

# Heritage Lectures

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## Grassroots Response: Citizens Taking Care of Citizens During Disasters

*The Honorable James Gilmore*

We are living in a society that should address homeland security from an all-hazards approach. The commission that I chaired (the Advisory Panel to Assess Domestic Response Capabilities for Terrorism Involving Weapons of Mass Destruction) adopted an all-hazards approach as one of its fundamental principles.

Why do I start by talking about all-hazards? Because we are living in an age of terrorism. We are expecting that there will be yet another attack. We have already seen multiple attacks by terrorists in this country and we are preparing the nation to respond to a terrorist attack. But the commission understood that you get a lot of bang for your buck if you also prepare the nation on an all-hazards approach. We don't know when there's going to be a terrorist attack, and we don't know what the nature of it will be. In fact, the enemy's goal would be to prevent us from knowing until the attack occurs.

But we do know this: We know there are going to be earthquakes, we know there are going to be major forest fires, we know there are going to be hurricanes. There always have been and there always will be catastrophes that have to be addressed by this nation. So all-hazards was one of the fundamental principles of what we were doing with our commission. And the second is the issue of citizen virtue.

I've put a lot of thought lately into our public policy system, into our political system, and I am troubled by the diminution of citizen involvement in the public affairs of the society. Fewer and fewer people vote, fewer and fewer people engage in public policy

### Talking Points

- To manage disasters, there needs to be a national strategy, which means a partnership between federal, state, local, private sector, and community leadership for an entire community of preparedness. If we continue to focus on the federal role exclusively, we will never prepare the nation.
- Specifically, there needs to be an actual military-style response plan for the first 72 hours after an attack or a natural disaster. It must be a complete plan that includes everyone, where everybody knows their role and what their role is in the entire community of preparedness and response.
- The experience of Hurricane Katrina gives us an opportunity to rethink citizen involvement. We now know that citizen virtue is not dead, and that it will respond on its own unless it is given real leadership in a 72-hour blueprint.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
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discussion. We have a lot more media discussion about it, a lot more than we've ever had before, because of the rise of the cable channels. But somehow the individual citizen doesn't engage at the public level in community affairs, in town hall meetings, in political party organizations like they used to. The media, in a way, has shifted some of the ground under all of this.

So there's room here in this society, if it's going to be a better society, for citizen virtue, for civic virtue. It may be, in a peculiar way, that the challenges we're facing today, both from Katrina-type incidents and also the long war that we are now in, give us an opportunity.

Let me talk about that just a little bit. First of all, I will not dwell upon the Al Gore approach that says we're going to have greater and greater hurricanes because of global warming. Maybe we are. I don't know. That's something that we can argue about and debate. But as I said a moment ago, we are going to have some hurricanes, to be sure. Maybe even this year; we're in hurricane season right now.

But beyond that unforeseeable natural situation, look where we have been in the last several months. We have seen a major attack in Madrid that killed a lot of people when a train was blown up. We haven't even addressed the trains in this country in any significant way. But the first time a train is attacked here, you're going to see a major change in the United States of America. Just like the second attack that occurred in London and killed so many and was so widely discussed across the world on not just the cable channels, but the regular network channels.

We are engaged in an ongoing war in Iraq, one that is evolving, one that is changing. If you pick up this morning's *Washington Post*, there is a lengthy discussion about the ways things are changing and evolving in Iraq and the American role in it. But one thing we know for sure: There are a lot of people that are pretty mad about the fact that we're in Iraq and they would like to do something about that if they possibly could. An attack on the homeland of this nation would be a profound statement that could be made if we're not extremely careful, and maybe even if we are.

Until about a week ago, we were watching an ongoing shooting war between Israel and Hezbollah. In fact, that shooting is still going on at a much lower level; the attacks are still occurring, but there is a tenuous cease-fire because of American and other leadership at the U.N. and other places. But during the height of that war, in some of the other discussions that I had in some other conferences, I pointed out that an attempt or a real, successful attack on this country was absolutely certain. People who were just angry as they could be about that war and losing relatives and people dying all the time absolutely had to try to strike this country. They had to if they possibly could.

Of course, what we saw after that was a thwarted effort to hijack airliners coming from the United Kingdom to the United States and to drop them into the ocean. To quote one of my favorite Virginians, Thomas Jefferson: "This moment in time is like a fire bell in the night." The international situation that we're seeing across the entire panoply of international issues that we are confronting in the post-Cold War situation is like a fire bell in the night with respect to the immediate attention necessary for homeland security, even if you discount a major event like Katrina.

