

## **An Analysis of Failure: Pearl Harbor, 9/11, Hurricanes Katrina and Rita Carl J. Jensen, III**

*Across the government, there were failures of imagination, policy, capabilities, and management.*

National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (2004: 9)

Complacency and procrastination are out of place where sudden and decisive actions are of the essence.

Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack (1946: 257)

*(S)tremlining, simplifying, and expediting decision making must quickly replace “business as usual” approaches to doing business.*

Statement by Comptroller General David M. Walker on GAO’s Preliminary Observations Regarding Preparedness and Response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita (Walker, 2006: 6)

### **Introduction**

The scenario repeats with depressing regularity. A national-level catastrophe or tragedy strikes. Before the dust has a chance to settle, fingers get pointed, accusations are made, and blame is parceled out. Eventually, a Congressional Committee or other fact-finding body lies out, in excruciating detail, just what went wrong and how it can be fixed. And yet, things continue to go wrong for seemingly the same reasons (or at least that is the perception).

This chapter examines the following questions: to what extent does government learn from its past mistakes? If the answer is very little, the question becomes why? How can it be that the confluence of talented, motivated individuals does not equate to, if not perfection, at least competence? Are there other, systemic forces at work that confound and hinder the best efforts of individuals? And ultimately what does this mean for policing?

## Methodology

The methodology employed herein is qualitative. Three relatively recent events in U.S. history – the Attack on Pearl Harbor, the 9/11 Attacks, and the Hurricane Katrina relief efforts – are examined for their similarities and differences. In particular, perceived governmental failures to prevent both Pearl Harbor and 9/11 in addition to inadequacies with regard to recovery efforts pertaining to Katrina and Rita are analyzed. These events were chosen for a particular reason: their national level significance and devastating consequences guaranteed that many hard questions would be asked. To that end, at least two (Pearl Harbor and 9/11) produced exceptionally comprehensive congressional reports that examined in great detail what happened, what went wrong, and what could be done to prevent such failures in the future. The General Accounting Office (GAO) has written a monograph that provides sufficient information from which to draw some tentative conclusions.<sup>1</sup>

The source documents used in the present analysis are:

- *The 9/11 Commission Report*. The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (2004)
- *Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack*. Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack, Congress of the United States (1946)
- *Statement by Comptroller General David M. Walker on GAO's Preliminary Observations Regarding Preparedness and Response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita* (2006)

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<sup>1</sup> Additional critique of the Katrina & Rita responses can be found in the Congressional report *A Failure of Initiative: The Final Report of the Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for the Response to Hurricane Katrina*, [http://katrina.house.gov/full\\_katrina\\_report.htm](http://katrina.house.gov/full_katrina_report.htm), which was released in February 2006.

Problems noted and recommendations found in the official materials were synthesized into broad, general categories. This was motivated by the need for clarity and the desire to determine whether consistent systemic issues across disasters could be identified. One might logically predict that the Pearl Harbor and 9/11 reports would highlight like issues; after all, both deal with the inability to prevent catastrophic attacks. Katrina and Rita, on the other hand, reveal significant deficiencies in response after the catastrophic event. However, if consistent, systemic government inadequacies exist, each might contribute to both an inability to prevent/foresee a disaster as well as an inadequate response in its aftermath.

## **Results**

The 9/11 and Pearl Harbor reports are noteworthy in their similarities. Indeed, many of the findings in one can be equally applied to the other. Perhaps of greater interest, many of the problems and recommendations found in the Katrina/Rita analysis are similar to those found in the Pearl Harbor and 9/11 documents. In broad terms, the following categories of deficiencies cut across all three reports:

- *lack of imagination/creativity;*
- *failure to gain a comprehensive, strategic understanding of the threat;*
- *inability or unwillingness to share information/cooperate;*
- *failure to plan/train;*
- *and failure to act decisively.*

Each category is considered in turn within this chapter.

### *Lack of Imagination/Creativity*

The 9/11 Commission did not mince words:

The most important failure was one of imagination. We do not believe leaders understood the gravity of the threat (pg. 9)...Terrorism was not the overriding national security concern for the U.S. government under either the Clinton or pre-9/11 Bush administration. The policy challenges were linked to this failure of imagination (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 2004: Executive Summary: 10).

According to the Commission, despite clear indications of al Qaeda's intentions, which included previous attacks on U.S. interests, proposed plots utilizing aircraft to attack buildings, indications of pilot training on the part of radical jihadists, and verbalizations by Osama Bin Laden himself, many in government were shocked when the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks unfolded.

