

AMERICANS AT RISK: WHY WE ARE NOT PREPARED FOR MEGADISASTERS AND WHAT WE CAN DO BY IRWIN REDLENER

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In *Americans at Risk*, Dr. Irwin Redlener draws on his broad experience as a pediatrician working with mobile emergency units both for children and adults, his time making recommendations to legislators about the vulnerabilities of children to biological and chemical agents and his regular meetings with Tom Ridge of the office of Homeland Security over a period of four years to write this urging a plan for a coordinated plan between government and the private sector. Redlener feels that Americans have made a mistake after 9/11 of putting all responsibility into the hands of government and official agencies to plan and prevent whatever catastrophe could happen in the future. Hurricane Katrina would seem to point to the fact that America has made little progress in its ability to respond to disasters - the four years since 9/11 have been only an anxious period of heightened awareness about uncertain threats - as in red and orange alerts - and a degradation of what used to be expected medical services - such as supplying the right amount of the flu vaccine. Redlener, in this book, will outline a plan of how the public can be informed and prepared which he feels would go a long way to averting a large-scale disaster. The book is divided into four sections. Redlener begins by looking at the American state of mind pre-9/11 and what went wrong with Rita and Katrina before presenting eight terrifying and vivid disaster scenarios from avian flu to agro terrorism, suicide bombings to earthquakes and a prolonged global blackout. In section three he lays out a plan of how citizens and the government can work together and section four is a guide to citizen preparedness. This is a book that addresses our changed world, both of global warming and terrorism and it presents plans we cannot ignore.

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22 of 23 people found the following review helpful.

A must read for all concerned citizens

By George G. Dumigan

Dr. Redlener talks about the following five megadisasters and what can be done to improve our response to them: an outbreak of avian flu in New York City; and earthquake in Seattle and the Puget Sound; the detonation of a nuclear bomb in a major city; an accidental chlorine release in a tornado-risk zone; and, finally, the targeting of American children by terrorists. After the interesting discussion of each megadisaster, Dr. Redlener points out the many things we can do to improve our response to them.

He very thoughtfully discusses the four barriers that prevent Americans from being in a state of optimal readiness. The first barrier is the lack of goals and accountability assigned to the monies given by the Feds.

The second barrier is the failure to imagine the consequences of situations before they happen. In one example of this barrier, he talks about the fact that all nursing homes in New Orleans were required to have an emergency evacuation plan, and they did. However, all the plans called for evacuating residents to other nursing homes. After Katrina 80% of the nursing homes were damaged and the flooding made them inaccessible. The third barrier is the lack of leadership as demonstrated by DHS Secretaries Brown and Chertoff. The fourth and final barrier is what he calls the strange psychology of preparedness. For example, one in three Americans believes a terrorist attack will happen within a year; however, fewer than half Americans have a family emergency preparedness plan. The thinking follows the line of there will be an attack, but it won't happen to me.

We are introduced to Prochaska's "Stages of Change" model to help us better understand how people normally modify their behaviors. By understanding this model we will be better able to create a culture of readiness. We are also introduced to the efforts other countries have undertaken to better prepare and deal with megadisasters. I enjoyed reading about what other countries were and are doing to better prepare for handling megadisasters. I did particularly like the Chinese example that he used. A major earthquake happened in the Qinglong district of China in 1976. It was between a 7.8 and an 8.2 magnitude on the Richter scale. The disaster claimed 240,000 lives and injuring another 165,000 people. The city of Tangshan was virtually destroyed. Qinglong, a community close by, suffered from the same quake, however, the outcome was very different. Two years earlier, Qinglong was warned about the possibilities of an earthquake striking their city. They took the warning seriously and prepared for the day when it might happen. The death toll in Qinglong on July 28th, the day of the quake? ONE --- a man died of a heart attack!! As Dr. Redlener said, "the lesson is overwhelmingly important: mitigation, education, and planning work".

The only megadisaster that could happen now is not getting this book, and the answers it provides, into the hands of our politicians!!!

George Dumigan

38 of 46 people found the following review helpful.

Good but compromised (3.5*)

By Amazon Customer

Certainly the author is an expert in the field but I thought that the book had three shortcomings. The author, as he admits in the preface, rushed the book out the door, relying on others to do much of the work. Political diatribe displaced accurate facts and sound reasoning in several parts. Finally, the author stumbled at the end, which was perhaps the most important part. Despite these flaws it is an important book which should be read, but with some reservations.

