

The 9/11 Commission *Report* merits attention for its implied departure from post 9/11 U.S. foreign policy that the second, rather than the first answer is correct. Yet, the *Report* leaves little concrete sense of how the United States might reconceive its involvement in the Middle East in order to recapture the goodwill for Americans, which has dropped precipitously after the Bush administration's response to the al Qaeda attacks, and implement the Commission's hope that our policies be based more on cooperation than coercion. Ultimately, the *Report's* efforts to suggest foreign policy ideas that can deter future attacks on American civilians suffer from one of the same problems that the Commission itself identified as a major reason for Washington's lack of readiness for 9/11/01, a failure of imagination (p. 339).

Given deep Middle Eastern anxieties about whether the Bush administration will continue its clear willingness to actualize its own foreign policy imagination in its second term, the *Report's* foreign policy confusion is not a failure to be taken lightly.

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The 9/11 Commission and Disaster Management: Little Depth, Less Context, Not Much Guidance

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The 9-11 Commission Report was considered for the National Book Award, both for the style in which it was written and for the manner in which the report provides crucial background information and puts the events of September 11, 2001 into a broader historical and policy context. My colleagues have said much the same thing in this review symposium. While that may be true for other parts of the report, such a perspective is missing from Chapter 9 "Heroism and Horror," the section on the emergency response following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

The report glosses over or ignores entirely factors that are key to the public's understanding of the emergency response on September 11. Focusing on the World Trade Center, for example, while Chapter 9 begins with the observation that "Emergency response is a product of preparedness," the chapter provides little information on the status of preparedness activities in New York at the time of the Trade Center attacks. When preparations by individual agencies such as the Port Authority and NYPD are discussed, the discussions center on details such as

authority relationships within those agencies, radio frequencies used, and equipment. The authors do not address more important dimensions of emergency preparedness, such as the existence or quality of agency and interagency plans, previous citywide preparedness drills and exercises, special training first responders may have received, pre-existing mutual aid agreements among agencies or jurisdictions (or lack thereof), or other types of preparedness activities. Nor is there any real attempt to relate how agencies responded on September 11 to prior preparedness efforts.

With respect to broader factors affecting preparedness, the report likewise ignores the fact that New York City, while at risk from terrorist attacks, is not particularly disaster-prone and, except for the 1993 Trade Center bombing, had not faced a major event requiring a large-scale multiagency response in decades. New York can be contrasted with Los Angeles, which has extensive experience meeting the challenges associated with earthquakes, fires, and other major community-wide crises. The City had been carrying out regular drills focusing on different aspects of

terrorism and disaster response for quite some time (ironically, a bioterrorism drill had been scheduled for September 12, 2001). However, drills and training are not the same as being challenged by, and learning from, actual disasters. The 1993 Trade Center bombing was a very serious emergency, but it did not reach catastrophic dimensions. New York responds to many small and some moderate-sized emergencies, but has faced very few disasters. The ability to handle everyday emergencies can instill false confidence that truly large events can be handled equally well. Again, the report does not address the extent to which the city's lack of prior disaster experience may have affected the multiagency response to the attack.

Like the McKinsey reports on the fire and police response and other analyses of the Trade Center Disaster, Chapter 9 places considerable emphasis on interagency communications failures during the height of the emergency. However, communications problems invariably plague response efforts in very large scale events, including those that are well managed. Indeed, I am hard pressed to recall any U. S. disaster of any significance in which communications were later judged adequate and effective. After-action reports on disaster operations invariably single out communications as a major problem hampering response effectiveness, if not the most significant problem, and many crisis managers and practitioners adhere almost religiously to the belief that better communications technology is the key to improving disaster response operations. This technologically oriented thinking ignores the fact that no system of communications and information-sharing has yet been devised that can address fundamental problems of large-scale disaster response. Decisions must be made and actions taken rapidly on the basis of vague and often conflicting information. Even when emergency communications media are operating as designed, messages are typically difficult to understand and interpret during major crises. As part of its investigation of the Trade Center disaster, the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) also analyzed the adequacy and effectiveness of emergency communications. Not surprisingly, NIST found a very large surge in emergency communications traffic immediately after the attacks on

