



Source: Brian Knowlton, 'U.S. presses Damascus over murder of Hariri', *International Herald Tribune online*, 25/10/05.

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When I got the job, the Minister for Territorial Security told me the three rules if something goes wrong.

1. Put a spin on everything;
2. If there's no spin, blame someone;
3. If possible, do both.

There was no hint of irony in his voice. This was the way things were done.

I'd been spinning and blaming like a pathologically lying spider for seven years. At first I found myself entertained by how well I could turn a situation around—like how the fifty-four year old minister found himself in hospital, drunk and stoned. Well, really, that one was easy. Explanation: He'd been the target of a drink and food-spiking incident, no doubt instigated by militant insurgents. Or the time he was caught in his ministerial car with a prostitute. Explanation: The minister had stopped to provide a lift to a friend of a friend and had no idea of her profession. The young lass never had to work again. Spin and blame, spin and blame. Worked every time.

The thing was, I could virtually write anything and he'd read it verbatim. He never checked the script, safe in the knowledge I was worth the exorbitant amount of money I was being paid.

He was lucky to have any thoughts in his head I reckoned, he had so many minders, assistants, helpers and hangers-on telling him where to go, what to say, do, wear. With so many people around him it was always easy to shift the blame to one or several of his entourage. As you might imagine, my popularity in the office was limited, at best.

But this thing he was now asking. As if I could do that. As if I could.

'You can and you will. This is what you're paid to do. So do it. You've already got the footage.' Yes, the footage. 'The conference is at eleven at the airport. Send it straight to the portable. You've got...' He checked his diamond encrusted Rolex, and cracked his neck'...ninety minutes.'

The footage was terrible. I don't mean badly filmed, that wasn't the problem. The footage was clear, precise, exact. I mean terrible as in making you violently, physically ill. I was violently, physically ill. In seven years of crafting language to every conceivable viewpoint, for good purposes or not, never did I think that I would have to do such a nauseating thing as trying to put a positive spin on what could only be called the major turning point in the degeneration of the country.

Australia's first terrorist execution.

His name was Abderrahim al Mouhafidim. He lived in a suburb of Sydney. He'd been anonymously turned in, prosecuted in a secret trial, and sentenced in a matter of weeks. The footage ended with Abderrahim's swinging head, held by the hair, his neck smoking from the cauterising execution wound. The Minister watched the

footage glued to his monitor, eyes so wide, mouth hanging expectant, and didn't flinch until the screen faded to black. He clapped his hands together—'Brilliant.' He was going to show this footage at the press conference. And I had to write the accompanying speech.

At my desk, I sat with my head in my hands, the grey laminate staring at me. I don't care. Fuck you, it said. Funnily enough, that's exactly what I was thinking.

As usual, all the staff gathered in the lunch room to watch the press conference. I stayed at the back of the room, sipping a bad office coffee.

The Minister usually started slowly, would then build up, and finish with a flourish. Not this time. After he finished showing the repulsive footage to the media contingent, and anyone else who happened to be in the vicinity at the airport, he pointed to the screen.

'This is how we deal with terrorists!'

I knew I'd hooked him. I could almost see the shining metal protruding through his cheek. His eyes were ablaze, loving the tirade I'd conjured up, throwing his voice as more citizens gathered behind the media. There were few things the Minister loved more than a crowd and I'd bailed him out of those situations one too many times.

'Sydney Airport is the jewel in our anti-terrorist crown. There's been no known or suspected neo-terrorists detected entering or leaving Australia for twelve months, proving our unique hard-line approach is working. Australia is a free country and we intend to keep it free!'

I thought of Abderrahim al Mouhafidim's vacant, lifeless eyes. I thought of his family.

'The message is loud and clear!'

I'd made the last sentence's font deliberately small. He had to lean in close to the prompter, so it was like he was emphasising the words to the cameras, and he was too worked up to notice. 'Do not fuck with us.'

There was a second before he realised, and his face started melting, the colour draining away. The journalists were soon shouting each other down—Minister, could you clarify that last statement? Minister, is that official government policy?

Everyone in the office turned to me, their mouths slack. I shrugged. 'What?', and strolled back to my desk.

I denied the Minister the pleasure of chewing me out, and firing me. By the time he got back to the office, sweating and seething, I'd already cleaned out my desk and left. I'd cop the blame, sure. Hell, I was to blame, perhaps the only time in my tenure that the right person would cop the blame. But someone else could put the spin on why, later that day, a wreath of flowers was delivered to Abderrahim al Mouhafidim's family with a sympathy card from the Minister for Territorial Security.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ross Murray.*