

The Red Pill

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In the first episode of the film trilogy The Matrix, lead character Neo was given the option of taking a red pill, which would enable him to understand what was actually occurring outside the illusion created by the Matrix, or a blue pill, which would allow him to return to experiencing only that illusion. Because he chose the red pill, Neo became aware for the first time of the oppressive, parasitic nature of the Matrix.

We too live inside a matrix, and the hegemonic power of the matrix has only strengthened since September 11, 2001. Lies are repeated until they are accepted as truth. Our rulers, dedicated social constructionists, declare proudly that “we create reality when we act,” as if no obdurate reality exists outside spin. However, occasionally, just as in the original Matrix film, there is a disturbance in the matrix. With Hurricane Katrina, we are experiencing just such a disturbance. For all who never want to see the people of our nation experience another catastrophe like Katrina, it is time to take the red pill.

Taking the red pill means recognizing that virtually nothing has been done since 9-11 to make this nation safer. Indeed, the opposite is the case; together with the debacle that is Iraq, post-September 11 policies and plans have actually made the nation more vulnerable, both to natural disasters and to future terrorist attacks. Those who are now in charge of preparing the nation in the face of disasters and terrorist attacks are ill-equipped to do so, both because they lack a fundamental understanding of what preparedness is, but more important, because they frame the challenges associated

with managing extreme events in ways that are entirely inappropriate.

Taking the red pill means recognizing that the sources of Katrina's devastation originated not in nature, but in longer-term trends, and especially in post-September 11 political and social realities. During the 1990s, the emergency management system at the Federal level was struggling to overcome the stigma of mismanagement and incompetence—a stigma that had become stronger after Hurricane Andrew in 1992. In those days, FEMA was facetiously referred to as a “turkey farm” and a dumping ground for inept political supporters who needed jobs. An independent panel by the National Academy of Public Administration published in 1993 following Andrew, another disaster that was woefully mismanaged, contained a number of findings and conclusions with respect to the U.S. emergency management system. It found, for example, that there were far too many political appointees among the leadership of FEMA and that the agency was poorly-managed, ineffective, and driven by partisan agendas. Perhaps the report's bluntest conclusion was that “The nation needs a well-organized effective emergency management system...[and] it does not have one” (National Academy of Public Administration, 1993: vii). The report emphasized, among other things, the need for placing individuals with appropriate knowledge, training, and experience in emergency management in high disaster planning and response positions. Seen now in the context of Hurricane Katrina, many of the findings and recommendations of the NAPA report were eerily prescient.

Some improvements were made at the federal level during the Clinton administration, when FEMA was directed by James Lee Witt, who had previous experience as a state emergency manager. Steps were taken, such as the elevation of the FEMA director to cabinet rank, that were intended to increase the agency's visibility and effectiveness. Although missteps continued, disasters were handled reasonably well by local, state, and federal officials during the Clinton administration. However, like all aspects of government, responsibility for disaster management is subject to the winds of political change. Thus Joseph Allbaugh, the President's 2000 campaign manager, came to occupy the director's chair at FEMA, and a new set of presidential appointees took over management and operations at the agency. Many claim that the Clinton administration had finally gotten the agency on the right track, and that programs initiated during the 1990s should have continued. The reality is that the Witt interregnum was an anomaly, and that under Allbaugh, FEMA merely returned to “business as usual.”

Then came September 11. Although again some serious mistakes were made with respect to the management of that disaster—EPA’s risk communications regarding health hazards at the Ground Zero site is a case in point, and many other examples could be cited—for the most part, both government officials and the general public recognized that emergency officials and first responders had done all they could to cope with the aftermath of massive, unprecedented attacks that occurred with almost no warning.

Once again, however, if we take the red pill, we must acknowledge that after September 11, the disaster management and homeland security policy landscape was radically altered in ways that weakened the nation’s defense against both future terrorist attacks and natural and technological hazards. Many forces conspired to make this happen. Whereas disasters had always been very low on local, state, and federal policy agendas, terrorism was important—by which I mean that for the first time, serious money was available to help make our society safer in the face of extreme events. A volatile mix of outrage, patriotism, politics, the profit motive, and entrenched institutional interests reshaped not only agencies and programs, but perhaps more important, the overall strategy this society would use in its preparations for future threats of all types. The emerging homeland security complex provided almost unlimited opportunities for both the private sector and for government agencies. In *No Place to Hide* (2005), for example, Robert O’Farrow discusses in detail how politically-connected data-mining and database development companies moved within days after 9-11 to obtain highly lucrative contracts to improve the government’s surveillance capabilities, which they did to great effect.