the towers. Rating messages that were transmitted according to criteria for clarity and understandability, NIST found that "roughly one-third to one-half of the radio messages transmitted . . . were not complete messages nor understandable" (National Institute of Standards and Technology, 2004:24). In many cases, this was due to the high volume of messages that were being exchanged; in other cases, communications were poor owing to disaster conditions themselves. Improvements in communications technology and interoperability are certainly needed, but they will provide only partial solutions to the larger challenges associated with intra- and interorganizational communications and coordination during disaster events.

The report notes that there was a lack of coordination among key response agencies, most notably NYPD and FDNY. However, such problems predated 9/11 by many decades and were known to have hampered responses in past emergencies. The Report does note that one reason Mayor Giuliani established the Office of Emergency Management (OEM) was to improve interagency coordination, particularly with NYPD and FDNY. However, the Commission provides no insights on how past interagency rivalries, OEM attempts at exerting leadership, or other institutional and political factors ultimately affected how agencies responded on September 11.

Another indicator of the *Report's* superficiality is its uncritical acceptance of certain aspects of emergency management doctrine, as indicated by its conclusion that the adoption of an emergency management framework called the incident command system (ICS) would have improved the effectiveness of the response to the attack on the World Trade Center. There had indeed been considerable resistance to the implementation of ICS on the part of key response agencies in New York, in part because of entrenched organizational cultures and other seemingly intractable organizational issues. Belief in the efficacy of ICS, like the notion that improved communications equipment will automatically solve response-related problems, has achieved the status of received truth among some emergency management and governmental circles, despite the lack of empirical evidence attesting to its effectiveness and despite the fact that ICS is conceptualized

and practiced nationwide in numerous different ways.

Similarly, the Commission takes the position that on September 11, the response to the attack on the Pentagon was so effective because Northern Virginia agencies were using ICS, and also because of prior drills and exercises. While there was indeed good interorganizational coordination at the Pentagon, the Commission fails to take into account important differences between New York and Northern Virginia: The Trade Center attack was far more severe and complex, the impact at the Pentagon was relatively localized, and the site was easier for responders to manage. As tragic as the attack on the Pentagon was, it was simply not comparable to that on the WTC, either in scale or in the response challenges it presented. Luck also played a role; by coincidence, fire service leaders were having a meeting not far from the Pentagon when the attack occurred, and a number of fire units were nearby, having been dispatched in response to an apartment fire moments before the crash. Additionally, the authors of Chapter 9 gloss over the fact that similar problems occurred at both the WTC and the Pentagon, including problems with convergence and communications. Nor did incident command work as smoothly and seamlessly at the Pentagon as the Commission implied. The emergency response at the Pentagon was judged successful, and by all accounts it was, but responders at the Pentagon site also had much more time in which to achieve success. Moreover, by the time the Pentagon was hit, responding agencies knew that what was occurring was, in fact, a terrorist attack. In failing to take into account differences and similarities between the two attacks, the Commission again oversimplifies the issues and fails to address the question of what contributes to the capacity to respond effectively to sudden extreme events.

The Commission would have done the public and agencies like the Department of Homeland Security a real service if it would have focused more on the broader political, financial, and cultural factors that contribute to response effectiveness. The ability to exert "command" and coordinate first responders at the incident and even the event level is only one such factor. As a case in point, ICS was originally developed among fire service

