A Need for Emphasis on Local Leadership in Emergency Management

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In 2009, I participated in the Joint Urban Warrior exercise sponsored by the Marine Corps War Fighting Laboratory and the Joint Forces Command-Joint Irregular Warfare Center, focusing on the problem of integrating military and civilian efforts in stability operations. In my analytical cell, the question arose as to where the necessary expertise could be found in civilian agencies, and in our discussions, it quickly became apparent that, for the most part, the applied skills were found not in federal civilian agencies, but in state and local government agencies. Besides representing a lesson lost within the military Civil Affairs community (in the Second World War Civil Affairs and Military Government soldiers were largely recruited from academia and sub-national government officials), but also an important cue that even in national security areas, the federal government may not always know best. A state extension officer, for example, may well know more about practical aspects of crop production than a federal USDA expert in agricultural price supports. In areas like biodefense or emergency preparedness, intricately entwined with public health, local officials are also likely to be the key players in effective incident response.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Air Force Colonel John Boyd outlined and popularized, in a series of briefings, the concept of a decision cycle, the Observe-Orient- Decide-Act (OODA) loop, as critical to a successful response to the challenges of a rapidly evolving environment [1]. The speed at which a decision-maker could collect, assimilate, and act on data is a key determinate to effective response to an evolving situation. It is therefore, critical to leave leadership roles in responding to problems at the level best able to develop true situational awareness, which is often found not at a national level, but at a state or local level. At that level, decision-makers are likely to have a more intimate familiarity with local conditions, local capabilities, and local constituencies— all of which improve the ability to orient on input data and give it meaning in the proper context.

Unfortunately, issue framing in the context of biopreparedness has often resulted in a disconnection between the realities of what is needed for an effective response. In truth, little difference exists between the response to a man-made or natural epidemic—except for the need for forensic analysis, which may well not be apparent at the time of the response, or even for years. As Treadwell et al. [2] have noted, “except for the most blatant violations of natural principles, bioterrorism will continue to remain difficult to differentiate from naturally occurring outbreaks [2].” For example, over two years passed before it was realized that the 1984 Salmonella outbreak in The Dalles, Oregon was a terrorist act rather than more routine foodborne epidemic [3,4].

Unfortunately, the manner in which the issue of biodefense has been framed has lost sight of the fact that, aside from aspects related to criminal investigation, there is no difference between a biological terrorist action and a normal epidemic [5]. As a result, planning is centralized to an unhealthy degree at the federal level, rather than at the level of the state and local responders. Under the paradigm in place since 1999, federal agencies such as the Centers for Disease or Department of Homeland Security in theory develop national policies for a response to a biological event, and state and local agencies implement them. In practice, this does not occur. Studies of federal funding for bioterrorism preparedness, for example, have found that it is not federal incentives such as intergovernmental transfers that determine preparedness activity at the local level, but rather local leadership and local issue saliency [6,7]. Misplaced responsibility and the addition of extra layers of oversight results in what has been called the “tragedy of the anti-commons” in public choice theory—a situation where too many entities have the ability to veto or delay key actions [8]. The inclusion of excess decision makers, particularly those outside the immediate level of response, impedes the development of an effective and rapid ability to orient to changing circumstances and act in a timely k _ j 1 cp _ g short, to deliver an effective emergency response.

We have seen the same results in practice with emergency management. Consider the responses to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and Hurricane Sandy in 2012. The weak response to Katrina in Louisiana is well known, and prominently characterized by the failure of state and local officials in both planning and response [9]. In contrast, stronger leadership at the state level in Mississippi, coupled with less reliance on federal intervention, resulted in a more effective response [10]. As in Louisiana, the response to the impact of Hurricane Sandy in New York City has been criticized as poor, again with local and state officials poorly prepared and reliant on federal leadership [11].

As we observe the lessons from real-world emergencies, it is important that we critically evaluate the lessons and reconsider cherished assumptions. Who should be responsible for emergency management? Just because the federal government is bigger, does that mean it is better—does it have the right resources and right capabilities? Should we focus less on national programs than on developing the right tools at the state and local levels to increase and leverage the situational awareness already found there, even if that reduces the role of national agencies? Have we-in government, in academia, in the private sector been asking the right questions in developing strong policies for emergency management?

References

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