There were other beneficiaries, as well. Since the end of the Cold War, military and national security agencies, as well as scientific agencies that support their operations, had been actively looking for new missions. Environmental monitoring and disaster response had already been explored by such agencies prior to 9-11 (see *Global Disaster Information Network*, 1997). With the advent of the war on terror, and with enormous increases in funding, the domestic missions of defense- and intelligence-related agencies have been greatly expanded. For example, there was no U.S. military entity with a specific mission to coordinate military operations within U.S. borders until 2002, when the U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM) was created with the express mission of engaging in homeland defense. Along these same lines, DHS

began to look increasingly to national laboratories, particularly Sandia, Los Alamos, and Lawrence Livermore labs, for help with challenges associated with the war on terrorism. DHS relies extensively on personnel from the national labs for strategic program management and guidance. Other key beneficiaries of homeland security largesse include mammoth consulting companies such as SAIC, Bearing Point, Titan, and many others.

The massive governmental re-organization that accompanied the creation of the Department of Homeland Security further sealed the fate of disaster management in the U.S. FEMA was incorporated into a 180,000-employee bureaucracy dominated by military, security, and law enforcement agencies. Morale fell at FEMA, and it was not uncommon to hear agency career professionals complain that “we can’t get heard in DHS because we don’t carry guns.” Many experienced staffers had already left the agency in the aftermath of 9-11, and the brain drain continued after DHS was created. Inside the beltway, it is widely understood that significant homeland security programs and initiatives are dominated by “three-letter agencies,” (FBI, CIA, DOD, DOJ) and not by four letter ones like FEMA. In the federal acronym system, hierarchy is all.

New DHS programs placed little emphasis on improving preparedness and response programs for any emergencies, including both terrorist attacks and disasters. Instead, the overwhelming emphasis was on detection, prevention, and deterrence of terrorist attacks. Just under half of the entire DHS budget is devoted to border and transportation security, with an additional 20% to the Coast Guard. Since the creation of DHS, the preparedness, response, and recovery missions of the agency have been seriously underfunded.

New DHS policies and programs violated two fundamental principles of emergency management. First, both social science research and emergency management practice have long emphasized the value of using an “all hazards” approach to protecting the public and reducing losses from extreme events, meaning that communities and other governmental levels should assess their vulnerabilities, focus generically on tasks that must be performed regardless of event type, and then plan for specific contingencies, guided by risk-based assessments of what could happen. Despite the fact that DHS claims to approach emergency management from an “all hazards” and risk-based perspective, concerns related to terrorism and weapons of mass destruction dominate

agency programs.

Second, since the late 1970s, emergency management research and practice have emphasized what is termed “comprehensive emergency management,” or the notion that loss-reduction efforts should be carried out in an integrated way across different time phases of extreme events: mitigation, consisting of long-term activities, such as land use policies and building codes, that are designed to make communities less vulnerable to extreme events; preparedness, or activities that center on developing the capabilities necessary to respond to disaster events; disaster response activities aimed at protecting life and property when disasters strike; and short- and long-term recovery activities. Comprehensive emergency management requires that the four phases of disaster be addressed in a unitary, holistic way, because loss-reduction activities are interdependent and mutually-reinforcing. Yet DHS has created stovepipes that work against such integration. Within DHS, the concept of mitigation has all but disappeared—except, of course, with respect to prevention and deterrence of terrorist attacks—and most emergency preparedness activities are assigned not to FEMA, which retains responsibility for response and recovery, but to other branches within DHS, specifically the Office of State and Local Government Coordination and Preparedness (OSLGCP) and the Office for Domestic Preparedness (ODP). These two DHS entities focus almost exclusively on funding and providing guidance for terrorism-related preparedness programs across the U.S. The OSLGCP is the agency charged with implementing Homeland Security Presidential Directive 8 (HSPD-8), which focuses on national preparedness. While HSPD-8 purports to be an “all hazards” guidance document, its overwhelming emphasis is on terrorism, rather than on the range of extreme events U.S. communities face. This can be seen in the wording of key OSLGCP and ODP documents and program descriptions, in the types of projects that are funded, and in the approach these agencies are taking with respect to preparedness. Pursuant to HSPD-8, for example, communities throughout the U.S. are now required to develop plans and programs for dealing with fifteen different scenarios, thirteen of which involve terrorism, WMD, and epidemics. As indicated earlier, such planning mandates deviate from basic principles of emergency management, which call for communities to systematically assess their own risks and vulnerabilities and develop comprehensive programs to manage those vulnerabilities.