### **The Gilmore Commission**

Now, let me talk a little bit about some of these kinds of issues as we're going along. The commission that I chaired was established in 1999. It was established by the United States Congress in conjunction with the Clinton Administration. Think back about 1999 and what we were talking about at the time. I can assure you it was not terrorism and it was not homeland security. It was a lot of different things, but it wasn't that. My recollection is that it was Monica Lewinsky and issues like that that were ongoing, but not terrorism or any kind of threat to the nation.

But the Congress was uneasy. They felt that maybe this nation was not prepared for a terrorist attack, not to mention a potential catastrophe of any kind in this country. Is this any surprise to anybody, by the way? Curt Weldon was the Congressman from Pennsylvania who actually dreamed up this commission and was concerned because he

had been in touch with a lot of local responders and they were concerned.

But what had we seen? Well, we had seen embassies in Africa attacked during that period of time. We had seen the World Trade Center attacked in the early 1990s—it didn't bring it down, but it was in fact attacked. We had seen a domestic terrorist attack in Oklahoma City, which was startling and puzzling to a lot of people at the time.

But the advent of technology and the capacity to create explosions and damage was growing in the world, and as a result, the commission was established. It was called the Advisory Panel to Assess Domestic Response Capabilities for Terrorism Involving Weapons of Mass Destruction. All of you all are Washingtonians; you know that everybody in D.C. has to shorten these things up into an acronym. You couldn't shorten that one up—it was too long—so they called it the Gilmore Commission, which was okay with me. But make no mistake about it: everybody on this commission was just as important as everybody else. Let me tell you a few things about some of the people. General Jim Clapper, former head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, was on this commission and became the vice chairman. When he left to take over the Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, we replaced him with a fellow by the name of George Foresman of the state of Virginia, who is today the undersecretary of Homeland Security for Domestic Preparedness. We taught him everything he knows on the commission.

Ray Downey was one of the leading people in the New York City Fire Department. Ray served faithfully on the commission, giving us the fire department's point of view, until he was killed at the World Trade Center at the 9/11 attack. Paul Bremer served on the commission faithfully for four years until he departed to go to Iraq and serve as the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority.

There were other names, and every one was just as important. Police, fire, rescue, emergency services, intelligence people, retired general officers; people who could give us a variety of perspectives. It was a three-year statutory commission with report on December of each year. After the first year, we concluded the key issue was: Who is in charge?

Who is responsible for a response should something occur? Who was in charge of the kind of response that might be necessary if we had either a catastrophe, or we had an all-hazards type of catastrophe, or a terrorist attack? And nobody knew the answer to that question.

We looked in the first year at the question of what is the risk threat in this country. What was the danger? And the answer at the end of that first year, 1999, was that we thought that a chance of an attack on the homeland of the United States was very probable. We expected that there certainly would be another terrorist attack, or more than one, in the United States.

The second year was the year 2000. We looked at the issue at the time and saw that the real challenge was that we didn't have a national strategy. The key report point in the year 2000 was that a national strategy is not a federal strategy. Now, I know this is not understandable in Washington. But we tried very hard to point out that you have to have a national strategy, which means a partnership between federal, state, local, private sector, and community leadership for an entire community of preparedness. If we continue to focus on the federal role exclusively, we will never prepare the nation.

We addressed a lot of other issues during that second year as well, but during the third year, 2001, we wrote a final report. We focused on what ought to be in a national strategy, what we should be thinking about.

A key area was how do you fold in the states and locals when they really don't work for the federal government? How do you fold them into a national strategy? How do you deal with the issue of health care, the public system which in fact might have to address the issue of a terrorist biological attack, or even a pandemic? What do you do when there are 30 trauma beds in a local hospital and a thousand people show up sick? What do you do when a thousand more come in behind them, and they're not sick at all, they just think they're sick? They're the "worried well," mothers bringing their kids in because they're coughing and they've heard on CNN that there's been a bio-attack. What do you do?

The third issue we focused on was the use of the military in the homeland: the long traditions of the United States, many of the regulations and laws in connection with the American military system and how we respond internally here in this country, the use of militia versus regular military versus others.

The issue of border control we considered to be the fourth important issue. We were concerned that there was no attention being addressed to border control. Because borders were very porous, there was great danger of enemies coming illegally across the borders.

And finally cyber-terrorism, which we found to be very troubling, but so big that we didn't know how to deal with it. Our thought was that there probably needed to be a separate commission just to deal with cyber-terrorism because it was so complicated and so likely.

