Circling the Wagons: Community-Based Responses to Bioterrorism

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The attacks on U.S. soil on September 11, 2001 , and widespread concern with the continuing possibility of terrorist incidents in this country, have skewed the axes of American society in two conflicting directions. On the one hand, they have thrust us into a troubling future in which we face a new sense of danger where we live; we and our neighbors felt safe for most of the last century from the kind of violent threat common in many other societies. Both our feelings of invulnerability and of difference have been seriously challenged. To counteract our loss of "innocence," institutions of government have embraced an unfamiliar concept of "warfare" at home and abroad for the foreseeable future.

On the other hand, these new influences on our public and private lives have also taken us back into our past in a vast, uncharted and untamed land.   Back to times at least before World War II when communities were isolated and remote from one another; when known and unanticipated dangers and illnesses could strike at any time; and when local societies were compelled to fall back upon their individual and corporate skills and resources to cope. This is a habit of thought and behavior that many have lost as greater mobility has chipped away at the intimacy and integrity of local communities. Technology has made almost all of us dependent, not upon ourselves and our neighbors, but on distant suppliers and centralized government bureaucracies for basic necessities as well as essential services, including public safety. In many instances, "community" is no longer synonymous with neighborhood.

The torque between these two countervailing trends constitutes a fundamental source of anxiety, frustration, anger, and sense of helplessness in contemporary society. We unexpectedly find ourselves facing new and unimaginable menaces at home without the well-practiced mechanisms of self-sufficiency and intra-communal support our ancestors enjoyed against earlier domestic threats. Access to and dependence upon technological conveniences and the services of centralized government agencies, both vulnerable to terrorist disruption, have led to an atrophying of individual survival skills and a loss of a collective memory of the strength and effectiveness of concerted neighborhood cooperation.

Unquestionably, there are exceptions within the United States to such generalizations, but perhaps the experience of the families of the U.S. Foreign Service abroad offers the most relevant deviation from the contemporary norm. In a unique way, American communities living in areas outside Europe and the urban centers of East Asia , straddle the divide between modernity and traditional habits of self-reliance. They take jet aircraft to post and communicate with the outside world via reasonably modern communications, but in many cases they must boil their drinking water, deal with instability and human threats including terrorism, and cope with a variety of inconveniences almost unknown today in this country. Above all, these communities exhibit characteristics of a "frontier" mentality, recognizing that they are invariably a minority, frequently in a hostile environment, cut off from rapid outside support and relief, and reliant upon their own collective devices for needs from entertainment to elemental security. In circumstances of direct attack or instability in the surrounding society, they must develop the skills and mechanisms for self shielding pending the arrival of outside assistance.

The operation and survival of embassy personnel and their dependents during a critical incident

depends upon the creation of a community ethos. It is true that "service discipline" among the Foreign Service and military personnel provides a presumption of coherence that is lacking in the broader public. But it would be a serious mistake to assume that it is a sufficient basis for effective crisis responses. Embassy communities frequently include personnel from other U.S. Government agencies without either the service discipline tradition or previous overseas experience. In addition to dependents of various ages, there are inevitably newly-arrived personnel who must quickly be brought into the community tent with others they may have known for a very brief period. Nor can a shared ethos and sense of belonging be forged on the basis of position or official lines of authority. Molding so diverse a group into a community able to remain functional in periods of danger and adversity requires deliberate and continuous attention to the process of community development and nurturing.

Despite its unique features, the experience of the Foreign Service and long-term expatriate communities abroad offers insights useful to the effective implementation of the "Shielding" concept within this country. Indeed, adapting some lessons from the behavior of exposed communities in foreign countries to contemporary American society can enhance our capacity to deal with domestic disasters, including the threat of bioterrorism. Among other benefits, they teach the importance of the community as an "actor", rather than a victim, is all phases of the threat.

The genius of the "Shielding" approach lies in its building upon the fundamental human predisposition to prefer a familiar comfort zone in times of anxiety and distress. The reluctance of people to abandon their "homes" is continually reaffirmed by their resistance to evacuating in natural disasters, such as floods, fires and hurricanes. No matter how devastating these threats can be, however, they are comparatively familiar and comprehensible in contrast to the unprecedented nature of terrorist attacks with biological weapons. As a consequence, and partially because these threats are posed by human agents and can be replicated, it is far more difficult to predict public responses. Unless the "fight" response can be reinforced by coping actively with the situation in situ, a portion of the public may be inclined to "flight" with all of the uncertainties and complications that alternative implies.

