience as a US Airways captain himself, Skiles transferred aircraft control to the captain for landing and the crew immediately worked together attempting engine restarts, activating the auxiliary power unit, and running emergency checklists. Captain Sullenberger reported,

My physiological reaction was strong. I had to force myself to use my training and stay calm. I knew I needed to touch down with the wings exactly level, nose slightly up and at a descent rate that was survivable, just above our minimum flying speed but not below it. And I needed to make all these things happen simultaneously. (Couric, 2009a)

Ninety seconds before hitting the water, Captain Sullenberger made an announcement to the flight attendants and passengers: 'Brace for impact!' This was the flight attendants' signal to prepare passengers for an emergency landing. 'I heard the flight attendants begin shouting their commands to passengers', the captain recalled, saying

'Heads down. Stay down.' I could hear them clearly. They were chanting it in unison over and over again. I felt very comforted by that. I knew immediately that they were on the same page. That if I could land the airplane, that they could get them out safely. (*ibid.*)

Similarly, Captain Sullenberger described the ‘amazingly good’ crew co-ordination on the flightdeck ‘considering how suddenly the event occurred, how severe it was, and the little time they had’ to prepare. In particular, he emphasised, although they ‘did not have time to exchange words’ through ‘observation’ and ‘hearing’, he ‘knew’ that First Officer Stiles ‘knew what he had to do’, that they ‘were on the same page’ and this comforted him. First Officer Stiles made similar comments. Each knew their ‘specific roles’, what the other ‘was doing and they interacted when they needed to’. Captain Sullenberger credited crew resource management (CRM) training, a teamwork philosophy developed in aviation in the 1980s, for giving them ‘the skills and tools that they needed to build a team quickly and open lines of communication, share goals and work together’ (NTSB, 2009a).

As Captain Sullenberger alludes to, these psychologically stabilising forces – for instance, observing his co-pilot was on the same page and hearing that flight attendants were complying with established procedures – built confidence in the team, assuring teammates that roles were clear and tasks were being accomplished. The team was thinking through crisis (Fraher, 2011). This confidence helped other teammates concentrate on their tasks, such as Captain Sullenberger’s challenge of landing on water. If he had been distracted by teammates not completing their duties, things may have ended differently.

Flight Attendants Donna Dent and Sheila Dail were sitting next to each other in the front of the aircraft, Doreen Welsh was in the rear. Everyone suspected the aeroplane had hit some birds, they recalled. No one knew for sure. Ms Welsh noted there was some passenger ‘panic in the back’ but ‘I calmed everyone down’ saying ‘We might have lost one engine. We’ll circle around’ and return to the airport. When she heard the call for ‘brace’, Ms Dail recalled, ‘I thought, “Okay, we’re gonna crash on the runway”’. No one imagined that they were landing on water. Even after touchdown, Ms Dent said she was looking outside and ‘still thinking well maybe there is water next to the runway that we just landed on.’ Ms Welsh agrees, ‘When I got out of my seat and saw that water, it was the most shocked I’ve ever been in my life’ (Couric, 2009b).

Yet, as a testament to their professionalism and training, they quickly adjusted their mindset to the demands of the situation and began evacuating. ‘I could see that the water was below me so I opened my door and my emergency escape chute automatically inflated’, Ms Dail recollected. Then the passengers ‘started coming’ and ‘there was no pushing and shoving’, it was quite orderly.

Following the crew's directions, passengers expeditiously egressed, leaving belongings behind. Some assisted parents with babies and older passengers until everyone had safely evacuated (Couric, 2009b).

Within minutes, local ferries, Coast Guard, and New York City Fire and Police Department vehicles arrived on scene to help with the rescue and recovery effort, mobilising their major emergency response teams. About sixty-five ambulances, 140 fire-fighters and police squad cars, helicopters, boats and rescue divers responded (Heightman, 2009). One of the greatest strokes of luck in averting this disaster was that it was still daylight, the surface of the river was calm, and boat traffic was light just before the evening rush when New York City commuters head back home to New Jersey. Local ferry captains, most of whom had grown up working on the river, were experienced at water rescue – albeit not typically from a floating airliner – and quickly arrived on the scene from the nearby piers.

The first ferry, *Thomas Jefferson*, arrived within five minutes of the aeroplane hitting the water. Captain Vincent Lombardi radioed the Coast Guard then helped deckhands, ticket agents, and bus drivers hoist people from the water on board the vessels. Captain Brittany Catanzaro of the *Governor Thomas H. Kean*, second on the scene, recalled, 'You train so much, you don't have to think about it. I didn't have to give any orders to the crew.' They simply knew what to do. Deckhand Cosmo Mezzina agreed, focusing on the task was the priority. 'You don't look right or left. You just look right in front of you, just to save, to rescue those people' (Dwyer, 2009).