agencies in California in the 1970s and is now used in many communities throughout California and other parts of the United States. Los Angeles has had long experience with ICS, having been one of its early adopters, but the city nevertheless failed miserably in its efforts to manage the 1992 civil unrest that erupted following the acquittal of the police officers that had been accused in the beating of Rodney King. That failure was a consequence not primarily of problems at the level of first responders (of which there were many), but rather of political divisions within city leadership, leaders' inability to understand the mood of the public and anticipate the scale on which rioting could break out, and poor decision-making by high city government officials during the event. The activities of first responders must, of course, be coordinated, but the overall management of large-scale disasters requires much more: the ability to assess threats and anticipate the likely impacts and consequences of events; the capacity to train personnel accordingly and to conduct realistic disaster exercises; the ability to mobilize resources; high-level political support for disaster management activities; ongoing collaborative relationships among crisis-relevant organizations during nondisaster times; a commitment to learn from past mistakes; and the capacity to react flexibly when encountering surprise.¹

At a more fundamental level, the notion of disaster "command" is inconsistent with what disaster are—complex occasions characterized by a high degree of ambiguity, often coupled with extreme urgency, that require extensive improvisation and that call for more autonomy, rather than less, on the part of organizational entities involved in the response. Unlike typical emergencies such as major fires and large transportation accidents, true disasters like those that occurred on September 11 also engender massive public

¹ With respect to the capacity for and commitment to post-disaster learning, while key agencies involved in the Pentagon response produced an extensive after-action report detailing both positive and negative aspects of the response, New York City never produced a similar report, in part because of concerns that a "lessons learned" document might expose the City to liability in the many lawsuits filed in the aftermath of September 11.

involvement and the emergence of new crisis response networks—organizational forms that differ radically from hierarchical command structures.

This moves the discussion to another critical deficiency in the Commission's account of the events of September 11. While to its credit the Commission does acknowledge that "the 'first' first responders on 9/11, as in most catastrophes, were private-sector civilians" (p. 317), the report downplays the critical role that building occupants played in evacuation and emergency search and rescue on that tragic morning. The report observes that Trade Center evacuees remained composed and did not panic as they exited the towers, but gives too little emphasis to the absolutely critical role their actions played in reducing the death toll. For example, thanks to other research, not the Commission report, it is now known that the evacuation of the towers was initiated by occupants themselves before rescue efforts were under way, even as official announcements that were broadcast in Tower 2 directed people not to evacuate. According to the NIST report on the evacuation process:

the majority of occupants decided to evacuate on their own after WTC 1 was hit, without waiting for an official building announcement . . . this is further evidence that people will make decisions on what they judge the proper action to take despite official procedures. (NIST 2004:21)

Again showing an inability to interpret and contextualize the information that was available to the Commission, the report describes many Trade Center occupants as unprepared to act in emergencies, but also acknowledges that while drills had been held in the Twin Towers, "civilians were not directed into the stairwells, or provided with information about their configuration and about the existence of transfer hallways and smoke doors" (p. 381). Nor were they told not to attempt to evacuate to tower roofs or that roof doors were kept locked. This was a significant omission, since many occupants were aware that helicopter roof rescues had been carried out following the 1993 bombings. Even without such training, and although the overwhelming majority had

never used exit stairways or attempted to negotiate the transfer routes, building occupants, many of whom were injured, were able to help one another downward dozens of stories to safety. Yet the *9/11 Report* gives most of the credit for the successful evacuation not to the evacuees but rather to building systems, such as stairways, and to the actions of first responders.

In contrast with its many recommendations regarding counterterrorism and national security, the Commission makes few specific recommendations for improving emergency response capabilities. One is that ICS be adopted by all emergency response agencies. The Commission seems not to have been aware that the adoption of ICS is already mandatory under Presidential Homeland Security Directive 5 and the Initial National Response Plan. The Commission also recommends more radio spectrum for emergency responders and the adoption of standards for private sector preparedness. However, such "solutions," while needed, cannot in and of themselves address the complex organizational, resource-related, cultural, and political factors that influence the manner in which communities manage disasters.