The inability to predict a particular attack goes well beyond a mere lack of understanding; in fact, it produces a complacency that causes many to completely underestimate all facets of the threat. The same type of complacency that was manifest following the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks was evident after the attack on Pearl Harbor:

There is no substitute for imagination and resourcefulness on the part of supervisory and intelligence officials (pg. 260)...Contributing to the effectiveness of the attack was a powerful striking force, much more powerful than it had thought the Japanese were able to employ in a single tactical venture at such distance and under such circumstances (Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack, 1946: 251).

While it could be argued that successful subterfuge was employed to explain a lack of foreknowledge regarding both attacks, a similar phenomenon - perhaps more aptly insufficient imagination - can be noted with regard to Katrina:

Leadership underestimated the storm and damage. The DHS Secretary designated Hurricane Katrina as an incident of national significance on August 30<sup>th</sup> the day after final landfall. As a result of categorizing it as an incident of national significance instead of a catastrophic event, the federal posture generally was to

wait for the affected states to request assistance. If it were categorized as a catastrophic event the federal response would have been more aggressive and would have come right away (Walker, 2006: 4).

There are many attributes of groups that, if left unchecked, can serve to stifle creativity and imagination (Paulus, 2000). Indeed, most businesses today would agree with Einstein's famous admonition that "imagination is more important than knowledge" (Einstein, n.d.) and many work diligently to overcome institutional barriers to success (Tan, 1998). Given the strong likelihood that rates of change and levels of uncertainty will only increase in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Kurzweil, 2005), the role that imagination and creativity will play in dealing with an unknown world should not be underestimated. The military appears to have recognized this and gears a great deal of its Professional Military Education program to developing critical thinking skills (Trott, 2006). Sadly, other public institutions seem less committed to the same goal.

#### *Failure to Gain a Comprehensive, Strategic Understanding of the Threat*

In the months following 9/11, a new phrase gained favor in our lexicon: "failure to connect the dots." Its meaning is quite simple; no one entity had successfully assembled and linked together all the available information to gain a strategic level understanding regarding the nature of the al Qaeda threat:

The most serious weaknesses in agency capabilities were in the domestic arena. The FBI did not have the capability to link the collective knowledge of agents in the field to national priorities. Other domestic agencies deferred to the FBI (pg. 9)...(W)hile there were many reports on Bin Laden and his growing al Qaeda organization, there was no comprehensive review of what the intelligence committee knew and what it did not know, and what that meant (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 2004: Executive Summary, 12).

In reality, the problem went well beyond the FBI. If one considers the totality of the information available in the files of intelligence agencies, other federal agencies (e.g.,

the State Department, the FAA) the military, local police departments,<sup>2</sup> and the private sector, there was a substantial amount of information that could have shed light on the pending attacks had the information been synthesized.

Difficulty in connecting dots did not begin with the 9/11 attacks, though. Consider the following from the Pearl Harbor report:

The Intelligence and War Plans Divisions of the War and Navy Departments failed: ...To give careful and thoughtful consideration to the intercepted messages from Tokyo to Honolulu of September 24, November 15, and November 20...and to raise a question as to their significance...To be properly on the qui vive to receive the “one o’clock” intercept and to recognize that military action would very possibly occur somewhere at 1 p.m., December 7. If properly appreciated, this intelligence should have suggested a dispatch to all Pacific outpost commanders... (Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack, 1946: 252).

While a strategic level understanding will help in the prevention of a catastrophic event, it will assist in the aftermath of one as well. Consider the recommendations of Comptroller General Walker concerning inadequate visioning and planning prior to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita:

...(P)rior to a catastrophic event, the leadership roles, responsibilities, and lines of authority for the response at all levels must be clearly defined and effectively communicated in order to facilitate rapid and effective decision making, especially in preparing for and in the early hours and days after the event (Walker, 2006: 3).

Gaining a strategic level understanding of one’s environment has always been a challenge; in today’s information-sodden world, that challenge has increased exponentially. “Connecting the dots” is not the only phrase to have gained prominence in the post 9/11 world. Consider the term “stovepipe,” a word used to describe systems that

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<sup>2</sup> Some of the 9/11 hijackers had encounters with local police prior to the attacks, to include the issuance of traffic citations (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 2004).

do not integrate well with other systems. The sheer number of “stovepiped” systems that possess information today is staggering; there are so many, in fact, that assigning some overriding authority to gain the strategic vantage point may be counterproductive or impossible.