And we were done. We submitted the report to the printer the first week of September 2001 and decided to go out of business. Within a week, of course, the attack occurred in New York City. I was the governor of the state of Virginia at the time. I was in my dressing room, and I saw the first tower of the World Trade Center in flames when I turned the TV on. Where were you? I'll bet that you know where you were or what you were doing. I'll bet you that somebody came over and told you to turn your TV on. I went around and saw Roxanne, the first lady, and said, "Turn your TV on, dear, somebody's lost control of an airplane and flown into the World Trade Center." Unbelievable.

## America Under Attack

Well, it was unbelievable, because we then watched and saw the second plane go into the second tower, and we knew that all the work of the three years just came home. We knew that we were under attack. Over the next minutes, I notified the National Guard, notified the law enforcement people; any evidence of gunplay anywhere in Virginia should be reported to the Emergency Operations Center.

I got to my office just in time to find out that the second attack that day was in Virginia, because the Pentagon is in Virginia. Who responded? Police, fire, rescue, emergency services, Arlington, Alexan-

dria, later Montgomery County, Fairfax County, people who then began to flow in from other parts of the country to respond to the Pentagon and to the tragedy that occurred there. Many of us knew Barbara Olson, as a matter of fact, who died on that plane going into the Pentagon on that day.

The commission was extended two additional years by the Congress following the attack. We all agreed to stay on. It was a time of great, heightened emergency in the nation, and we decided to stay on. We did two more reports, one that dealt with intelligence sharing issues or lack thereof in the fourth year, among other things. And then in the fifth year, 2003, when we really truly did go out of business, we focused on what a prepared nation should look like. We tried to be as visionary as we could. We expressed concern that we were losing the drive to prepare, and we expressed concern that in the public dialogue that was going on in the United States, we were increasingly laying the foundation for a decrease of America's civil freedoms in this country as a result of the attack by the enemy and our fearful response to those potential attacks.

That truly is the history of that commission. After the governorship, I went into private life. I began to associate with some of the leading companies, went with one of the major law firms in the United States, and went about the business of trying to put my life together after the governorship. And after a year or so, I began to realize with some other colleagues that we were not seeing the implementation of the critical point. Don't misunderstand: The five reports had about 164 recommendations and we count about 146 that have been implemented in whole or in part. But we don't have the strategic concept in place that talks about a national strategy of federal, state, local, private sector, and community leadership.

In fact, some federal efforts have been made; there is a citizen corps that we actually cooperate with in many ways, but it still is too federal-centric. Until we break away from this concept that everything has got to be federal we're going to be in trouble. And by the way, The Heritage Foundation has been a leader in promoting the cultural changes we have attempted to bring to show that power should be dispersed. But we've



been trained ever since the Great Depression that if we just hang around, the federal government will come and bail us all out. We've got a reason to believe that: They've got all the money—all the money—and they'll take more of the money. But that's another speech for another day.

We decided to establish a 501(c)(3) private-sector organization to push for the right policy. It's called the National Council on Readiness and Preparedness, NCORP. If you want to look at the new organization, completely privately funded, it's *NCORP.org*. If you want to see the Gilmore Commission reports, you can find them on the Rand Corporation webpage, *rand.org*.

### **Needed: A Blueprint for Response**

We decided that we wanted to push for an area of community preparation: federal, state, local, private sector, community leadership. We believed that we were lacking an actual blueprint for response in the first 72 hours. You have to have an actual military-style response plan where everybody knows where they're supposed to be and what their appropriate role is. It is not enough to tell community leaders to put water under the sink and buy duct tape. You have to have a complete plan that includes everyone, and everybody knows their role and what their role is in the entire community of preparedness and response. Otherwise we will not protect this nation.

Instead, we ended up with a situation like Katrina. Actually, there's a whole report on it, published by Fran Townsend and the White House. It's actually a very thorough blow-by-blow discussion on Katrina.

But I would say that while there are tremendous successes—and I might add, there's an entire appendix in the report that outlines everybody who had a success, including community organizations—I would say overall the conclusion is that the Katrina response was not a success. I think that most people would agree that we had a lot more work to do.

But remember that Katrina was almost a perfect example of a terrorist attack in this country. It's true you did have a little bit of a benefit because you saw it coming, you knew what its potential was, but just like there's been an accusation that there was a fail-

ure of imagination at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, it was a failure of imagination, apparently, because they didn't know they were going to end up with the entire city flooded by the breach of the levees. That was unpredicted, it was unforeseen. It was almost a perfect example of a terrorist attack of mass destruction.

