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# FBI

## ***Law Enforcement Bulletin***

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### ***The Oakdale and Atlanta Prison Sieges***

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# FBI

## Law Enforcement Bulletin

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**The Cover:** The Oakdale and Atlanta prison sieges, occurring simultaneously in November 1987, became catalysts for the largest crisis management mobilization in FBI history. See article on page 1.

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# The Myths of Interviewing

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**“I**’ve been around guns all my life. I grew up with guns.” When experienced firearms instructors hear these words, they realize that a difficult task lies ahead. They know that before they have any chance of teaching students the proper fundamentals of shooting, they will first have to “unteach” the bad habits and misconceptions such students bring to the range. Fortunately, for the firearms instructor, such “experienced” rookies represent the exception. On the other hand, the instructor who teaches interviewing to investigators often encounters students with preconceived ideas or myths about what constitutes good interviewing.

Although these students may have had little interviewing experience, many will enter a classroom armed with myths that the instructor must correct. These myths, derived mostly from television and other media, are attitudinal in nature and are much more difficult to modify than shortcomings resulting from insufficient knowledge or skills. Difficult or not, these myths must be modified; the success of many investigations depends on it. This article presents and discusses these myths with the hope of correcting them through understanding.

## MYTH 1: Interviewing Cannot Be Taught

Like many myths, this one contains enough of an element of truth to perpetuate it. Certainly, an interviewer cannot become accomplished without conducting interviews. However, this alone does not ensure proficiency any more than shooting numerous rounds on the firing range will guarantee marksmanship. To improve with practice, one must first master the fundamentals, which *can* be taught. Otherwise, repetition will only reinforce bad habits. Some interviewers have 20 years’ experience, while others have a year of experience—20 times.

## MYTH 2: An Interview Is A List Of Questions

Most successful interviewers define interviewing as “a conversation with a purpose.” People attempting to win another’s confidence, develop rapport, or discover “what makes someone tick” quickly find they achieve these aims only if they establish communication. This is done through conversation, a two-way process, not by simply asking a list of questions. Pollsters may rely on questionnaires; investigators must not.

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**MYTH 3:  
Interviewers Are Born,  
Not Made**

An outgoing personality, a genuine concern for people, and a gift of gab all contribute to successful interviewing. The error lies in equating these attributes with competence. Just as a person who thinks an interview consists solely of questions or who ignores the fact that an interview is a conversation, one can also forget that the conversation must have a purpose. To fully understand the purpose, the interviewer must prepare for an interview by gathering all available information about the case, the statutes, and the people involved—not an easy task to one who has “never met a stranger.”

**MYTH 4:  
Interviewers Must  
Stick To The Facts**

Unlike the scholar who gleans information from inert books and records maintained in a library, the interviewer deals with a source of information that has feelings and emotions. To ignore these attributes is to ensure failure, because these are the very characteristics that enable an interviewer to succeed. By appealing to positive feelings, such as duty and honor, or by defusing negative ones, such as fear and embarrassment, the investigator will often find that emotions are the key to a successful interview. If emotions are dealt with, the facts will come eventually; however, if ignored, this will never happen.

**MYTH 5:  
Listening Is  
A Natural Process, Not A Skill**

To substantiate that listening does not occur automatically, peo-

ple need only recall the last time they were introduced to a group. If shortly after the introductions, they were asked the names of those just met, they would likely say they could not remember. This is inaccurate. They had not forgotten; they never heard the names. The inability to recognize listening as an active process that requires considerable effort causes many interviewers to fail.

**MYTH 6:  
Note-Taking Is  
Of Paramount Importance**

A desire for complete, accurate reports often causes investigators to take nearly verbatim notes. This preoccupation with note-taking stymies the flow of conversation and limits the investigators' abilities to observe and listen. Thus, interviewers miss not only the facts but also the nonverbal behavior that is so important during an interview. As a result, obsessive note-taking, which is intended to enhance efficiency,

interviewers that they must dominate situations and then turning them loose with guns and badges invites disaster. Doing so often results in behavior more appropriate to arrest situations than to interviews. Most often, interviewers dominate neither by uttering threatening words nor by displaying menacing behavior; rather, they should exhibit an air of serene confidence. Truly dominant individuals feel no need to overtly announce that they are in charge.

**MYTH 8:  
Cross-Examination Is  
The Same As Interrogation**

Carefully crafted questions designed to ensnare the liar in his own words constitute a cross-examination. Some of the best practitioners of this skill, courtroom attorneys, effectively discredit many who testify. Although this process often achieves the desired effect, it rarely, if ever, produces a confession. Why? Because people do not confess as

“  
***Most successful interviewers define interviewing  
as ‘a conversation with a purpose.’***  
”

actually lessens it. Note-taking requires good judgment to avoid adversely affecting all information obtained in the interview.

**MYTH 7:  
An Interviewer Must  
Dominate The Situation**

Actually, this is not a misconception. The fault lies not in the principle but in the interpretation of it. Instructing new inves-

a result of questions; they confess because the interrogator has given them good reasons to do so. Failure to distinguish between a cross-examination and an interrogation often results in an extended “interrogation,” with the investigator repeatedly asking the subject if he committed the crime and the subject repeatedly denying it.

## Focus on William J. Bennett

### Conclusion

Even in today's world of high technology, some of which has found its way into law enforcement's arsenal, the solution to many crimes still lies with people—the witnesses, the accomplices, and the criminals themselves. To tap these sources effectively, investigators must be proficient interviewers. However, experience alone does not ensure proficiency—training is also required. And, effective training begins with the identification of the students' problems. Recognizing the myths held by many rookies, and even some experienced investigators, may provide a starting point for the trainer. **FBI**

### Suggested Readings

The works set forth below deal with various aspects of the interview process:

- Robert B. Cialdini, *Influence* (New York: Quill, 1984).
- F.E. Inbau & J.E. Reid, *Criminal Interrogation and Confessions* (Baltimore, MD: Williams and Wilkins Co., 1986).
- Genie Z. Laborde, *Influencing with Integrity* (Palo Alto, CA: Syn-tony Publishing, 1984).
- G.I. Nierenberg & H.H. Calero, *How to Read a Person Like a Book* (New York: Cornerstone Library, 1981).
- Stanton Samenow, *Inside the Criminal Mind* (New York: Times Books, 1984).



**W**illiam J. Bennett assumed the post of Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy after confirmation by the U.S. Senate. Prior to being named by President Bush as Director, Dr. Bennett was president of the Madison Center, a public policy education and research organization located in Washington. He served as U.S. Secretary of Education from February 6, 1985, through September 20, 1988.

A native of Brooklyn, NY, Dr. Bennett holds a bachelor of arts degree in philosophy from Williams College, a doctorate in political philosophy from the University of Texas, and a law degree from Harvard. He taught at the University of Southern Mississippi, the University of Texas, Harvard University, Boston Uni-

versity, and the University of Wisconsin, before becoming president of the National Humanities Center in North Carolina. In 1981, he was selected by President Reagan to be Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, where he served until being named Secretary of Education.

As Secretary of Education, Dr. Bennett was a vigorous advocate of education reform and a leader in anti-drug efforts. In 1986, Dr. Bennett released *Schools Without Drugs*, a handbook that served as the cornerstone of the Education Department's efforts to prevent drug use by school children. As Secretary, Dr. Bennett implemented over \$250 million in new anti-drug programs aimed at students.

**FBI**