Terrorism is not like natural or even other man-made hazards. But, then again, a tornado is not like a hurricane and certainly not like an earthquake. The argument that the all-hazards model cannot accommodate hazards like terrorism, especially bioterrorism, is most often based upon a fundamental misunderstanding of the model. The term all-hazards does not mean being prepared for any and all hazards that might manifest themselves in a particular community, state, or nation. What it does mean is that there are things that commonly occur in many kinds of disasters, such as the need for emergency warning or mass evacuation that can be addressed in a general plan, and that that plan can provide the basis for responding to unexpected events. Emergency plans cannot cover everything that might be required in a disaster. Indeed, the requirements for evacuation for flood may differ significantly from those required for evacuation during a hazardous materials spill. Plans need to be adaptable to circumstances. Likewise, managers and other officials, whether they are elected public officials or corporate officers, also need to adapt, innovate, and, when necessary, improvise.

Emergency planning begins with the identification of the disasters that have occurred in a community in the recent past. These are the known and, generally, the most probable hazards. Planners may then focus on the disasters that have occurred in the distant past by reviewing newspaper archives and history books and also by interviewing long-time residents. Other hazards may be added to the list if they determine that there may be some probability of them causing risk to life, property, or the environment. New highways and rail lines mean more potential for hazardous materials accidents, for example. These are the probable threats. There may be some talk of possible threats, and some of them may be addressed in the plan, as well. The media, political leaders, influential residents, or influential participants in the planning process or the larger community may direct attention to hazards of very low probability or even of no discernible possibility. Media attention can make hazards and disasters seem much worse or more frequent than they really are—the so-called “CNN effect.” Personal and family traumas may create champions for lesser risks. The point is that these less probable or even improbable hazards may be included in the planning. That’s politics, and the planning process is, after all, political as well as technical. It is also human nature. If the community is lucky, the planners give greatest attention to the highest risks. All-hazards planning is based upon the most likely disasters as well as the risks that receive the most media attention.

Terrorism is a hazard of uncertain probability for most communities and organizations. The question is whether terrorism is so different from other threats that the all-hazards approach is inappropriate or ineffective. Officials may need to issue public warnings, order evacuations, or direct sheltering-in-place.
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ONE MISSION:
To provide a forum that fosters communication and cooperation between industry and government security, law enforcement, and emergency responders at the federal, state, local, and tribal level to protect America’s citizens and critical assets.
Depending on the situation, officials may need to contact law enforcement, fire service, and EMS personnel. Hospitals and other medical resources may need to get involved. Organizations may need to mobilize volunteers. To the extent that terrorist incidents might even resemble natural or technological disasters, the response may be very similar. A bridge or building collapse, a fire, an explosion, a power outage, and even a flood might result from terrorist actions. Certainly, the responses to the World Trade Center towers and Pentagon attacks were much like responses to fires and structural failures. While law enforcement officials were concerned with the preservation of evidence, the emergency responses were much as they would have been to a natural disaster. Emergency planning now may include fire and EMS protocols to minimize disturbance of evidence, but the basic response requirements remain. A bioterrorist attack may require quarantine, special medical response, and other extraordinary measures, including dealing with mass casualties on a scale unlike even the largest natural disasters, but the basic plan is a starting point for dealing with such incidents. More importantly, community response will be guided by the plans in place, likely an all-hazards plan. That plan should address not only bioterrorism but influenza and other naturally occurring pandemics.

All-hazards planning has the virtue of being cost effective in terms of time and money. It is cheaper to develop and easier to remember a single plan even if planners have to wade through annexes to provide guidance for dealing with specific issues. Hazardous materials accidents do require understanding of the chemicals involved and the technical expertise to minimize damage and protect lives. Structural failures raise other issues concerning the conduct of emergency response in unstable and unsafe environments. Floods raise public health issues, as well as hazardous materials issues.

What the all-hazards approach can contribute to the effort to deal with terrorism in its many forms is a basic framework for structuring the emergency response, preparing for the response, and recovering from attacks, as well as developing appropriate measures to prevent or reduce the impact of the attacks—whatever form the attacks may take. It is also important to remember that the threat of terrorism is less certain than other threats. Indeed, the threat of earthquakes in California and the Pacific Northwest is much more certain than the threat of terrorism; consequently, investments in capacity to deal with risks to life and property should be based upon that priority. Similarly, the threat of hurricanes is more certain along the Gulf and East coast than the threat of terrorism. As Hurricane Charley demonstrated, the level of destruction may be even greater than what we have experienced in terrorist attacks. Building capacity to deal with the most probable events will increase capacity to deal with less probable events. For private firms, unless they are a likely target of terrorists or are located adjacent to such a target, the biggest threat may well be workplace violence of other sorts. Physical security, from locked doors and closed circuit television systems to armed guards and employee identification cards, can address a variety of threats. In short, precautions to deal with criminal intruders, disgruntled employees, angry spouses, and enraged clients can also serve as a foundation for an antiterrorism program, and an all-hazards plan can provide the framework for a response.

Finally, the all-hazards approach encourages a broader perspective. Attention to the potential to prevent or reduce the impact of hazards is important. The Department of Homeland Security has been focused on the prevention of terrorist incidents, even though the department’s mission statement also mentions reducing the impact of incidents that do occur. Mitigation efforts can reduce the political benefits of terrorist violence and the psychological impact. Recovery planning can reduce the social and economic impact, as well. All-hazards planning does encourage a broader perspective on risks and how to deal with them and a broader foundation on which to build effective programs to manage hazards and disasters.

William L. Waugh, Jr., PhD, Professor, Public Administration and Urban Studies/Political Science, Andrew Young School of Policy Studies, Georgia State University, Atlanta, Georgia.