One of the most basic glues that bonds individuals to their area of residence is a sense of community with those around them. Such a feeling has the ability to affect everything from concern with the appearance of a neighborhood to the likelihood of effective cooperation in times of trial. Where the public has lost, through easy mobility and other features of modern life, the association between neighborhood and community, the need to be with others toward whom we feel strong ties of mutual dependence and responsibility is no less intense in times of crisis. It is precisely at such moments of societal trauma that widely dispersed family and friends are least able to provide the kind of supportive environment required. Living among relative strangers not only inhibits self-help activities but may give rise to feelings of helplessness and despair.

An important aspect of preparation for potential crises within Foreign Service communities is the open admission that such situations can occur. It is often easier to ignore the possibility of serious threats, but we do so at our own peril. Every embassy, for example, maintains, exercises, and periodically updates an Emergency and Evacuation (E&E) Plan designed to provide plans and procedures for dealing with crises and attacks, including terrorism. In practice, these plans seldom fit precisely the circumstances of a particular incident. They do, however, produce two important benefits: first, the exercises serve to remind all that threats to the community's well-being are a constant reality and, second, they provide opportunities to think through appropriate ways to react to varying contingencies. On balance, the anxiety induced by recognizing the threat is probably more than offset by the realization that community leadership is under-taking measures to cope with the danger.

An associated facet of preparations in embassy communities is the maintenance of a system of early warning and information transmission, which could be easily replicated domestically. To be effective, the system, which is essentially a telephone tree, must be maintained, exercised and

up-dated periodically before the occurrence of a crisis. Embassy selected 'wardens' from both the official and wider expatriate communities serve a crucial function in spreading alerts and other information widely and quickly. Wardens are chosen within large organizations and to assure a geographic spread in case of phone outages.

A similar arrangement could be established in local neighborhoods through-out the United States in anticipation of natural and man-made disasters. The very act of creating this kind of local network has important practical and psychological implications for an effective response to crisis contingencies. First, like the Neighborhood Watch in many areas, the process conditions citizens to the real possibility of disaster, making it much more difficult to ignore the threat. Second, the exercise is a step toward building a sense of community among neighbors who may ordinarily have little or no interaction. Third, activation of this kind of geographic network provides a mechanism for encouraging members to undertake precautions at home against possible traumatic events from flood and severe snowstorms to bioterrorism.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, active involvement of residents brings awareness of the surprising array of resources and capabilities their neighborhood possesses to react to a common threat. The recognition that individual house-holds are neither alone or helpless is crucial to the acceptance of Community Shielding as a defense. Thinking through in advance of crisis how the community would respond can build the needed confidence and sense of empowerment to mitigate panic and dysfunctional reactions to the unthinkable.

In the Foreign Service experience, the analog of the Shielding concept is called the "Stand Fast" phase of the emergency plan. Frequently, the impulse in the face of a crisis is to take action, any action. Seldom, however, is there sufficient information available in the initial hours of disaster to discern an appropriate course of action.   As difficult as it may be, the wisest course under these conditions is to wait for clarification of the nature of the threat and how to evade it.

It is a mistake to view "Stand Fast" as merely a passive exercise. Local communities, whether abroad or in this country, are not equipped to resolve major crises, whether natural disaster, civil unrest, or terrorist attack. For this, they must rely on outside assistance -- the arrival of a relieving force, medical assistance, or humanitarian aid. The task of the local community is to cope with the immediate situation and to survive until help or informed guidance can reach it. This is the most positive strategy that can be adopted when the situation is unclear and any other action is likely to increase the threat.

The objective of the community under attack must be to maximize the survival and welfare of its members. In the case of terrorism abroad or at home, the maintenance of a sense of cohesion and order is the ultimate rebuff to the perpetrators. Their goal is to sow terror and induce panic. In the degree that they are successful, they complicate immeasurably the responsibilities of lawful authorities in responding effectively to the larger crisis and regaining the initiative. An interlocking network of local communities capable of fending for themselves in the early phases of a crisis is among the most valuable assets at the disposal of these authorities. The redundancy inherent in such networks also imparts a degree of flexibility in their response.

Individuals and families may not respond positively to instructions to remain in place unless they are comfortable with those around them.   This comfort level can be enhanced by pre-crisis planning and shared preparations within the neighborhood. It also requires, however, that thought be given to means of maintaining contact during the period of trauma. Each member of the "community" has to know that he or she is "known" by the formal or informal leadership, that they will be kept informed and not forgotten in the rush of events. Preparations should also be made to provide essential human and medical support, including required medicines, to the extent possible.

