

The 9/11 lesson of how citizens react in a crisis

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There's something missing from the debate about what President Bush knew and when he knew about 9/11: any recognition of the importance of information for intelligent action by nonbureaucrats. Yet American citizens can and have played key roles in averting disaster throughout our history, from Paul Revere's Ride to Sept. 11 itself.

The Bush administration says nothing could have been done to stop 9/11. Critics say the FBI and CIA failed us. Certainly they did. But both sides of the debate miss a key action that could have been taken. Forget about the Aug. 6, 2001, presidential daily briefing and the unspecified color alerts from the Department of Homeland Security.

On Sept. 11, ordinary people were the only ones to have done anything to stop the carnage. The brave souls on United Flight 93 caused their jetliner to slam into a Pennsylvania field. They acted quickly, using a spontaneously formed intelligence network that shared information freely. They knew they were going to die, and they knew their deaths were preventing some unknown but greater terror. Their actions saved the Capitol building in Washington.

It was an example of pre-emptive resilience. It happens all the time in disasters. And it mostly happens among ordinary people. It almost never happens in bureaucracies. Flight 93 passengers used cell phones to gain and share solid intelligence. They made a coordinated choice and acted decisively.

In contrast, intelligence organizations couldn't tell what was intelligence, and they refused to share information. Paralyzed by turf issues, politics and other obstacles, they couldn't make a choice. They failed us all. Testifying before the 9/11 Commission in March, former White House Counterterrorism Coordinator Richard A. Clarke testified to this effect and apologized for the failure.

Long-existing research shows that top-down command-and-control approaches fail in disasters. Bottom-up, citizen-based responses are often more effective. It was pre-emptive resilience when a spontaneous network of regular citizens successfully marshaled numerous watercraft -- ferries, pleasure barges -- to evacuate 500,000 people off lower Manhattan that terrible day. Regular people, not bureaucracies, made that happen. Pre-emptive resilience helped evacuate the infirm from the World Trade Center towers. It would be pre-emptive resilience if we prepared teachers to be first responders in anticipation of a chemical attack in our neighborhoods.

What could Bush have done in August 2001 -- or earlier? He could have told us what the intelligence community was worried about. In July 2001, the FBI advised Attorney General John Ashcroft not to fly commercially. Don't regular citizens warrant similar information?

The president could have said on television: "We have clear intelligence that terrorists are operating within our borders. They are probably affiliated with Osama bin Laden, whose radical Islamic group has been involved in several previous attacks against us. He has said he wants to retaliate. Our information is not specific about the place, time or method of attack. But there is chatter about hijacking airplanes. The FBI has noticed suspicious activity that might be preparation for hijackings and has noticed suspicious activity around federal buildings in New York. The FAA has advised airlines to be on the lookout. I want to warn all Americans to also be on high alert."

Nothing in that is inconsistent with the Aug. 6 presidential daily briefing. Note that such a statement would be drastically different from the simple, unspecific "color-coded alerts" that come from the Department of Homeland Security. Were the president to add other available intelligence about an

impending attack -- intelligence obscured in the hue and cry over this one presidential daily briefing -- the American people would likely have understood that trouble was brewing.

Is this 20/20 hindsight? Would Americans have been similarly paralyzed, indifferent or inured by the barrage of ominous intelligence? Don't we act more cautiously following ominous government warnings about smoking and health, diet and obesity, and alcohol and driving?

Would Americans panic? Not likely, and especially if there were a history of a respectful and reliable flow of information. The administration's penchant for secrecy works against pre-emptive resilience. What's worse is that the Department of Homeland Security, one of the world's largest bureaucracies, is nearly paralyzed by its size.

Could an alerted public have stopped 9/11? Maybe not. But, the public thwarted 25 percent of the planned attacks. If travelers that morning had been suspicious, they may have more quickly spotted the hijackers (who looked remarkably similar) and foiled their plans. In the worst case, perhaps they would have commandeered more of the hijacked aircraft and crashed them, like our heroes on Flight 93.

The power of individuals and their networks shouldn't be underestimated (note al-Qaida). It should be bolstered and facilitated by organized government agencies. Rather than centralize, we ought to shore up resilience in the lowest levels of society (workplaces, schools, faith-based organizations). Someone should send the president a presidential daily briefing on pre-emptive resilience.

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