

America the Resilient

Defying Terrorism and Mitigating Natural Disasters

By Stephen E. Flynn

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Summary: A climate of fear and a sense of powerlessness caused by the threats of terrorism and natural disasters are undermining American ideals and fueling political demagoguery. Rebuilding the resilience of American society is the way to reverse this and respond to today's challenges.

*STEPHEN E. FLYNN is Jeane J. Kirkpatrick Senior Fellow for National Security Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations and the author of *The Edge of Disaster: Rebuilding a Resilient Nation* (Random House, 2007), from which this essay is drawn.*

When it comes to managing the hazards of the twenty-first century, it is reckless to relegate the American public to the sidelines. During the Cold War, the threat of nuclear weapons placed the fate of millions in the hands of a few. But responding to today's challenges, the threats of terrorism and natural disasters, requires the broad engagement of civil society. The terrorists' chosen battlegrounds are likely to be occupied by civilians, not soldiers. And more than the loss of innocent lives is at stake: a climate of fear and a sense of powerlessness in the face of adversity are undermining faith in American ideals and fueling political demagoguery. Sustaining the United States' global leadership and economic competitiveness ultimately depends on bolstering the resilience of its society. Periodically, things will go badly wrong. The United States must be prepared to minimize the consequences of those eventualities and bounce back quickly.

Resilience has historically been one of the United States' great national strengths. It was the quality that helped tame a raw continent and then allowed the country to cope with the extraordinary challenges that occasionally placed the American experiment in peril. From the early settlements in Virginia and Massachusetts to the westward expansion, Americans willingly ventured into the wild to build better lives. During the epic struggles of the American Revolution, the American Civil War, and the two world wars; occasional economic downturns and the Great Depression; and the periodic scourges of earthquakes, epidemics, floods, and hurricanes, Americans have drawn strength from adversity. Each generation bequeathed to the next a sense of confidence and optimism about the future.

But this reservoir of self-sufficiency is being depleted. The United States is becoming a brittle nation. An increasingly urbanized and suburbanized population has embraced just-in-time lifestyles tethered to ATM machines and 24-hour stores that provide instant access to cash, food, and gas. When the power goes out and these modern conveniences fail, Americans are incapacitated. Meanwhile, two decades of taxpayer rebellion have stripped away the means necessary for government workers to provide help during emergencies. Most city and state public health and emergency-management departments are not funded adequately enough for them to carry out even their routine work. A flu pandemic or other major disaster would completely overwhelm them. A report on disaster preparedness released in June 2006 by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security found that only 25 percent of state emergency operations plans and 10 percent of municipal plans were sufficient to cope with a natural disaster or a terrorist attack; the majority of the plans were deemed "not fully adequate, feasible, or acceptable to manage catastrophic events." And even as community and individual preparedness is in decline, nine out of ten Americans now live in locations that place them at a moderate to high risk of experiencing damaging high wind, earthquakes, flooding, hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, or wildfires. Climate change will increase the frequency of such calamities.

The United States' aging infrastructure compounds the risk of destruction and disruption. One of the rationales for building the interstate highway system was to support the evacuation of major cities if the Cold War turned hot; in 2006, the year the system turned 50, Americans spent a total of 3.5 billion hours stuck in traffic. Public

works departments construct "temporary" patches for dams, leaving Americans who live downstream one major storm away from having water pouring into their living rooms. Bridges are outfitted with the civil engineering equivalent of diapers. Like the occupants of a grand old mansion who elect not to do any upkeep, Americans have been neglecting the infrastructure that supports a modern society. In 2005, after a review of hundreds of studies and reports and a survey of more than 2,000 engineers, the American Society of Civil Engineers issued a scathing report card on 15 categories of infrastructure: the national power grid, dams, canal locks, and seven other infrastructure sectors received Ds; the best grade, a C+, went to bridges, and even in that case, 160,570 bridges, out of a total of 590,750, were rated structurally deficient or functionally obsolete.

These downward trends in preparedness and infrastructural integrity could be reversed by stepped-up investment and more effective leadership. Unfortunately, Washington has been leading the nation in the opposite direction. Since September 11, 2001, the White House has failed to draw on the legacy of American grit, volunteerism, and ingenuity in the face of adversity. Instead, it has sent a mixed message, touting terrorism as a clear and present danger while telling Americans to just go about their daily lives. Unlike during World War II, when the entire U.S. population was mobilized, much of official Washington today treats citizens as helpless targets or potential victims.

This discounting of the public can be traced to the culture of secrecy and paternalism that now pervades the national defense and federal law enforcement communities. After decades of combating Soviet espionage during the Cold War, the federal security establishment instinctively resists disclosing information for fear that it might end up in the wrong hands. Straight talk about the country's vulnerabilities and how to cope in emergencies is presumed to be too frightening for public consumption.

This is madness. The overwhelming majority of Americans live in places where the occurrence of a natural disaster is a matter of not if, but when. And terrorist groups' targets of choice are noncombatants and infrastructure. These are hazards that can be managed only by an informed, inspired, and mobilized public. Both the first preventers and the first responders are likely to be civilians.