Conditions within this country give domestic communities some significant advantages over Foreign Service communities in carrying out the strategy. In the first instance, even in the

aftermath of terrorist strikes, the country will remain in "friendly" hands. It may take some time to re-establish governmental functions, but those in control will not be hostile. Secondly, the size and diversity of the country assures that there will be areas and resources not affected by even an attack with a weapon of mass destruction. Help will eventually be available. Finally, to the degree that they are not affected by the disaster, modern technology offers a variety of means of modern communication -- telephone, e-mail, television, and radio -- as well as limited movement by neighbors. It should be feasible to reassure all that they will not be left alone or abandoned.

The major enemy of an effective "Stand Fast" operation is boredom, an inability to find useful activities to occupy those sheltering during a crisis. Many individuals will find survival and other tasks to keep themselves busy; a few will inevitably fail to do so, dwelling on their plight and becoming increasingly anxious. Community leaders need to pay particular attention to this problem both in advance of and during the crisis and consider carefully enlisting neigh-bors in the performance of useful tasks that can be performed within the limits of community confinement.   If the duration of the crisis is prolonged, there will be needs within the community that those who can move about will need to meet in support of the infirm and other neighbors with other needs. The distribution of such tasks can be a potent antidote to boredom and a crippling sense of victimization. Nothing in my experience during the siege of the Embassy in Kuwait was more effective in conditioning ordinary individuals to achieve extraordinary things than the realization that they had a useful contribution to make to the welfare of the community.   For most people, even tasks that would be considered menial in normal circumstances have important therapeutic effects during a prolonged crisis, reinforcing the coherence of the community and fostering a voluntary commitment to group goals and discipline.

Domestically, the 'Self Shielding' concept provides the critical bais for personal and community health and integrity. Traumatic crises unavoidably create stress in individuals and groups, stress that can generate societal breakdowns and disintegration. In extreme cases, the outcome is what has been called "learned helplessness."   The antidote to this phenomenon is neither to ignore the threat nor to try to accomplish more than is realistic in combating it. It is rather difficult to find areas and activities, physical or mental, that are not controlled by events or others. I call this "carving out areas of autonomy" and its effectiveness has been demonstrated, for example, by prisoners of war and others who managed to cope with indescribable conditions and emerge in reasonably sound condition. What appears common in these cases is not exceptional courage, although they were unquestionably brave, but great personal integrity and the ability to deny their captors or other factors total control over them. During the Embassy siege in Kuwait , all involved knew that the Iraqi occupation forces controlled the area around the compound and, further, that they had the capability to overrun the Embassy at will. Focusing on those facts alone would have been overwhelming and disastrous. Instead the community inside operated on the assumption that, so long as the Iraqis did not attack the compound, it was in control of its "home" and its own welfare; the members of the community were convinced that they could extend their resources and improve their conditions, and they did! Each achievement, in fact, strengthened resolve and confidence in one another until they felt able as a group to undertake small acts of defiance against their captors.

Shielding offers similar opportunities in most foreseeable situations, with the crucial difference that those outside the neighborhood are friendly, sympathetic and supportive. Refugees and evacuees must by definition place themselves in the hands of others, no matter how well-meaning. They cannot control most aspects of their lives at that time and attempts to do so are most likely to take the form of disruptive behavior at a time when authorities are preoccupied with re-establishing order and normalcy in the aftermath of the disaster. Evacuees are essentially "victims" with limited capacity to contribute to their own welfare or resolution of the crisis situation.

In contrast, Shielding provides the basis for individual and communal "actors" who retain substantial control of their lives and conditions. If thought were given to neighborhood responses in advance of the disaster and minimal preparations were put in place, a surprising degree of resiliency can be created. Individuals will vary in their ability to function more or less normally

under trauma, but anecdotal evidence within the Foreign Service and American expatriate communities strongly suggests most will respond with resolve and creativity in the tradition of their ancestors on the frontiers of America .

How the Shielding concept is presented will be crucially important to public acceptance and implementation by neighborhoods throughout the nation. It is not, as it may appear to some, a negative or passive response to external threats. It must be made clear that it does not entail merely "hiding" at home. Rather, it will demand unprecedented levels of community activism and cooperation. It must be seen as a program of active resistance to terrorism because it confounds the terrorists' intention to disperse and disrupt society. Standing fast also means standing up to them and their attack. By surviving and ultimately flourishing neighborhoods strike a major blow in the struggle against this scourge, each citizen contributing to the goal. Likewise, it is a strategy that draws upon the powerful strain of voluntarism in American society, avoiding the need for government intervention and coercion implied by involuntary evacuations and quarantines.

