

The Role of the Citizen

In personal preparedness, each individual can make a huge difference. It is really an area where you can empower the individual.

—Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff

Tom Brokaw was doing his homework in early September 2008, reviewing his old calendars and personal documents. As the former managing editor and anchor of *NBC Nightly News*, he had long established a rule that he would cover the news but not make it. But he decided to break that rule. He agreed to testify at the Commission's hearing in New York City because he wanted to provide a detailed personal narrative of how events unfolded in 2001, when two of his assistants came in contact with a white powder that spilled out of two envelopes that had come in the mail, addressed to him. His testimony was riveting as he walked us through the weeks of wrong guesses and misdiagnoses before medical authorities realized that his two assistants were victims of cutaneous anthrax. Brokaw's assistants eventually recovered but his story was an example of the destructive power of anthrax when used as a weapon.

But there was something else that Brokaw did before appearing at our hearing that produced an insight every bit as valuable. It highlighted why our Commission concluded that this section on the need to inform and empower citizens was a fitting way to end our report.

Tom Brokaw told us he wanted to see just what the U.S. government has done since 2001 to better inform citizens about attacks from this specific weapon of mass destruction:

So I thought I would check [the] Homeland Security website before I came down here today. I typed in "anthrax attack." I

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got a keynote address by the assistant secretary of health on the meaning of an anthrax attack, remarks by the Homeland Secretary Michael Chertoff, a testimony by a physician before the House of Representatives, testimony of an assistant secretary chief medical officer about how a prophylaxis program will be initiated early to reduce the economic impact of anthrax. I got almost no information that would be useful [to] me in that culture of chaos if I needed help to find out where I go, what it looks like, and what the next course of action should be.

A well-informed and mobilized citizenry has long been one of the United States' greatest resources. While much of this report has focused on what the U.S. government must do to prevent the use of weapons of mass destruction, it is also important to recognize the contribution that all Americans can make in preventing such an attack against our country.

Faced with a serious problem of homegrown terrorism, the United Kingdom has come to recognize the untapped power of the British people in countering radicalization. During a meeting with our Commission, a senior Scotland Yard official succinctly expressed the British law enforcement agency's conclusion: "Communities defeat terrorism."

The British government has embraced the reality that the public can represent a vast early warning network. Cooperative relationships between citizens and law enforcement are becoming a major weapon in combating terrorism and radicalization in the United Kingdom. The United States has much to learn from the British example. A concerted effort is needed to involve the American public in prevention efforts. This effort should start by developing a public education program that goes well beyond the vague admonition to report "suspicious activities." The public must be made aware of what activities are suspicious and of their responsibility to inform authorities.

The public must also be prepared for its role in responding to a potential WMD attack. Citizens must be educated about what they should expect from their government in such a crisis—and what government expects from them in the form of advance preparation and responsible action. If we show potential terrorists that we are ready—as a community and as a nation—then they are less likely to believe that their attack can achieve all of its destructive goals.

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RECOMMENDATION 13: The next administration must work to openly and honestly engage the American citizen, encouraging a participatory approach to meeting the challenges of the new century.

The Commission believes there are several specific actions that the United States should undertake to implement this recommendation.

ACTION: The federal government should practice greater openness of public information so that citizens better understand the threat and the risk this threat poses to them.

Although the Commission did find relevant government-created content regarding anthrax on the website of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, it is clear from Brokaw's testimony that more must be done to educate the public regarding what information is available and where to find it. Of course the information should be easily accessible. In the event of an attack, quick access to information can save untold lives. The government would be well served to have ready-made messages, adaptable to the circumstances of any specific event, available for swift distribution following an attack. Such messages could be delivered by government officials; natural social networks, such as schools and churches; and the media, including the Internet.

The Department of Homeland Security's use of color-coded threat levels was well intentioned, but it has resulted in highly simplistic representation of the nation's risk. Citizens are often confused by the meaning of changes in threat levels and do not know what actions they should take in response. If such an advisory system is continued in the next administration, changes in threat levels should be accompanied by explanatory statements and by recommendations of appropriate actions.

ACTION: The next administration should, as a priority, work with a consortium of state and local governments to develop a publicly available checklist of actions each level of government should take to prevent or ameliorate the consequences of WMD terrorism. Such a checklist could be used by citizens to hold their governments accountable for action or inaction.

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Responsibility for preventing a WMD attack is not limited to the federal government; state and local governments have a critical role to play in helping to protect the nation. The next administration should work with a representative group of state and local governments to develop a simple checklist of steps for them to improve their ability to prevent such attacks. This checklist should be developed within the first six months of the next administration, and it should be made publicly available to enable citizens to hold their state and local governments accountable.