Readers of this essay may wonder about the role that social science research on extreme events played in these and other government actions since September 11, or

about the extent to which the architects of the homeland security complex sought guidance from professional emergency managers in their efforts to design new structures and systems. The short answer is that almost no one representing either academic social science or professional emergency management was at the table—or anywhere near the table—as post-September 11 policy and programmatic agendas were developed. In the area of risk communication and public information, for example, with no input from the social science research community, the homeland security complex produced such useless guidance as the color-coded warning system, directives about duct tape and plastic sheeting, and the ready.gov web site. One has to search long and hard to find a single social scientist on other important DHS advisory boards. Research conducted under the auspices of agencies such as the DHS Science and Technology Directorate almost completely lacks social science content, concentrating instead on such topics as sensors, equipment, and protective gear for what the agency refers to as “first responders.” Social science research has consistently shown that community residents are the true first responders in both disasters and terrorist attacks, but homeland security initiatives ignore the vital role the public plays in disaster response. Instead, as we saw so vividly in Hurricane Katrina, the government’s stance is that the public in disaster-ravaged communities mainly represents a problem to be managed—by force, if necessary—and a danger to uniformed responders. Social science knowledge with respect to the value of grass-roots preparedness efforts, community-based organizations, and the role played by both pre-planned and emergent disaster volunteer groups was never used in developing planning schemes for extreme events.

Who helps guide federal homeland security initiatives? At the highest level, the Homeland Security Advisory Council, charged with overseeing DHS activities, includes a former state emergency manager who is now a private consultant, a local police chief, two mayors, a governor, a former member of Congress, and a university president. However, the bulk of the Council’s membership comes from intelligence and security-oriented consulting companies such as MITRE Corporation, Mitretech, and the Anser Institute, the corporate world, and the Washington national security elite. The CEO of Southwest Airlines is a member, as is the former CEO of Lockheed Martin, along with a representative from Dow Chemical Company and the former chair of the Ad Council, now with the Interpublic Group of Companies, described on the Advisor Council web site as “among the world’s largest marketing and communications and services companies.” The chair of the Advisory Council is the

CEO of Bell South.

Since 9-11, professional emergency managers have been marginalized in the homeland security planning process, excluded from high-level discussions on homeland security, and reduced to the status of paper-pushers charged with filling out endless forms dealing with targeted terrorism-related homeland security funding and with preparedness “capability assessments.” In testimony before the Congress in March 2004, former FEMA director James Lee Witt noted that FEMA’s loss of cabinet status and absorption into DHS had weakened the agency, stating that “I assure you that we could not have been as responsive and effective during disasters as we were during my tenure as FEMA director, had there been layers of federal bureaucracy between myself and the White House” (Witt, 2004, emphasis in the written document accompanying his testimony). On August 30, 2005, the very day after Hurricane Katrina struck, the Washington Post published an op-ed article by Eric Holdeman, the emergency manager for King County, Washington, in which Holdeman stated that DHS actions, including Secretary Chertoff’s recently-announced DHS organizational and programmatic changes would be a “death blow to an agency [FEMA] that was already on life support,” also noting that “[t]hose of us in the business of dealing with emergencies find ourselves with no national leadership and no mentors” (Holdeman, 2005).

