

Background

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National Disaster Planning Slowed by Inadequate Interagency Process

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Six years after 9/11, the federal government still lacks a comprehensive regime for planning and preparing for large-scale disasters. In part, this shortfall is the product of an inadequate interagency process, the means by which federal agencies organize and cooperate with one another and their partners in state and local government and the private sector.

Fixing the problem will require renewed vigor from the Administration in setting clear policy guidelines, particularly in implementing a National Exercise Program, emphasizing the priority of interagency disaster preparedness for the National Planning Scenarios, and improving professional development.

Disaster Planning to Date

During the Cold War, the federal government developed some contingencies laying out the roles and activities that departments and agencies would perform under grave scenarios. In particular, they established continuity-of-operations plans, so that government activities could continue after a Soviet sneak attack on Washington, and civil defense plans for nuclear war.¹

After President Jimmy Carter established the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in 1979, FEMA assumed much of the responsibility for coordinating planning that included thinking about unthinkable acts. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, much of the effort lapsed or became outdated.

Following 9/11, the federal homeland security effort subsumed the mission of planning for national

Talking Points

- The federal interagency process has made much progress in the establishment of the National Exercise Program, but six years after 9/11, the United States has yet to implement a national planning and exercise program fully equal to the task of preparing for catastrophic disasters.
- To speed interagency implementation of the NEP and associated planning efforts, the Administration should formally roll out the National Preparedness Guidelines and the Target Capabilities List as the guiding documents for the federal interagency process.
- The Administration should require that all department and agency exercises come from the National Planning Scenarios and that all departments and agencies dedicate the necessary resources to participate meaningfully in the NEP.
- Effective use of the NEP and the National Planning Scenarios would enable all levels of government to share lessons learned, raising the nation's overall level of preparedness.

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catastrophic events and placed renewed emphasis on disaster preparedness. The establishment of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Homeland Security Council (HSC) created momentum for more robust national disaster planning. Homeland Security Presidential Directive 8 (HSPD-8) established new requirements for national disaster readiness, assigning the DHS the lion's share of responsibility in organizing the federal planning effort. In turn, the DHS developed a representative set of 15 terrorist and natural disaster scenarios.²

Washington's Disaster Menu

The DHS released the National Planning Scenarios (NPS) in July 2005. (See Table 1.) Each scenario gives an overview of the situation, outlines geographic considerations, includes a timeline and event dynamics section, and details any secondary hazards and events. The scenario also details the key implications of the disaster for federal, state, and local jurisdictions. Finally, it identifies the mission areas that would be activated by that type of incident, such as calling out urban search and rescue teams to comb collapsed buildings for victims after an earthquake.

For example, the DHS developed a data source named Universal Adversary to serve as the enemy in the terrorist scenarios. It "replicates actual terrorist networks down to names, photos, and drivers license numbers. The data enable exercise players to simulate intelligence gathering and analysis."³ Because the NPS are response-oriented, the department also created the prevention prequels and detailed attack trees to test the prevention capabilities

of local, state, and federal government exercise participants.

The DHS intended the scenarios to be illustrative, useful for developing the requirements for the kinds of resources and capabilities needed to respond to a national emergency, not predicative in the sense that the government was anticipating exactly which kinds of terrorist attacks might happen next. The intent was to use the scenarios to develop a family of plans and programs that might be suitable for responding to a wide range of catastrophic events.

The National Planning Scenarios were to be used by the HSPD-8 implementation team as well as by states, localities, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector for two key purposes: identi-

National Planning Scenarios		
Scenario	Type	Risk
Nuclear detonation	10-kiloton improvised nuclear device	Terrorist
Biological attack	Aerosol anthrax	Terrorist
Biological disease outbreak	Pandemic influenza	Natural disaster
Biological attack	Plague	Terrorist
Chemical attack	Blisters agent	Terrorist
Chemical attack	Toxic industrial chemicals	Terrorist
Chemical attack	Nerve agent	Terrorist
Chemical attack	Chlorine tank explosion	Terrorist
Natural disaster	Major earthquake	Natural disaster
Natural disaster	Major hurricane	Natural disaster
Radiological attack	Radiological dispersal device	Terrorist
Explosives attack	Bombing using improvised explosive device	Terrorist
Biological attack	Food contamination	Terrorist
Biological attack	Foreign animal disease (foot and mouth disease)	Terrorist
Cyber attack	Computer infiltration	Terrorist

Source: Homeland Security Council, *National Planning Scenarios*, April 2005, at <http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/nationalsecurity/earlywarning/NationalPlanningScenariosApril2005.pdf> (October 18, 2007).