Let me ask you, who was in charge at Katrina? Was it the mayor of New Orleans? Mayor Nagin has done everything he could do to push that off, to say that someone else was in charge, probably the governor. How about Governor Blanco—was she in charge? She looked pretty puzzled to me when I saw her, like she was stunned by this whole business. Was the President in charge? The President certainly wanted to send more and more authority in, but he didn't want to step on state and local prerogatives.

The point is, you have to get this stuff straight at the front end. You can't do this on the fly. There has to be a 72-hour response plan. We can no longer assume under the old situation of deferring to the federal government that if we just hang around they will come and save us. Because I have news for everybody: There is no "they." We are "they." And that's the truth. If there is a terrorist attack of mass proportions or multiple attacks or major catastrophes, in the first 72 hours we are "they."

The Secretary of Health and Human Services in Washington, D.C., said as much. He said if there is a pandemic attack of some type or a biological attack, don't be naïve and expect that in the first 72 hours the federal government is going to come and fix everything. "You're on your own," for the first 72 hours, I think was the direct quote. So we had better rethink the way that we approach terrorism in the United States of America, not to mention catastrophes like Katrina.

There have in fact been successes. But had there been a blueprint in place for response, we might not have seen the death and destruction that followed the disorganization as a result of the Katrina situation. In fact, many of the examples of private initiative that we have seen were individual initiatives that occurred outside of an actual response blueprint.

Even though there was a national response plan, it's pretty general. It doesn't actually tell who is sup-

posed to do what, when, and how. We know for sure that the communities and states across this country do not have plans. They have not trained and they have not exercised. The Council of Mayors, as recently as several weeks ago, issued a report and said that a large portion of the communities of this country (my recollection is about 40 percent) have no plans whatsoever.

So what are you going to do? How are you going to fix an entire community of preparedness? What was the analysis that went on at the time of Katrina? What was the one takeaway you could take away from Katrina? FEMA failed! That's what everybody said: FEMA failed.

When I was governor, we never expected FEMA to come into our state and do everything. We knew they would come in and collocate at the Emergency Operations Center—the same one that I activated on the 9/11 morning—and then work in partnership with state authorities. We would be in support of the action agencies actually in the field: police, fire, rescue, emergency services. And that's what we saw at the Pentagon. That is the reality of the model.

But what are we doing? We decided after Katrina that it's all FEMA's fault. So, we're going to fix FEMA. But FEMA cannot do this. As a matter of fact, the Department of Homeland Security can't do this alone and we shouldn't expect them to. And we shouldn't expect the federal government to do it either, because there is no real "they," as I think they are prepared to admit.

### **Recapturing Americans' Public Virtue**

But this is not a failure; there's no guilt here. This is a big country. We don't run this country out of Washington, D.C., we run it out of the communities and the states and the mayors and the boards of supervisors and the good public servants that work day in and day out to protect our streets and our communities and to respond. And we now know

that citizen virtue is not dead, that it does respond, and will respond on its own unless it is given real leadership in a 72-hour blueprint.

So this is the key. I believe that we have become more and more detached as a nation from civic virtue, from the patriotism and duty that we have as Americans. This is a product of the age, and certainly a product of the media society, a product of big government and big taxation that has led us to the sense that we don't really have the personal responsibility; we can defer to others someplace else. There are limitations to what government can do, and that is the reality. To expect otherwise sets ourselves up for disappointment.

But there is an opportunity here. I believe that the challenge we face with terrorism and the experience with Katrina gives us an opportunity to rethink citizen involvement. I like to call it public virtue, a concept that we have always had as Americans: a sense of virtue, of our own responsibility and opportunity for action. And have we not seen it? Have we not seen it in all the history of America? We have seen it with the breaking open of entire new colonies in this country, we have seen it with individual people simply putting their stuff in wagons and going across the Great Plains on their own, we have seen the dangers that Americans have always been prepared to face. And those dangers are no greater today; they are the same.

Americans have this built into their character. And I am therefore very optimistic. I see this as a moment of opportunity for the United States to once again reawaken the concept of public virtue through citizen involvement and citizen organizations. And if we recapture that and we do that, we will continue to be, even more so than ever, the beacon that lights the liberty and freedom in the world.

—*The Honorable James Gilmore, former governor of Virginia, is the chairman of the National Council on Readiness and Preparedness.*