If we take the red pill, we will recognize that today, four years after September 11 and a few weeks after Hurricane Katrina, the protection of our nation against extreme events is being managed by a bloated, myopic, and incompetent bureaucracy that has undermined the nation’s ability to be resilient in the face of disasters—and terrorism—and drastically underinvested in measures that would truly make the nation safer. The stench of pork is everywhere, as efforts to allocate DHS funds on the basis of reasonable expectations regarding risk and vulnerability have failed. And rather than objective, science-based evidence on what went wrong (and right) with homeland security and disaster loss reduction, our government is busily investigating itself. The public deserves so much more—but again, what can we expect from a public that has a raging addiction to blue pills?

Endnotes

1 Significantly, Witt had been the director of emergency management for the state of Arkansas, which facilitated his interactions with President Clinton.

2 I am arguing here not that terrorist attacks, even attacks employing planes, could not have been foreseen, but that on September 11, the attacks came as a surprise. This is in contrast with Hurricane Katrina, which allowed days of warning.

3 In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the pressure is now on to assign more responsibilities for disaster response directly to the military. While military organizations clearly have important functions to play, earlier analyses, such as the NAPA report, found sound reasons for not increasing the role of the military in domestic disasters. Nevertheless, the administration is seeking modifications to the Posse Comitatus Act in order to do just that.

4 For example, on January 10, 2003, the website GOVEXEC.com ran an article on the major contributions the labs were making to homeland security research and development, including deploying chemical weapon sensors in the Metrorail system in Washington and conducting surveillance on crowds that attended the Salt Lake City Olympics with a new biological weapons detection system called the Biological Aerosol Sentry and Information System, or BASIS. The article also indicated that “three BASIS systems are even now deployed in undisclosed U. S. cities.”

5 One insider from the consultant world once remarked to me that since 9-11, such companies, formerly known as “Beltway bandits,” now like to think of themselves as “patriot partners.”

6 It should be noted, however, that this is a continuing trend within the federal government, not a new one. However, cuts became much more serious after the creation of DHS.

7 Numerous examples of “skills mismatch” can be found by looking at the resumes of individuals who have leadership positions in these and other DHS programs. However, the fundamental problems do not lie with individuals, but rather with institutions that have continually sought to push their own agendas in the aftermath of 9-11.

8 Indeed, hurricane and earthquake scenarios were only added to the list after a small group of high-level administration officials persistently pressured for their inclusion.

9 FEMA itself has developed a broad spectrum of decision-assisting tools for local communities, including HAZUS, a suite of geographic information science (GIS)-based software products that enable communities to project future impacts and losses from earthquakes, floods, and wind hazards.

10 DHS, like other federal agencies, embraces terms such as “stakeholder involvement” and “public-private” partnerships,” but the actions of the agency belie these claims. Approximately 2% of the DHS budget is devoted to “citizen preparedness,” directed primarily through the Citizen Corps. When the agency developed the National Preparedness Goal, language referring to preparedness on the part of the general public was inserted at the very last minute and over the objections of many DHS officials.

11 For example, Advisory Committee member James Schlesinger, the Chairman of the Board of Trustees of MITRE, sits on the Council. His extensive resume includes positions as Secretary of Defense, Secretary of Energy, Director of Central Intelligence, and Presidential assistant.

12 The Ready.gov web site, DHS’s attempt to promote community, household, and business preparedness for extreme events—which again emphasizes primarily terrorism-related threats—was developed by the Ad Council. Despite the Council’s record on producing public service campaigns, the notion of “marketing” preparedness through a national web site is fundamentally flawed. How many poor and vulnerable residents of cities like New Orleans spend their time surfing the web looking for safety guidance? What good is a web site for people who have no electricity? Moreover, except for a small amount of Spanish-language content, Ready.gov is accessible only to persons who are literate in the English language. Web-based “marketing” also ignores the fact that genuine preparedness involves grass-roots collaborative efforts, not web browsing.

13 In early 2005, I spoke with the chief emergency management official in a large southern city. He indicated that “we don’t do emergency management any longer, we just fill out forms and manage DHS grants...I need accountants and budget administrators so my staff can get back to actually doing emergency management.” This is what can be expected when vast amounts of money are made available for

equipment that some DHS skeptics call “toys for boys,” while funds for personnel to manage programs are lacking.

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