1. James Jay Carafano, "Beyond the Rainbow Plans: Military Industrial and Mobilization Planning in an Uncertain Century," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1959, August 10, 2006, at www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/bg1959.cfm.
2. George W. Bush, "National Preparedness," Homeland Security Presidential Directive HSPD-8, December 17, 2004, at www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/12/20031217-6.html (October 16, 2007).
3. U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "TOPOFF 3 Frequently Asked Questions," March 2005, at www.dhs.gov/xprepresp/training/editorial_0603.shtm (October 16, 2007).

fyng needed capabilities and establishing an exercise program to test them.

- **Capabilities.** Using capabilities-based planning, the scenarios helped the DHS to identify a Universal Task List of common actions that needed to be performed. The goal was to use these requirements to establish a baseline of capabilities that cut across the 15 scenarios. The capabilities would be needed at some level of government to protect against, prevent, respond to, or recover from a terrorist attack or natural disaster. These capabilities became the basis for developing the Target Capabilities List (TCL), which are specific resources and responses required for catastrophic disasters.
- **Exercise program.** The scenarios became the foundation of the National Exercise Program (NEP) so that any level of government could use a scenario to test its resiliency across the TCL capabilities and, more important, could establish an exercise program to enhance its competencies and capabilities on a continuing basis. As part of the NEP, the DHS developed the Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program, which provides a standardized mechanism for building on such lessons learned.⁴ With the launch of the Lessons Learned Information Sharing (LLIS) Web site,⁵ lessons learned from the NEP and NPS can be shared more broadly and more easily among all levels of government, thereby raising the nation's overall level of preparedness iteratively.

As a result, the NPS has created a family of guidance documents for federal, state, and local officials for their planning and exercise programs.

Planning and the Interagency Process

Building on the NPS to fully implement a true national preparedness system will require inter-

agency coordination and an integrated planning and exercise effort among federal agencies, their partners in state and local government, and the private sector. A national preparedness system requires three elements:

- A resource function that focuses on the assets, equipment, and personnel that a jurisdiction needs under the TCL across the relevant capabilities;
- A training function that determines the jurisdiction's needs in relation to disciplines, asset requirements, and equipment training; and
- A capacity to test competencies through a robust and repeatable exercise program that identifies capability gaps and provides feedback on how to close those gaps over time.⁶

State and local governments are looking to the NPS for much-needed guidance. Eventually, the scenarios should serve as a cornerstone of their planning and exercise programs. However, encouraging the adoption of the NPS across the federal government has proved problematic.

One of the key hurdles in gaining greater participation in planning and exercise efforts has been the level of disaster needed to trigger involvement by the Department of Defense and continuity-of-government officials from various agencies. If a scenario is not sufficiently catastrophic, then little is served by involving the Pentagon or continuity officials in the exercise. This forces planners to increase the catastrophic scale of the exercise. But if an exercise is too catastrophic, it easily overwhelms state and local capabilities, preventing those jurisdictions from exploring existing gaps in their capabilities. As a result, agencies have not focused their efforts on the most difficult scenarios.

That dissonance has been resolved somewhat by creating a "carve-out" for the Defense Department and continuity officials wherein a separate scenario

4. U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "TOPOFF 4 Frequently Asked Questions," October 2007, at www.dhs.gov/xprepresp/training/gc_1179422026237.shtm (October 16, 2007).

5. U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "Lessons Learned Information Sharing," Web site, at www.LLIS.gov (October 19, 2007).

6. See William O. Jenkins, Jr., Director, Homeland Security and Justice Issues, U.S. Government Accountability Office, "Homeland Security: Preparing for and Responding to Disasters," testimony before the Subcommittee on Homeland Security, Committee on Appropriations, U.S. House of Representatives, GAO-07-395T, March 9, 2007, at www.gao.gov/new.items/d07395t.pdf (October 16, 2007).

allows for testing the most extreme disaster situations. For the Top Officials 4 (TOPOFF 4) full-scale exercise in October, in conjunction with the DHS exercise, the Defense Department ran one of its full-scale exercises, which allows for more robust testing of the nation's coordination capabilities.⁷

Another obstacle has been the interagency policymaking process. The Policy Coordinating Committee, a subset of the Homeland Security Council, brings all participants to the table. Committee attendees from the government agencies are not the most senior officials and often lack the authority to make decisions for their departments. According to one participant, the meetings often become unending series of "one step forward, two steps back" affairs that result in little agreement. In turn, the HSC has not exercised sufficient discipline over the committee to ensure that its efforts are constructive.