Levin and Jensen (2005) have proposed a somewhat different model, one more resembling today’s blogs, in which information is shared freely and consensus (or lack of same) emerges naturally. In such a system, the role of the central authority is to provide systems and guidance that facilitate sharing. That way, the group - rather than a single individual - understands and contributes to the strategic vision.

*Inability or Unwillingness to Share Information and/or Cooperate*

Rodney King’s lament for just getting along could be the mantra for governmental reform. The inability or unwillingness of government entities to cooperate and share is, unfortunately, nothing new. In the case of the disasters under study, guarding turf and fostering a competitive rather than a cooperative organizational attitude made things much worse:

Action officers should have been able to draw on all available knowledge about al Qaeda in the government. Management should have ensured that *information was shared and duties were clearly assigned across agencies, and across the foreign-domestic divide* (pg. 10 - 11)... The combination of an overwhelming number of priorities, flat budgets, an outmoded structure, and *bureaucratic rivalries* resulted in insufficient response to the new challenge (pg. 12)...Those working counterterrorism matters did so despite limited intelligence collection and strategic analysis capabilities, *a limited capacity to share information both internally and externally* (pg. 13)...At more senior levels communication was poor. Senior military and FAA officials had no effective communication with each other (emphasis added) (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 2004: Executive Summary, 15).

The Pearl Harbor Committee (1946) was more blunt in its assessment:

Specifically, the Hawaiian commands failed...to effect liaison on a basis designed to acquaint each of them with the operations of the other, which was necessary to their joint security, and to exchange fully all significant intelligence (pg. 252)

Any doubt as to whether outposts should be given information should always be resolved in favor of supplying the information (pg. 255)

Restriction of highly confidential information to a minimum number of officials, while often necessary, should not be carried to the point of prejudicing the work of the organization (pg. 261).

Personal or official jealousy will wreck any organization (pg. 264).

The lack of a shared vision, exacerbated by a dearth of pre-disaster relationship building and familiarity will derailed the best efforts of even the most competent and dedicated individuals:

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Red Cross – working together for the first time as co-primary agencies for ESF-6 under the National Response Plan – disagreed about their roles and responsibilities, and this disagreement strained working relationships and hampered their efforts to coordinate relief services for hurricane victims (General Accounting Office, 2006:1).

As human beings, we are enamored with competition. Consider the World Cup, the Super Bowl, or the Tour de France. That spirit of competition has spilled over into the public sector, with “no child left behind” legislation rewarding “good” schools and agencies competing for scarce resources.<sup>3</sup>

In spite of task forces and gradual improvement, both organizational and personal competition, rather than cooperation, are the norm for many police organizations. How many law enforcement CEOs *truly* reward their subordinates for cooperating with others over individually solving the “big case”? If “what gets rewarded gets done” is true, it leaves little incentive for cooperation.

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<sup>3</sup> Although, consider as a corollary, the following: the writer was once told by a senior law enforcement official that failure wasn't always a bad thing; indeed, resources would often be thrown at a “failed” venture in order to “fix the problem.”



If playing well with others is still a work in progress for some in policing, it seems to have gained legs in other venues. Recently, a leader of the white power movement in the United States issued congratulations and assistance to al Qaeda and like-minded organizations for their fight against the West. The possibility that two such disparate groups could get together may surprise some; however, game theory has shown that cooperation will often arise in non-cooperative situations, if it appears to be in the interest of the parties (Turocy & von Stengel, 2001). Making and breaking temporary alliances is a key component of the information age; those who persist in going it alone likely doom themselves to irrelevance.

#### *Failure to Adequately Plan/Train*

The lack of imagination generates damage throughout the entire prevention/re-mediation process, not the least of which occurs in planning and training venues. After all, without vision, meaningful plans cannot be constructed and comprehensive training will not result:

America's homeland defenders faced outward. NORAD itself was barely able to retain any alert bases at all. Its planning scenarios occasionally considered the danger of hijacked aircraft being guided to American targets, but only aircraft that were coming from overseas.... (T)he FAA did not adjust either its own training or training with NORAD to take account of threats other than those experienced in the past (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 2004: Executive Summary, 10).

The military was similarly outmaneuvered at Pearl Harbor:

*There is great danger of being blinded by the self-evident.* Virtually every witness has testified he was surprised at the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. This was essentially the result of the fact that just about everybody was blinded or rendered myopic by what seemed to be the self-evident purpose of Japan to attack toward the south (pg. 262).