LESSON UNLEARNED

In retrospect, it is remarkable that the events of September 11 have been used to elevate the role of professional warriors, spies, and cops at the expense of enlisting citizens to assist in securing the nation. Unfortunately, the prevailing interpretation of that day focuses almost entirely on the three airliners that struck the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon. President George W. Bush has concluded from those attacks that the U.S. government needs to do whatever it takes to hunt down its enemies before they kill innocent civilians again.

But it is the story of United Airlines flight 93, the thwarted fourth plane, which crashed in a Pennsylvania field, that ought to be the dominant 9/11 narrative. That plane's passengers foiled al Qaeda without any help from -- and in spite of the inaction of -- the U.S. government. There were no federal air marshals aboard the aircraft. The North American Aerospace Defense Command, or NORAD, could not intercept it; it did not even know that the plane had been hijacked. Yet United 93 was stopped 140 miles from its likely destination -- the U.S. Capitol or the White House -- because of the actions of the passengers who stormed the cockpit. Of all the passengers on the four 9/11 planes, only those aboard United 93 knew their hijackers' intention. Theirs was the last plane off the ground. Once the terrorists took control of it, they did not prevent passengers from making urgent calls to family and friends, who told them what their counterparts on the three earlier flights discovered only during their final seconds. Americans should celebrate -- and ponder -- the reality that the legislative and executive centers of the U.S. federal government, whose constitutional duty is to "provide for the common defense," were themselves defended that day by one thing alone: an alert and heroic citizenry.

The story of United 93 also raises a serious question that the 9/11 Commission failed to examine: might the passengers on the other three planes have reacted, too, if they had known the hijackers' plans? The 9/11 Commission documents that in the years leading up to the attacks on New York and Washington, a number of

people inside the U.S. government had collected intelligence suggesting that terrorists were interested in using passenger airliners as weapons. But because that information was viewed as sensitive, the government never shared it with the public. What if it had been widely publicized? How would the passengers aboard the first three jets have behaved?

The next president needs to embrace the United 93 story -- and consider these questions -- in order to reawaken the spirit of community and volunteerism witnessed throughout the nation in the months immediately following 9/11. If U.S. history is a guide, people will respond to the call to service. They only need to be asked.

THE BEST DEFENSE

The rallying point should be a call for greater resilience. Building the resilience of American society would increase the nation's security by depriving al Qaeda and other terrorists of the fear dividend they hope to reap by threatening to carry out catastrophic attacks. In military terms, the United States is too large, and al Qaeda's capacity to attack the U.S. homeland too limited, for terrorists like them to inflict nationwide destruction. All they can hope for is to spawn enough fear to spur Washington into overreacting in costly and self-destructive ways.

Fear arises both from being aware of a threat and from feeling powerless to deal with it. And although it is impossible to eliminate every threat that causes such fear, Americans do have the power to manage their fear and their reactions to it. For more than six years, however, Washington has been sounding the alarm about apocalyptic terrorist groups while providing the American people with no meaningful guidance on how to deal with the threats they pose or the consequences of a successful attack. This toxic mix of fear and helplessness jeopardizes U.S. security by increasing the risk that the U.S. government will overreact to another terrorist attack.

What Washington should do instead is arm Americans with greater confidence in their ability to prepare for and recover from terrorist strikes and disasters of all types. Confidence in their resilience would cap their fear and in turn undermine much of the incentives terrorists have for incurring the costs and risks of targeting the U.S. homeland.

The United States needs the kind of resilience that the British displayed during World War II when V-1 bombs were raining down on London. Volunteers put the fires out, rescued the wounded from the rubble, and then went on with their lives until the air-raid warnings were sounded again. More than a half century later, the United Kingdom showed its resilience once more after suicide bombers attacked the London Underground with the intent of crippling the city's public transportation system. That objective was foiled when resolute commuters showed up to board the trains the next morning.

Such resilience results from a sustained commitment to four factors. First, there is robustness, the ability to keep operating or to stay standing in the face of disaster. In some cases, it translates into designing structures or systems (such as buildings and bridges) strong enough to take a foreseeable punch. In others (such as developing transportation, energy, and communications networks), robustness requires devising substitutable or redundant systems that can be brought to bear should something important break or stop working. Robustness also entails investing in and maintaining elements of critical infrastructure, such as dams and levees, so that they can withstand low-probability but high-consequence events.

Second is resourcefulness, which involves skillfully managing a disaster once it unfolds. It includes identifying options, prioritizing what should be done both to control damage and to begin mitigating it, and communicating decisions to the people who will implement them. Resourcefulness depends primarily on people, not technology. Ensuring that U.S. society is resourceful means providing adequate resources to the National Guard, the American Red Cross, public health officials, firefighters, emergency-room staffs, and other emergency planners and responders.