Given the 36° water and 11° wind chill factor, temperatures that wintry January day, the expeditious rescue of crash survivors was paramount. Particularly critical was the fact that the human body loses heat twenty-five times faster in cold water than air. Therefore, people had less than thirty minutes before their body core temperature would drop and hypothermia would set in. Depending upon the individual's health, physical fitness, body mass index, clothing, physical activity and posture in the water, it could take significantly less time. However, many individuals who die from cold water immersion do not die from hypothermia. They suffer a heart attack either before becoming hypothermic or hours later, after rescue. Therefore, the quality and timing of medical treatment was also vitally important to survivability. As boats rescued victims, they dropped them on both sides of the river, distributing survivors around local hospitals rather than overwhelming one facility. This ensured timely, quality care for the survivors.

On 11 June 2009, the National Transportation Safety Board concluded three days of public hearings in Washington DC investigating Flight 1549. Juxtaposed with the solemn news of the recent disappearance of Air France Flight 447 over the Atlantic and crash of Colgan Air Flight 3407 near Buffalo, this near-miss success story provided the peculiar comfort of a modern miracle. Yet, at the NTSB hearings our hero-pilot Captain Sullenberger testified about an unsung hero. He celebrated the 'importance of Crew Resource Management' and of 'a dedicated, well-experienced, highly trained crew that can overcome substantial odds, work together as a team'. *Teamwork* was the hero averting disaster. Most reports explain disaster as the result of a single flawed decision made by an operator (e.g., 'pilot error'). So it seems reasonable to assume Captain Sullenberger is the 'hero'. Yet, this assumption is dangerous, as Captain Sullenberger himself attests. Its danger is cutting ourselves off from resources that help avert, or respond to, a crisis. These resources include an increased willingness not to panic and hope for a saviour but rather to step up, accept the risks, and take responsibility.

Let us now return to our previous hypothesis, that America's sophisticated hero-making process dynamically evolves the image of heroism to reflect the needs of the observers as much as the deeds of the hero, applying it to US Airways Flight 1549. What does the social construction of Captain Sullenberger as 'the pilot-hero' tell us about the psychological needs of Americans in January 2009? In other words, let's explore some of the possible purposes it served for America to make Captain Sullenberger the hero-pilot.

## DISCUSSION

Freud (1960) believed that individuals seek illusions to avoid reality and protect themselves from the uncomfortable emotional truths of group life. After enduring near-record job losses, foreclosures, Ponzi schemes, government bail-outs, and a seemingly endless parade of greedy executives, Americans seemed desperate for an old-fashioned, stand-up guy to make them feel safe in 2009. The terror of facing feelings of helplessness and powerlessness led many to focus emotions on one person as a 'hero-leader' imagined to be all powerful, thereby allowing the dysfunctional and destructive aspects of the system to go unexamined.

As Bion (1961) noted, when a group is in this dependency basic assumption, it operates as if members have joined together to be sustained by a single leader on whom they completely depend. Once people have deposited their psychological needs upon this hero-leader, there is a regressive wish that they can now sit back and wait

for him to solve their problems, acting as if they know nothing, have no skills, and are helpless. By projecting their anxiety on to the hero, followers free themselves 'from the anxiety and responsibility of taking action, seeking autonomy, taking risks, or expressing their own fears and feelings' (Gemmill and Oakley, 1997, p. 278).

Interestingly, Winnicott (1987) noted, when a group is most elated, expressing manic emotions like the excitement that ensued in the weeks following the Hudson River landing, it is most apt to develop defences and less inclined to look at the serious aspects of life. In projecting their sense of incompleteness upon the hero-leader, individuals become caught in an illusion of helplessness that limits their own contributions as well as debilitates the authority of the leader. This mindlessness allows people to stop thinking and feeling anxious in a form of 'learned helplessness' (Gemmill and Oakley, 1997, p. 278).

The dilemma in this hero-making process is that Americans abdicated their own collective responsibility for creating a culture in which these activities occurred, attempting to eliminate risk from the equation. They conveniently failed, for instance, to comprehend the implications of the desire for mortgaged homes, cheap airfares, and high returns on investments on the industries which provide these goods and services, wanting instead to reap the benefits without sharing the risks. By making Captain Sullenberger America's hero, it validated this 'good' internalised image, convincing people that even with bankruptcies, mergers, downsizing, and salary cuts, the economy is still safe because 'heroes' are at the controls.

The danger in this 'hero-making' defence is that when this dependency dynamic emerges, people suppress their awareness of others, fantasising a special relationship to the hero while erroneously believing they have no responsibility for themselves or others (Hirschhorn, 1997). The antidote to dependency is to accept responsibility, creating reality based, positive internalised images of the risks and responsibilities of adult life. Ironically, by accomplishing this, people will increasingly rely on their own skills and authority just like the pilots, flight attendants, air traffic controllers, passengers, and emergency responders did on 15 January 2009, averting catastrophe. This is the lesson we can learn from US Airways Flight 1549.

#### *Note*

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