*Failure can be avoided in the long run only by preparation for any eventuality.* The record tends to indicate that appraisal of likely enemy movements was

divided into “probabilities” and “possibilities.” Everyone has admitted that an attack by Japan on Pearl Harbor was regarded as at least a possibility. It was felt, however, that a Japanese movement toward the south was a probability. The overall result was to look for the probable move and to take little or no effective precautions to guard against the contingency of the possible action (Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack, 1946: 263).

Finally, the planning and training issues associated with Hurricanes Katrina and Rita have been well documented:

(T)o best position the nation to prepare for, respond to, and recover from major catastrophes like Hurricane Katrina, there must be strong advance planning, both within and among responder organizations, as well as robust training and exercise programs to test these plans in advance of a real disaster (Walker, 2006: 5).

Myriad books and articles have been written touting the importance of training; this article will not retread that well-worn path. Instead, it will discuss the role that visioning can play in devising realistic events based on probable futures; after all, training only on what has been and not considering what may be does little good.

Futurists spend a great deal of time attempting to devise methods for anticipating future events. Two different, but not necessarily mutually exclusive, schools of thought have emerged in this arena. The first, termed “creating the future,” assumes that individuals have the ability to take certain actions that will result in bringing about the “preferred” future. Others argue that, given the complexity of the universe and man’s inability to anticipate all possible consequences, “creating” may be an unrealistic goal. Rather, individuals should prepare for a whole host of possible futures in order to “manage” whatever comes along. The latter group is heavily invested in scenario planning, which attempts to anticipate many different possibilities and devise strategies to meet each situation.

Whichever way one chooses to proceed, successful implementation of this process is inextricably linked to a lack of imagination. Multiple Nobel Prize winner Linus Pauling once observed that it's "easier to tame a wild idea than to invigorate a dead one" (Pauling, n.d.). Organizations that can't escape timidity and parochialism are doomed to devising training better suited to solving yesterday's problem than to anticipating tomorrow's. All the training in the world (and the author agrees with the official reports that training is woefully underfunded and generally inadequate) won't help matters. To borrow a phrase from the computer world: "garbage in, garbage out."

*Failure to Act Decisively*

*Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,  
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?  
But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,  
Though I have seen my head [grown slightly bald] brought in upon a platter,  
I am no prophet—and here's no great matter;  
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,  
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,  
And in short, I was afraid.*

T. S. Eliot, from *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1917)

In the 9/11 attacks (as with Pearl Harbor, Rita, and Katrina), many individuals acted bravely and decisively. Indeed, stories abound of brave first responders who saved many, many lives. Yet risk aversion seems to accompany any disaster. Consider the oft-cited Zacarias Moussaoui case in which Minneapolis FBI agents were convinced that Moussaoui was training to hijack an airplane for a possible suicide mission. As they conscientiously attempted to gain information to divine Moussaoui's intentions and confederates, FBI headquarters effectively applied the brakes:

There was substantial disagreement between Minneapolis agents and FBI headquarters as to what Moussaoui was planning to do. In one conversation between a Minneapolis supervisor and a headquarters agent, the latter complained that Minneapolis's FISA request [request to obtain a national security search

warrant] was couched in a manner intended to get people “spun up.” The supervisor replied that was precisely his intent. He said he was “trying to keep someone from taking a plane and crashing it into the World Trade Center.” The headquarters agent replied that this was not going to happen and that they did not know if Moussaoui was a terrorist (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, 2004: 275).

The military, which should be expected to reward bold, decisive leadership, fared no better at Pearl Harbor:

Perhaps the most signal shortcoming of administration, both at Washington and in Hawaii, was the failure to follow up orders and instructions to insure that they were carried out. The record of all Pearl Harbor proceedings is replete with evidence of this fundamental deficiency in administration... In the dispatch of November 27, 1941, which was to be considered "war warning," Admiral Kimmel was instructed to "execute an appropriate defensive deployment preparatory to carrying out the tasks assigned in WPL-46." Very little was done pursuant to this order with a view to a \*defensive\* deployment; the Navy Department did nothing to determine what had been done in execution of the order (Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack, 1946: 255).

