

## Book Review: *Mission Improbable*

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***Mission Improbable: Using Fantasy Documents to Tame Disaster*, Lee Clarke. University of Chicago Press, 1999.**

"The King's New Clothes" would be an excellent alternate title for this unsettling book. According to Lee Clarke, as in the fairy tale, some disaster planners try to fool most of the people most of the time. Disaster plans and the disaster planning process are expertly and mercilessly dissected by Clarke. Granted, he takes on easy targets such as nuclear power plant evacuation plans, massive oil spill cleanup plans – and the ultimate fantasy plan, survival of nuclear war.

Clarke clearly understands the planning process and the importance of planning for both daily life and disasters. According to Clarke, the lynch pin in the "fantasy" disaster planning process is the act of transforming uncertainty into risk. Clarke defines risk as "when it is possible...to estimate the likelihood that an event (or set of events) will occur." According to Clarke, "Uncertainty is when such estimations are not possible."

For example, we have a great deal of experience with flood disasters, and can fairly well anticipate when and where the water will rise and the damage that will occur as a result of flooding. The same sort of predictability is not possible for dealing with a massive oil spill on the high seas, because there is little comparable experience upon which to make estimations.

Clarke characterizes certain plans and parts of plans as "fantasy documents," when planners treat "uncertainty" as though it is "risk." As a classic example, he cites a plan championed by the Long Island Lighting Company (builders of a nuclear power plant) that an evacuation for a Three

Mile Island type of event would be similar to an average workday commute, when thousands of people regularly leave Long Island to work in New York City.

In this case planners, writing with a very broad brush, ignored issues such as parents trying to get their children from school before evacuating. The planners "assumed" (you know what that means) that public transit bus drivers would stay on their buses and drive a pre-assigned evacuation route, leaving their own families to their own devices. The planners in this case assumed that because the bus drivers would become "disaster workers," that they would perform to the same high standards that other disaster workers (police and firefighters) do. In this instance the bus drivers emphatically stated that their families came first, thus voiding this "fantasy" plan.

In some cases, planners take a small incident (an oil spill of four or five thousand gallons on an intra-coastal waterway) and multiply merrily until they have equated the small incident to a large incident (an oil spill of 250,000 gallons on the high seas). Furthermore, in this instance, both plans assume (there we go again) that oil spills only occur when the winds are light and the seas are calm.

Clarke also discusses the value of disaster plans as both practical and symbolic documents. The symbolism is that organizations (via a plan) assure some interested group that some unknown danger in fact can be dealt with – "just trust us."

Don't get the wrong impression; Clarke isn't "anti" planning. He sees great value in well written and exercised plans. He strives to

make the reader look at the planning process in greater detail, and understand the planning process in its social context.

He understands that plans are often shaped by political issues. But he argues that often the political aspects obscure important issues about the real risks involved. Plans should realistically address actual hazards and exposures, and not gloss over them to the disadvantage of the public who is exposed to the risk.

He proposes a theory of how "multi-hazard" planning developed as a way for the Federal government to get state and local civilian planners to address nuclear hazards when state and local planners had little interest and less money for nuclear disaster planning. Clarke explains that while Federal nuclear war disaster planning was always targeted at a "limited" nuclear war scenario, the military plans were written for a massive "first strike" offensive. Thus, these two different concepts of nuclear war resulted in "fantasy" plans.

Clarke teaches sociology at Rutgers University. As a result, this book does not quite read with the panache of a Tom Clancy novel. Because *Mission Improbable* deals with complex and important issues, it does take both time and concentration to get through it. But for my effort, I have a much more expansive and clearer perspective on disaster planning and its history.

Planning is a most fundamental part of disaster preparedness. *Mission Improbable* unveils the intricacies of good planning – and the Machiavellian use of smoke and mirrors that influence the shape and substance of far too