It's a fast read for a variety of reasons. I purchased it just prior to a 2-hour flight and was finished before they collected the coffee cups.

What the author does contribute is a variety of scenarios and the consequences.

Redlener's political orientation is left of Hillary and friends and it shows. My guess is that some of his Columbia associates also sprinkled their venom into the text. Some of the many examples where his bias influences the analysis include flu vaccines and New Orleans.

The author concludes that some profit driven scheme is resulted in the flight of vaccine producers from the US to foreign shores and the concentration of the world's production of flu vaccines into two plants. If there is a scheme it is simply one of survival. Flu vaccine production is a low margin product, rushed to production

each year just ahead of the flu season to serve an uncertain demand. If the demand is there (and the author is correct that the public does not take responsibility for basic stuff) they make a little money. However, if there is an allegation of a problem, years after the vaccine was produced, the maker is going to get sued. US courts are the preferred venue where the rules of evidence are lax, joint and several liability is common and the juries are generous. Therefore, only high margin drugs whose primary market is to Americans are manufactured in the US. Attempts at tort reform have of course been blocked by Redlener's friends in government, thanks to the abundant cash contributions of the trial attorneys.

Redlener concludes that New Orleans wrote a disaster plan and then forgot about it. He then goes on to place most of the blame at FEMA's doorstep. What he does not share with the reader is that FEMA paid for and sponsored a full-scale exercise involving local government the year before the hurricane hit and which exercise contemplated exactly the scenario that happened.

The author covers the importance of media cooperation in the efforts to prepare and then a few chapters later dismisses the Bush administration's recommendations that people obtain the materials to shelter in place. He says that the flaw in the process was not with the concept of sheltering in place but rather the fact that it was subject to jokes on late night TV. Guess why? His political friends attacked the concept not because it was ineffective, but because they wanted to attack the administration and the press jumped in on the effort. This was the perfect opportunity for one or more of his political pals to have put the country first and reminded the press of the research done by RAND, which concluded that sheltering in place was both effective and important in a number of scenarios. The author does in other sections refer to some of the other work done by RAND on this area and recommends reading it.

The author's scenario of a terrorist attack using children is excellent. However, it misses the propensity of the most threatening terrorist groups to increase the scope and sophistication of attacks. Redlener does understand that unlike most conventional wars the purpose of the attacks are not to cause strategic damage but rather to create terror and to show the inability of the government to stop them. It is far easier to create terror than to stop terrorists, but the public sees it as a "fair fight" so if terror continues the terrorists must be stronger.

Redlener complains that people refuse to prepare but makes no mention that his friends need to stop conveying the message that the government can do everything.

His analysis of the consequences of a nuclear attack is abbreviated and while valuable does not include some of the more important risks. The chapter leaves the victims long before the full extent of the effects are discussed. Again this is probably the consequence of a rush to publish prior to the elections.

Redlener spends pages describing a Seattle earthquake using the techniques of a newscast where the impacts are personalized. While this focus provides drama it misses the enormous importance of critical factors like the time of the earthquake. Both the San Francisco and Los Angeles earthquakes of the early 90s occurred outside of normal business hours. While the San Francisco earthquake affected commuters it did not occur while people were working in high-rise buildings, factories, warehouses, schools and retail stores.

Also missing from the book is a serious look at the impotence of government in the face of a widespread disaster. In military terms there are simply not enough boots on the ground. Consider Los Angeles where 3.8 million people (plus vast numbers of uncounted illegal aliens) are protected by a thin blue line of less than 10,000 police officers, 90% of whom live outside the city. In the event of a flu pandemic many will be off duty and if the pandemic is national there will not be other community resources to augment the depleted ranks. Citizens are going to need to be responsible for their own protection.

Perhaps the greatest shortfall is the failure to spend a few more days on the last chapter detailing the development of a family disaster plan, preparing and the need to act. Far too much emphasis is given to what government must do and not enough to what people need to do, especially with respect to taking action early. An example of this was the night prior to the Mayors' order to evacuate New Orleans. The bloggers had access to the information that the city employees were fleeing, that it was critical to begin evacuations prior to the Mayor's announcement and that immediate action was required.