Perhaps the most significant failure discovered by the GAO with regard to hurricane response involved confused lines of command and uncertainty with regard to delegated authority. As a result, individuals unaware of their responsibilities were reluctant to act:

(E)vents unfolded both before and immediately after the landfall of Hurricane Katrina that made it clear that governmental entities did not act decisively or quickly enough to determine the catastrophic nature of the incident...Although the DHS Secretary designated a PFO to be the federal government’s representative under the NRP structure and to coordinate the federal response, the efforts of all federal agencies involved in the response remained disjointed because the PFO’s leadership role was unclear. In the absence of timely and decisive action and clear leadership responsibility and accountability, there were multiple chains of command, a myriad of approaches and processes for requesting and providing assistance, and confusion about who should be advised of requests and what resources would be provided within specific time frames (Walker, 2006:4).

Unlike the Prufrock character cited above, in most of the cases under study, the failure to act decisively did not result from cowardice—rather, individuals did not

appreciate the “big picture” and defaulted to overly-cautious decision making (or, in some cases, the decision making that was considered appropriate at the time). In a culture that punishes failure more severely than it rewards success, the safest decision is usually to say “no.” As a result, risk-aversion can become ingrained, as much a part of the corporate culture as the mission statement or logo.

### **Addressing the Problem**

*Unfortunately, many of the lessons emerging from the most recent hurricanes in the Gulf are similar to those GAO identified more than a decade ago, in the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew, which leveled much of South Florida in the early 1990s (Walker, 2006: 4)*

*(W)hen a crisis develops (that is, when the current paradigm fails to adequately resolve lasting problems), the revolutionary step of replacing the entire paradigm by another becomes essential...(Chalmers, 1982: 99).*

This chapter is concerned with only three crises; analyses of other events may yield different results, but that seems doubtful. To be sure, there were differences between all three reports. However, the consistent nature of many of the identified problems across all three events is striking – indeed, it is striking enough to suggest that at least part of the problem has to be systemic rather than idiosyncratic.

The recommendations in all three reports addressed the need for greater centralization in the hopes that this would foster greater cooperation between agencies and produce a clearly defined chain-of-command. Indeed, in the months following 9/11, the largest reorganization of the civilian federal government in the history of the United

States produced the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).<sup>4</sup> This prompts the question: do increased centralization and the creation of large, hierarchical agencies make it more or less likely that the common problems of Pearl Harbor, 9/11, and Hurricanes Rita and Katrina will be solved? Do bureaucracies typically encourage decisive decision making, better communications, cooperation, and imagination? In the next section, Joseph Schafer confronts these and other questions.

Members of the Futures Working Group meet regularly to discuss myriad issues, not the least being the organizational structures best suited for the information age. To be sure, centralization and hierarchies provide benefits (e.g., economies of scale, systems to permit information sharing); however, truly efficient models must provide for the maximum empowerment of decision makers on the ground. That is generally not the case with bureaucracies. We are convinced, though, that such information age systems can be developed (see Cowper, 2005; Levin & Jensen, 2005). Indeed, the remainder of this volume is dedicated to developing just such a model for disaster preparedness and/or response.

## **Conclusion**

The world has shifted. Whereas national security was once under the exclusive control of the military, it is now a joint law enforcement/military issue. According to the late Tip O’Neill (n.d.), “all politics is local.” As the 21<sup>st</sup> century progresses, terrorism

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<sup>4</sup> Although it is beyond the scope of the present article, a similar reorganization of the military and intelligence communities was mandated by the National Security Act of 1947, which was passed amid controversy in the wake of Pearl Harbor/World War II (see Balogh, Grisinger, and Zelikow, 2002).

may become progressively more local as well. The military and intelligence successes against al Qaeda have caused that organization to fragment, becoming more diffuse and networked by ideas rather than strict chains of command. One need only consider the recent arrests of alleged “homegrown” al Qaeda sympathizers in Canada and Miami to understand that the threat is not just external.

Of course, response to natural disasters has always begun at the local level; that won't change. Both of these situations suggest that the role of local police will increase rather than diminish, especially in areas once thought to be the sole responsibility of “the feds.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, it is the Futures Working Group's fervent hope that as models are discussed and plans made, all parties – federal, state, and local – will have an equal seat at the table. In the information age, the coin of the realm is speed and flexibility. Let us hope that we do not have to learn too many more lessons for that message to sink in.

Finally, due to length restrictions of the present volume, an in-depth analysis was not attempted; rather, major points were examined to draw some preliminary conclusions. Given the striking similarities that emerged, a more comprehensive analysis is altogether fitting. To do otherwise would be to consign ourselves to failure upon failure.

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<sup>5</sup> For example, in its quest to prevent terrorism, the New York City Police Department has detectives stationed in such international locales as Tel Aviv, London, Toronto, Montreal, Singapore and Lyon, France (Sostek, 2004).

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