The third element of resilience is rapid recovery, which is the capacity to get things back to normal as quickly as possible after a disaster. Carefully drafted contingency plans, competent emergency operations, and the means to get the right people and resources to the right places are crucial. Some small communities, such as Eden Prairie, Minnesota, are organizing themselves so that everyone can pitch in right away in the case of an emergency. Citizens are being trained to be auxiliary first responders, and local companies are committing themselves to providing resources and lending expertise in order to dramatically reduce the economic aftershocks of any disaster. Among the larger cities, Seattle has put together a business emergency network, a communications system linking the city government and businesses. It is designed to aid the local business community in predisaster preparation and to help disseminate information quickly and accurately when disaster strikes.

Finally, resilience means having the means to absorb the new lessons that can be drawn from a catastrophe. It is foolish for a society to go right back to business as usual as soon as the dust clears, by, say, rebuilding homes on floodplains or failing to resolve interoperable communications issues that confound coordination and information sharing among first responders. People must be willing to make pragmatic changes, such as relocating when their homes are repeatedly destroyed or reaching deeper into their pockets to pay for the communications and other tools communities need to improve their robustness, resourcefulness, and recovery capabilities before the next crisis.

Working to strengthen the four features of resilience is a far more open and inclusive process than a national effort centered on security, because it requires drawing on the United States' greatest strengths: civil society and the private sector. Furthermore, whereas boosting the security apparatus is usually very expensive, advancing resilience almost always provides a positive return on a relatively smaller investment. As a June 2007 report by the Council on Competitiveness, a Washington-based group "committed to ensuring the future prosperity of all Americans," concluded, "The ability to manage emerging risks, anticipate the interactions between different types of risk, and bounce back from disruption will be a competitive differentiator for companies and countries alike in the 21st century."

BRAVE NEW AMERICA

Increasing the resilience of the American people will require presidential leadership. For years, the fear of terrorism has been stoked and the federal government's ability to defeat radical jihadists has been exaggerated. This has created a passive citizenry that oscillates between fretfulness and cynicism. In his or her inaugural address, the next president will need to call on Americans to recapture their spirit of endurance and optimism. During the new administration's first hundred days, it must work with Congress to put in place programs that help Americans build robustness, achieve resourcefulness, enhance their ability to recover swiftly, and revise designs and protocols based on lessons learned from crises. Given the American tradition of self-reliance and volunteerism, the effort will strike a strong bipartisan chord.

The new secretary of homeland security should be charged with transforming the department's law enforcement culture, which so far has held citizens and the private sector at arms length. He or she must also reach out to the private sector and task it with taking the lead in advancing resilience at the company and community levels. CEOs should not require much prodding. As globalization, interdependence, and geopolitics become more volatile forces, people and companies will gravitate to those firms and places that are dependable. Those enterprises that do poorly at managing crises because they fail to foresee and prepare for them will lose shareholder value and market share. Companies adept at managing operational risk can also help communities rebound when disasters strike. In 2005, for example, Wal-Mart was able to bring 66 percent of its stores in the Gulf States back into operation within 48 hours of Hurricane Katrina's coming ashore, providing many of the critical supplies that everyday citizens, small businesses, and government agencies needed to get back on their feet.

Two tricky but potentially influential allies in the effort could be the mass media and Hollywood. To a large

extent, the stories Americans see on their small and big screens have been part of the problem. A more inspirational and less dramatic reality is rarely portrayed. As the mass evacuation of Manhattan on September 11 made clear, in real crises Americans largely keep their wits about them and assist one another. During World War II, Hollywood played a helpful public-service role by supporting war-bond drives and producing training films, while providing much-needed entertainment. Media executives today could do the same by committing themselves to relating stories and communicating messages that inform and inspire individual and societal resilience.

In the end, everyday Americans will have to step up to the plate in their homes, schools, and workplaces. An August 2006 study sponsored by the Department of Homeland Security found that nine out of ten Americans believed that being prepared for emergencies was important. Yet a poll commissioned in the same month by Time magazine found that only 16 percent of Americans thought they were "very well prepared" for an emergency.

The good news is that most of the things people can do at the individual level to prepare themselves, their families, and their employees are relatively easy. These measures include purchasing a three-day emergency kit, developing

a family emergency contact plan, and visiting Web sites maintained by the Red Cross and other organizations that provide instructive what-to-do lists. Such efforts can provide real peace of mind and save lives when disaster strikes. They would also represent tangible expressions of American support for the U.S. soldiers who put their lives on the line beyond U.S. shores to protect a nation that today remains recklessly exposed to the consequences of a successful terrorist attack.

Rebuilding the resilience of U.S. society is an agenda that could reverse the debilitating politics and mounting cynicism now bedeviling the U.S. electorate. Whereas increasing security measures is an inevitable answer to a society's fears, resilience rests on a foundation of confidence and optimism. It involves taking stock of what is truly precious and ensuring its durability in a way that would allow Americans to remain true to their ideals no matter what tempest the future may bring.