In addition, in the months before Hurricane Katrina, the HSC created some confusion at the interagency level by launching the Catastrophic Assessment Task Force (CATF) exercises, which competed with the NEP exercises. The CATF exercises were Cabinet-level exercises aimed at challenging the federal government's ability to respond to a major event. The procedural problem with the CATF exercises was that other departments and agencies, except for the Defense Department with its massive planning staff, simply did not have enough qualified personnel to participate fully in both the NEP and the CATF exercises.

The substantive problem with the CATF exercises was that they were so complex and catastrophic (and largely implausible) that the lessons learned from them were either obvious without the exercise or too expensive to the point that no President would request the required resources and no Congress would pay for them. For example, a CATF scenario might indicate that the nation needed 20,000 surge hospital beds for third-degree burn victims, the supplies to treat the 20,000 burn vic-

tims, and the large numbers of medical personnel to treat the victims. This would require billions of dollars, an enormous increase in the number of college and medical school students specializing in burn treatment, and other costly changes just for one element of the CATF response.

The CATF exercises simply demonstrated that the United States could not deal with two nearly simultaneous nuclear detonations followed closely by a Category Five hurricane on the East Coast and an earthquake on the West Coast measuring 8.0 on the Richter scale. This is not a surprise. One senior official referred to the CATF scenarios as the "Book of Revelations" because of their apocalyptic nature.

The CATF frustrated rather than accelerated the interagency planning effort. Subsequently, the DHS was able to fold the CATF exercises into the NEP schedule and to construct more realistic scenarios based on the NPS so that Cabinet members could constructively explore strategic policy issues that needed to be resolved.

During the October TOPOFF 4 exercise, the DHS kicked off the five-year NEP plan, which "combines exercise activities, affords departments and agencies the opportunity to reduce the number of separate exercises they must plan and participate in, and, more importantly, provides an opportunity to demonstrate that the government can operate effectively during an elevated threat situation."⁸ A more systematic national exercise effort should help to make interagency planning and coordination more manageable.

A key benefit of using the NEP and the NPS as the sole interagency tools to gauge preparedness is that capability gaps can be identified and then addressed across departments and agencies through the Corrective Action Program. According to one DHS briefing, the plan will provide "the basis for systematically developing, prioritizing, and tracking corrective actions following exercises, real-world events, and policy discussions."⁹ Such a

7. U.S. Department of State, Office of Counterterrorism, "TOPOFF (Top Officials)," July 24, 2002, at www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/fs/2002/12129.htm#1 (October 16, 2007).

8. U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "TOPOFF 4 Frequently Asked Questions."

9. U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "National Exercise Program (NEP)," March 8, 2007, at www.fas.org/irp/agency/dhs/nep.pdf (October 16, 2007).

program injects some much-needed accountability into the process and allows the lessons learned to be shared more broadly via the LLIS Web site so that state and local governments can incorporate lessons appropriately.

Regrettably, departments and agencies still conduct exercises largely disconnected from the NEP and without using the NPS or the Corrective Action Program.¹⁰ This is inefficient and counterproductive, particularly since the National Planning Scenarios can be tailored by any of the departments or agencies to test particular training or objectives issues that are germane to their needs. It makes little sense to allow federal departments and agencies to conduct non-NEP/NPS exercises.

In addition, because preparing a Cabinet member or other department or agency principal for an exercise takes an enormous amount of resources, keeping the number of ad hoc exercises to a minimum is key to keeping all top officials fully engaged and committed to the NEP process. The five-year plan contains a sufficient level of exercises to test the critical elements of the federal government's resiliency and still allows departments and agencies to use the NPS to focus on specific issues within their missions.