The Foreign Service has lived with the threat and reality of contemporary terrorism for many decades. Its personnel have suffered disasters and casualties and learned important lessons in the process. This brief paper distills some of them and suggests their applicability within the United States , now that global terrorism has reached our shores and is likely to remain a threat for the foreseeable future. Most importantly, the Foreign Service has learned that fore-sight and relatively simple precautions and preparations greatly enhance defenses against terrorist attack. At the same time, they have discovered that it is possible to maintain vigilance without sacrificing quality of life. Regretfully, these are things that the American general public will now need to absorb as well. Shielding points the way to this objective in an environment where attacks with weapons of mass destruction could be widespread but solutions are apt to be local.

APPENDIX

NOTIONAL PROGRAM OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Genuine communities are voluntary associations; they cannot be decreed or imposed from above. Geography, circumstances, or external threats may define community membership, but it is essential that members feel that they "own" their institutions, however rudimentary, for the community to perform the functions and responsibilities demanded by the Self Shielding concept.

The temptation to impose one template on diverse neighborhoods, therefore, should be resisted. Authorities should be prepared to provide information, assistance and advice, while permitting local communities to evolve and make preparations for disasters in accordance with their individual characteristics, capabilities and needs. If we expect communities to exhibit initiative, resiliency and self-reliance under attack, they must develop habits of autonomy in the pre-disaster period.

These guidelines, based on the Foreign Service experience abroad, are consequently very general and subject to modification in light of practical experience with the process.

I.   Many communities already possess vestigial institutions. Homeowner or community associations, neighborhood watch, or local chapters of civic organizations, for example, can offer a framework for development of disaster response plans. Where they do not exist or are unacceptable to the potential membership, new structures may have to be created. In either case, the vital requirement is an initial cadre of community activists. They may be drawn from pre-existing organizations or self-selected in the first instance, but they must understand and accept the need to make preparations for crises that can threaten the security and well-being of the community. These "leaders" can be changed, augmented, or formalized in their expanded roles as the Self Shielding program evolves. It is important to accept from the outset that some individuals in the locality will decline to participate actively, at least until the contingency occurs.

Planning will need to take account of this fact of human nature. The leadership will need to work around non-participants and engage maximum neighborhood engagement in discussion and preparations.

II.   The process of organizing the community should give members a sense of mastery of their immediate environment and collective well-being, even in unforeseeable conditions. The compilation of essential data also provides a mechanism for building a network of relationships. Among the things that crisis leadership will need to have at hand are the following:

- contact lists of authorities and agencies needed in emergencies (e.g. fire and medical services, local disaster preparedness authorities, media outlets, etc.) Ideally, contacts with leaders in adjoining communities should be included. Periodic liaison with them will be useful for mutual support in time of crisis;

- census of community members with names in household, addresses, and phone numbers and other means of communication (e.g., e-mail);

- prepare directory of key contact information and simple instructions for distribution to community members;

- designate area wardens (within walking distance of those for whom they are responsible) to ensure communication of essential information under all circumstances;

- designate several individuals to move about within the community and to adjoining neighborhoods as needed for re-supply, etc. In general, every community member who wants or will accept a useful function should be given a responsibility; and

- compile inventory of community resources and special needs (e.g. residents with special physical and medicinal needs, 4-wheel drive vehicles, persons with EM or nursing experience, generators, ham radio operators, etc.).

III. Community organization and plans cannot be a prepare-and-forget process. People move, circumstances change, etc. and the community needs to incorporate changes based upon feedback from residents, enhanced governmental services and lessons learned in exercises or natural disasters (flooding, snowstorms, etc.). The system developed (including the warden system can be used profitably for ordinary community activities, such as road clean-up, or picnics and other gatherings. Conscious effort should be made to involve as many residents as possible through meetings where guidance is provided (essential stocks of water and food for households, procedures in emergency, assembly points and routes if needed, and contacts for special support and assistance). Such sessions will ideally also offer citizens an opportunity not simply to receive information but to make suggestions and share concerns. We must always remember that the objective of community building is only partially achieved by putting physical preparations in place; nurturing a sense of community confidence, inter-dependency and involvement is equally, if not more, important.