For instance, such a checklist should include adequate support for first responders and public health units. It might expand in metropolitan areas to funding for local police departments to ensure participation on local FBI-led Joint Terrorism Task Forces. These task forces serve, in effect, as the operational arm of domestic counterterrorism efforts, and state and local participation is vital to ensuring their success. Yet statements during Commission interviews and hearings made clear that the further local governments are removed in time from September 11, 2001, and the more distant they are from New York and Washington, D.C., the less priority they give to counterterrorism.

The Commission recognizes that many state and local governments are currently under enormous financial pressure. However, such challenges cannot be allowed to increase our nation's vulnerability to another attack. A checklist will give citizens a meaningful metric to evaluate their state and local governments' counterterrorism efforts, and though it may not ensure that minimum capabilities are maintained, it will help Americans understand the consequences of inadequate preparation.

ACTION: The federal government should seek to strengthen its ties with immigrant and second-generation populations, especially from the Middle East and Asia, to encourage greater engagement and investment by private U.S. citizens in improving the civil and cultural institutions of foreign partners.

The United States is a nation of immigrants, but the U.S. government is often slow to use this enormous asset when developing and implementing foreign outreach and assistance. A multitude of ethnic cultural and professional societies thrive within the United States and provide direct links to foreign countries. Given these resources, the government should engage immigrant groups and second- and third-

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generation citizens in supporting U.S. foreign assistance and institution-building efforts. These populations are often appreciative of the opportunities available to them in the United States and are supportive of U.S. government efforts to improve conditions in the countries of their or their family's origin. Yet as one senior official acknowledged to the Commission, "We simply haven't asked them to help."

Such informal assistance and engagement programs have the added benefit of directly supporting other recommendations made by the Commission, especially the recommendation to improve global ideological engagement. Immigrant or second- and third-generation populations are likely seen as more credible spokespeople than are representatives of the U.S. government.

ACTION: As a priority of the next administration, the Secretary of Homeland Security should release a set of recommendations on which citizens can act to improve preparedness against potential WMD attacks. Such recommendations could range from following the Red Cross disaster preparedness guidelines to encouraging their workplaces and children's schools to prepare emergency plans.

There are simple steps that most individuals can take to mitigate the consequences of an attack—even a WMD attack. By demonstrating that they could reduce at a national level the potential damage and lasting effects caused by an attack, citizens might convince a terrorist organization that pursuing such an attack was not worth the effort and thus deter it.

The Department of Homeland Security, through its Ready.gov program, has sought to outline steps that Americans can take to prepare for potential attacks. This effort has received considerable criticism, however, both because communications during the initial rollout were poor and because the advice was too simplistic. The recommendations to purchase plastic sheeting and duct tape were roundly ridiculed, and in this critical first engagement with the public DHS lost credibility. Now, more than seven years since the 9/11 attacks, the public has also grown complacent.

The next administration has a chance to reengage the public in establishing a culture of preparedness. Within the first six months, the next Secretary of Homeland Security, building on the wide range of knowledge

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located in think tanks, state and local governments, universities, and other centers of expertise, should release a set of clear and specific actions that citizens can take to improve their preparedness for WMD attacks.

ACTION: Like the government, citizens should transform their involvement to meet the challenges of the 21st century. This includes holding political leaders accountable for the performance of the government in countering emerging threats.

Elsewhere in this report are recommendations for how Congress should reform to meet the challenges of this new security environment. While mandating at least two sweeping reforms of the executive branch, Congress has failed to substantively act on any recommendations to reform itself. No other branch of government has the authority to compel Congress to evolve to meet new challenges. Ultimately, the greatest stimulus of, and check on, the actions of Congress remains the American people.

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On the day before the seventh anniversary of the infamous terrorist attacks on America's homeland, our Commission convened a public hearing in New York City. We marked the day, September 10, 2008, by hearing first from one whose family suffered a grievous loss in the attacks—Carie Lemack, a founder of Families of September 11. Then we heard from witnesses who shared insights that came from their work in government, the media, academia, and law enforcement. It was well into the day when Commissioner Raymond Kelly of the New York City Police Department testified. And in his presentation, he summed up with poignancy and urgency the challenge facing us all today—globally, nationally, locally, and in the one role we all share, as concerned citizens.

“Whether it's fixing gaping holes in regulation, securing loose nuclear materials abroad, or fully funding programs here at home that represent our last line of defense, we have absolutely no time to lose,” Commissioner Kelly told the Commission. “Everything we know about al Qaeda tells us they will try to hit us again, possibly the next time with a weapon of mass destruction. We must do everything in our power to stop them before it's too late.”