



Prepare for the Next Disaster, Not Last One

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Fools rush in where fools have been before.

Nearly four years after al-Qaida terrorists crashed jetliners into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast. The disasters are different, but the response has been tragically similar: a mad rush to point fingers, launch commissions and hold hearings, and a national obsession with bringing the full weight of the U.S. government to bear on one goal – preventing the last catastrophe.

Missing from all the talk of the organizational charts of the Federal Emergency Management Agency and levee designs is common sense. Rather than blindly scrambling in the aftermath of this disaster, we should use this moment to peer over the horizon and assess the most likely and damaging catastrophes – natural and man-made – that the future will bring. Confronting these worst-case scenarios is the best chance we have of preventing them and limiting their devastation if they occur.

For many of us in the scary-scenario business, the mother of all nightmares is not a Category 5 hurricane or four hijacked airplanes used as missiles. It is nuclear terrorism. The reason is simple and frightening: supply and demand.

Building a nuclear bomb has never been easier. Nearly 30 years ago, Princeton undergraduate John Aristotle Phillips managed to produce designs for a workable nuclear bomb using nothing more than some textbooks and open-source materials he purchased from the U.S. government. Today, rudimentary instructions for building a nuclear device can be found on the Internet. For holy

warriors without BlackBerries, Pakistan provided cave-to-cave delivery of nuclear weapon technologies and materials for years, until the Pakistani government shut down the pipeline last year.

Although developing weapons-grade fissile material – the key component in any nuclear bomb – remains a technical challenge, because of the Cold War arms race, the rise of “rogue states” and the breakdown of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, fissile material is now ready-made and in abundant supply. Worldwide stockpiles in more than 50 countries contain enough for 300,000 nuclear bombs. Much of it is guarded by nothing more than an underpaid security guard and a chain-link fence. The International Atomic Energy Agency has confirmed 18 cases of theft or smuggling of weapons-usable fissile material since 1993.

Lazy terrorists can dispense with bomb-making. In the United States, there are 100 operating nuclear reactors, many of them within spitting distance of an airport and none capable of withstanding the impact of, say, a large commercial jetliner.

As for demand, U.S. intelligence agencies for years have reported that Osama bin Laden seeks to acquire weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear weapons. But don't take the CIA's word for it – take bin Laden's. In 1999, the terrorist mastermind publicly called the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction a “religious duty,” and in 2003, he sought a fatwa from a radical Saudi cleric authorizing the use of WMD to kill millions of American civilians. Supply, meet demand.

That's the good news.

The bad news is that the United States is, and will remain, exceptionally vulnerable to a nuclear terrorist attack for the foreseeable future. Why? Because vulnerability is the price we pay for liberty and prosperity. The same porous borders that bring Hollywood to Bali and enable Wal-Mart to sell Chinese goods in American small towns also allow terrorists to send nuclear bombs to a city near you.

A recent study found that despite all of the port security measures instituted since 9/11, U.S. officials stood, at best, a one-in-four chance of detecting a nuclear device packed in one of the millions of shipping containers entering the country each year. And if the terrorists were smart enough to pack the device in a heavy machinery container, the detection rate dropped to about zero. It doesn't take a statistics expert to see that these odds are not so good.

Which leaves us with response. If you think Katrina's disaster relief efforts were a disaster, just wait. In a nuclear terrorist attack, there would be no warning. Mass panic would be likely. And the chief challenge might not be coordinating emergency response but getting any response at all in disaster zones contaminated by radiation. No government can protect everyone from everything. The best we can do, and the only responsible approach, is to play the odds, allocating scarce resources, developing policies and building bureaucracies to protect us from the future, not the past.

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