The Commission also endorses regionally-based preparedness efforts based on mutual aid agreements among contiguous jurisdictions, noting that such arrangements are especially important for National Capital Region. This is sound guidance; mutual aid is an important component in any effort to manage disasters. Again, regional preparedness efforts have, in fact, been under way for many years, particularly in the antiterrorism area. However, the manner in which homeland security funds are now flowing to regional entities suggests that regional initiatives may well be detrimental to cities, in that under regional funding schemes, monies tend to be allocated disproportionately to surrounding suburban areas. One very sound Commission recommendation centers on the need to base homeland security assistance on assessments of risk and vulnerability, and cautions Congress against using homeland security funds as a "pork barrel" (the Commission's words).

The report says nothing about a pressing need that the current administration has all but ignored: the need actively to engage the public in preparedness and response efforts

for all types of disastrous events. As vividly demonstrated on September 11, 2001 and in the days that followed, members of the public played a vital role, first in New York in what must be considered one of the most successful structural evacuations ever undertaken, and later in the provision of all manner of aid to victims and to responding agencies. Stories of public heroism and self-sacrifice during the 9/11 disaster were quickly overshadowed by massive media emphasis on the heroic actions of official responders, especially firefighters. Yet the fact remains that without this large-scale public involvement, the initial and subsequent impacts of the 9/11 attacks would have been even more severe. There is new and strong evidence that members of the public want to participate in terrorism readiness and response activities. For example, a September 2004 report by New York Academy of Medicine entitled "Redefining Readiness: Terrorism Planning Through the Eyes of the Public," indicates that a significant proportion of the adult population, as many as one-third, want to be personally involved in community planning for future terrorist events (Lasker 2004). Similarly, leading bioterrorism experts at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center's Center for Biosecurity have long argued for the need to see the public as a partner in homeland security preparedness efforts, rather than as a problem to be managed.

Even with all the lessons September 11 provided, the need for genuine public preparedness is something the Commission never seems to have considered. On the contrary, the Commission report is consistent with current trends that frame disaster management as a problem best addressed by people in uniform—law enforcement and the military. Throughout Chapter 9, for example, the general public and the victims of the attack are consistently referred to as "civilians," as if the response to 9/11 was a military operation and those who were not first responders were passive bystanders. The Commission goes a step further with the military analogy by arguing that agencies responding to disasters "must be fully coordinated, just as branches of the U. S. military are." Such a philosophy leaves no role for what the Commission itself acknowledged as the true "first responders" during disasters.

Yet it is very consistent with ongoing administration efforts to militarize disaster response and to centralize control over response operations at the federal level.

The increasing tendency to conflate disaster response and warfighting is among the most marked and alarming legacies of September 11. Military analogies are now pervasive in discourse on emergency management for both disasters and terrorist attacks, and the assumption that uniformed service personnel are best able to manage domestic crises of all types, including disasters, is now embraced at the federal level (but much less so at other levels of government). For example, many disaster researchers around the country recently received an invitation from the office of the Commandant of the Coast Guard to attend a conference on needs associated with managing the "domestic battlespace"—the place formerly known as our communities and homes—during terrorist attacks and disasters. In Florida following last summer's hurricanes, uniformed military personnel "secured" disaster assistance centers and Home Depot stores, presumably to prevent the restive masses from rioting and looting. Such strategies fly in the face of all that is known about how the public responds during major crises and about the importance of public involvement, and they contribute to an atmosphere that will likely degrade our nation's emergency preparedness infrastructure, rather than improve it.

The Commission could have addressed this trend and made major contributions to public policy discourse on appropriate strategies for managing homeland security threats and dealing with the consequences of future attacks that may occur. However, that opportunity was missed, perhaps because this aspect of the Commission's work and its implications for domestic homeland security—and by extension, disaster policy—was not viewed as important in comparison with its work on counterterrorism policy and intelligence failures. This section of the report offers little of value for social scientists concerned with disasters and risk, practitioners seeking to improve preparedness and response measures, or those concerned with broader policymaking on preparedness, response, and recovery for homeland security threats.

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