Historically, there has been an issue with the level of dedication among departments and agencies outside of the Homeland Security, Defense, and Justice Departments. In the tabletop exercises leading up to the TOPOFF full-scale exercise in 2005, many of the senior officials changed from exercise to exercise. This lack of continuity created several problems. New participants:

- Faced a learning curve that prevented iterative learning from exercise to exercise,
- Often failed to come fully briefed,
- Appeared less engaged in the exercise since they knew they would be playing in only one exercise, and

- Frustrated consistent attendees because valuable time was wasted bringing new participants up to speed.

An excellent example of a participant who was dedicated to the program was Assistant Secretary of Defense for Homeland Defense Paul McHale, who came to most, if not all, key exercises fully prepared and often provided the most useful information and interactions. Indeed, many of the issues that he faced during the exercise confronted the Administration during the federal response to Hurricane Katrina. For example, one issue was the implications of deploying military forces under Titles 10 and 32 of the U.S. Code¹¹

Shortfalls in the National Exercise Program are also reflected in the state of department and agency planning for the NPS. The White House has placed particular emphasis on preparing for pandemics and hurricanes, and, in turn, agencies have given these planning efforts priority. It is not apparent that all federal agencies have dedicated sufficient energy and resources to developing plans and exercises for other scenarios.

Filling the Ranks

Several factors likely contribute to the lack of sufficient progress on planning and exercise programs across the federal government.

- The NEP is intended to identify gaps and expose shortfalls. Senior leaders may be reluctant to expose such limitations because they would open up their departments to additional scrutiny by the press, Congress, and political factions.
- Except for a few federal entities, such as the Department of Defense, many agencies and departments lack the robust staffs and adequate training and education needed to perform effective operational planning for large-scale catastrophic incidents.
- Compounding this problem, many of these same departments and agencies are not well versed in

10. *Ibid.*

11. See Lynn E. Davis, Jill Rough, Gary Cecchine, Agnes Gereben Schaefer, and Laurinda L. Zeman, *Hurricane Katrina: Lessons for Army Planning and Operations*, RAND Corporation, Arroyo Center, 2007, at www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2007/RAND_MG603.pdf (October 16, 2007).

the capabilities and missions of the other federal departments with which they must coordinate.

- There are few collaborative environments, such as headquarters like the military's NORTHCOM, where senior planners from various federal agencies are educated, work, plan, or exercise on a routine and systematic basis.

Building Better Capabilities

The Administration could undertake a number of initiatives to speed interagency implementation of the NEP and associated planning efforts, including:

- **A formal interagency rollout of the recently released National Preparedness Guidelines and the latest version of the Target Capabilities List** as the documents that set the framework and create the benchmarks that the federal interagency process should use to determine capability gaps and overall preparedness levels.¹²
- **Mandating that all department and agency exercises come from the National Planning Scenarios** so that lessons learned can be readily applied across the federal, state, and local governments.
- **Requiring all departments and agencies to dedicate the necessary resources to participate meaningfully in the NEP**, including the active, consistent participation of Cabinet members and other high-level senior officials.
- **Interagency professional development reforms**, including establishing at an existing university via a competitive process (1) a national university for homeland security, (2) an elite operational planning school for federal agencies and departments,

and (3) a certification process for qualifying individuals to perform high-level interagency staff and field operations tasks.¹³

Conclusion

The federal interagency process has made much progress in the establishment of the National Exercise Program. With the launch of the five-year exercise plan in October and the release of the National Preparedness Guidelines and Target Capabilities List, there is an opportunity to attain the level of coordination and consistency in the National Exercise Program that is needed both to ensure that the nation's capability gaps are identified and to begin reducing them at all levels of government.

These efforts are commendable but insufficient. Six years after 9/11, the United States has yet to implement a national planning and exercise program fully equal to the task of preparing for catastrophic disasters. Establishing this system before the end of this presidential term is an achievable and necessary goal.

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12. The final version of the Interim National Preparedness Goal was released in March 2005. For more information, see James Jay Carafano and Matt A. Mayer, "Spending Smarter: Prioritizing Homeland Security Grants by Using National Standards," Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 2033, May 10, 2007, at www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandDefense/bg2033.cfm.

13. James Jay Carafano, "Missing Pieces in Homeland Security: Interagency Education, Assignments, and Professional Accreditation," Heritage Foundation *Executive Memorandum* No. 1013, October 16, 2007, at www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandSecurity/em1013.cfm.