To his credit Redlener recognizes that the military is far better prepared to deal with disasters than most government officials. Some of the greatest advantages of the military are that they are mission oriented rather than PR oriented and their culture rewards leadership.

Not a criticism but rather a suggestion for what hopefully will be a revised version is that our entire disaster relief system appears to ignore the fundamental changes which have occurred in our capabilities to communicate and react. If there is one element of New Orleans that displays the failure of imagination it is the failure to instantly create an accessible information system/database for affected persons and families. Craigslist, church groups and local papers filled the gap but in a fragmented approach. Here is an example where the government could have asked one group to create and maintain the system overnight.

The author dwells on the problems of refugees without medical records but does not consider the simplicity of a solution - give emergency physicians access to the programs that were paying for the resident's prescriptions and to the major drug store databases. The information is there, instantly accessible but hidden for a lack of imagination.

The failure to use our resources goes far beyond the simple but highly effective database of the missing, lost, family members and folks offering help. The bureaucratic Red Cross wanted to dominate management of the relief efforts but focused on New Orleans, a tiny fraction of the affected area. In other areas church groups became the focus of relief efforts in many areas. Unlike the Red Cross they operated a peer to peer national organization and were able to identify needed supplies and workers. Operating at no cost to the taxpayer, happy to receive most any support they were the stars of the recovery.

I was saddened to see the author comment that his daughter probably did not have room in her tiny apartment for the basic emergency kit. Perhaps he would ask himself what would she do if presented with 6 pairs of highly desirable shoes, find a place for them or refuse the gift.

Had Redlener cleansed the manuscript of excess political diatribe, taken the time to more carefully examine the scenarios he developed and finally and most importantly spent a little more time on development and implementation of personal plans and acting on the plans in time of crisis the book would have been a 7 star homerun.

Redlener might pause to measure his attitude and efforts against the Boy Scout philosophy - be prepared, be honorable and do good deeds.

4 of 5 people found the following review helpful.

An Urgent Need for Government Preparedness Spelled Out in Foreboding, Realistic Terms

By Ed Uyeshima

The coming Armageddon is quite realistically covered by author Irwin Redlener, the Director of the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University, in a variety of forms in his foreboding tome. In meticulous, sometimes biting dramatic detail, he paints five fatalistic scenarios - an avian flu outbreak in New York City; a major earthquake in Seattle; a nuclear attack; a train wreck that causes the release of toxic

chemicals; and a terrorist attack that targets elementary schools in Arizona. Within each scenario, we see a chaotic morass of bureaucracy, and Redlener points out real-life examples of such deficient actions that make the aftermath he describes of such disasters feel palpable.

For instance, in mentioning an actual attack on a school in Beslan, Russia, the author brings to light the possibility that terrorists could go after soft targets, specially women and children, since such sacrifices are more typical in Muslim. He also discusses the threat of nuclear detonations. Just as North Korea proved today, terrorists could use newer technology to assemble small nuclear weapons covertly. Moreover, there are liquid explosives and other such low-tech threats that can be used in even more clandestine ways. The variety found in the possible onslaughts is daunting, especially to the reader, and sadly, no one, from Redlener's informed perspective, seems prepared to handle these disasters optimally. Starting with FEMA's lethargic response to Katrina, there is a wellspring of stories about how Homeland Security has mishandled both money and expertise.

In the most prescriptive section of the book, the author describes a nine-point strategy which amounts to validating good common sense and a more disciplined approach to organization by the government. The author is particularly critical of the random nature of American preparations as opposed to the more pivotally positioned and prepared European nations. Redlener begins his recommendations with having the 9/11 Commission reconvene to address preparedness efforts, and including the expansion of the military role in planning for and responding to major disasters. He also discusses the key role played by volunteer organizations in recovering from mega-disasters with little organized support from the government.

Most tangibly, Redlener discusses citizen preparedness and our sometimes surprising history of lapses in this area, even when such efforts were highly publicized during WWII. Despite common belief, little was actually accomplished in this area at the time. The current threat of WMDs is quite different from the A-bombs of yore since they are so focused in devastation, but the need for personal preparedness is still quite evident. While it may come across as prosaic to tell citizens to stay healthy and fit, Redlener knows full well that it comes down to the individual to ensure larger plans can be mobilized. This is a hard read at times but most worthwhile.

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