The events of 9/11 created a watershed for the profession of emergency management. In the post-9/11 world, the preoccupation with the threat of terrorism has changed political and administrative priorities. Budget allocations for traditional emergency management programs have been subsumed in the larger allocations for Homeland Security, often with little assurance of the continuity of traditional programs.

The larger programs have subsumed emergency management functions as well. Although local emergency managers are pleading for “dual use” programs that will increase capacities for dealing with the more familiar natural and technological hazards and disasters and for funding of mitigation programs to reduce the growing dangers of natural disasters, the attention of national and state policymakers is elsewhere. Even within the Homeland Security apparatus, minimal attention is being paid to matters beyond prevention of terrorism-related disasters, as Secretary Ridge himself has stated. Only recently have inquiries been made about mitigation possibilities and recovery issues stemming from a WMD-related event.

For local emergency management personnel, the question is whether capacities to deal with the more common natural and technological disasters have been reduced . . . or even lost altogether. As resources are diverted to counter-terrorism programs and new Homeland Security offices fill up with personnel who are unfamiliar with the language of emergency management as well as the programs created to deal with natural and technological hazards, some loss of capacity to deal with those disasters is to be expected.

The front pages are full of stories about inadequate funding for helping local first responders prepare for and respond to a WMD-related event. Part of the problem may be the poor beginning of the Homeland Security effort, which divided dealing with WMD events into two components: crisis management and consequence management. These were usually conceptualized as phases, with consequence management referring merely to dealing with post-event issues. First responders were mainly seen as those dealing with the effects of terrorism; their roles in reducing the impact of the events (mitigation) and thus speeding recovery were largely ignored. Furthermore, their preparedness was viewed as less important than the preparedness of law enforcement, military, and (perhaps) fire service personnel, and organizations in preventive roles. Although the distinction in responsibilities for WMD events has been formally abandoned, the priority still seems to be on crisis management.

The national emergency management system is built around generic “all-hazards” programs that are adaptable to a spectrum of potential disasters. The model of mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery has its problems, but it provides both a unifying approach to dealing with hazards and disasters and a common terminology for emergency managers and public officials. That is why the State of
California formally adopted the terminology to facilitate communication among its local, regional, and state agencies.

Still, the model is confusing to those who still see the four functions as sequential phases rather than overlapping functions. It is also confusing to those who do not understand that “all-hazards” does not mean a perfect plan for every conceivable type of disaster. All-hazards means adaptable plans that provide the basis for dealing with a variety of hazards and disasters, including terrorism. The plan is the starting point and having generic evacuation, shelter-in-place, debris management, and other programs ready to be adapted to circumstances is far more efficient and understandable than stand-alone programs for each type of disaster. Mitigation measures can be built into response and recovery and preparedness programs.

The all-hazards approach must be continued. The risks posed by earthquakes in California and by hurricanes along the Gulf Coast are potentially far greater than those posed by terrorists. The risks posed by influenza and other diseases (witness the SARS epidemic) are far greater than those posed by terrorists with anthrax, sarin, or other biological and chemical agents. Does a cocktail of “weaponized” biological agents produced by a “rogue state” or purchased (or stolen) from an old Soviet weapons lab pose a threat greater than the flu? How many angels can fit on the head of a pin? In a perverse way, many emergency managers may be hoping for a catastrophe wrought by seismic or meteorological phenomena that will remind policymakers that there are forces more powerful than al-Qaeda, and that the capabilities to deal with them need to be maintained.

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