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4 INTRODUCTION: 9.11 AS DISASTER:
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6 ON WORST CASES, TERRORISM,
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8 AND CATASTROPHE
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11 Lee Clarke
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15 Things will never be the same, some say, because of 9.11. We feel more vulnerable,
16 more threatened, more at risk. It was the worst terrorist attack on U.S. soil, goes
17 the refrain. It was dramatic beyond our worst nightmares. Like millions of others,
18 I watched the events of that lovely morning unfold on television. When the South
19 Tower fell for a few seconds I could not see it collapsing. My blindness wasn't
20 because of the smoke and dust. It was a cognitive blindness. I could not believe
21 my eyes and so, somehow, my mind denied my brain the truth of the moment.

22 The 9.11 attack – especially the collapse of the World Trade Center – *was* a
23 worst case. One of the attributes of a worst case is that it's overwhelming. That's
24 why we say things will never be the same. The attacks were overwhelming in
25 a number of ways. They overwhelmed our imaginations as we watched airliners
26 crashing. It was instant death on a scale that few people outside of war have ever
27 witnessed. The attacks overwhelmed our political and organizational systems too.
28 In the wake of 9.11, and the anthrax poisonings later that Fall, it became painfully
29 evident how ill-prepared our organizations were to either prevent or respond
30 to attack and disaster. The list of failures is long, embarrassing, and massive.
31 America's intelligence and security organizations had plenty of information and
32 warning but were poorly organized and in some cases patently incompetent.
33 None of the 19 hijackers were even detained at the airports, even though some of
34 them were carrying knives and didn't have proper paperwork. While it's wrong
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1 to say that all the horror could have been prevented, clearly some of it should
2 have been.

3 As bad as it was, it could have been worse. That, too, is an attribute of worst
4 cases – they can always be worse. The planes could have been full of people.
5 The planes could have crashed into the WTC an hour later, when the buildings
6 would have had many more people in them. The people in the plane that crashed
7 in Pennsylvania could have failed and that plane could have made its way to the
8 White House, or the Capitol building.

9 It has become cliché to ask what we have learned from 9.11. The reason that it's
10 cliché is that asking the question comes to sound rather like asking children what
11 they've learned from their latest mistake. Just as children give parents answers
12 they think the parents want to hear, so the “lessons learned from 9.11” come to
13 sound homiletic, too easy, even vacuous. Nonetheless, here are some things that
14 we *should have* learned by now:

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- 16 • People are resilient in the face of catastrophe;
 - 17 • People hardly ever panic in disasters;
 - 18 • Americans are despised in many parts of the world;
 - 19 • We won't be safe from terrorism by chest-thumping and bombing people;
 - 20 • Our airports are vulnerable;
 - 21 • Our critical infrastructure is vulnerable.

22 All of those things were known well before 9.11 by academics who know about
23 terrorism and disasters. That's another reason that talk about “lessons learned”
24 is often so much hot air. The lessons are *already there* but elites have to pay
25 attention if they are to matter. But even after over 3,000 deaths, and the property
26 destruction, elites seemed not to have learned very much from the attacks. They
27 still think people are prone to panic, even though disaster researchers have known
28 for a long time that is false. As a result, political leaders and even professional
29 disaster planners, who ought to know better, create response plans that are based
30 on faulty assumptions. Worse, the chief response to all the intelligence failures has
31 been to create a monster bureaucracy with unprecedented powers to infringe on
32 people's civil rights. (The coincidence of the attacks with the advent of a far-right
33 federal government lead to major compromises in people's privacy rights.) But
34 the terrorists are organized in small networks so it's unlikely that creating a big
35 organization will do much more than merely assure the public that *something* is
36 being done about the problem.

37 All worst cases have silver linings, and so does 9.11. At the time of the attacks
38 Mayor Rudolph Giuliani was facing a hostile public and press over his high-handed
39 dealings and his disastrous personal life. After 9.11 Giuliani was a hero, and will
40 now be remembered that way. At the time of the attacks President George Bush

1 was still reeling from having the Supreme Court hand him an election in which he
2 lost the popular vote by a significant margin. He was also being doubted because
3 of his lack of vision regarding public policy. After 9.11 President Bush was seen
4 as the defender of the free world, having crushed Afghanistan and the Taliban in
5 fairly short order, only to set up to overthrow Iraq.

6 Another silver lining of 9.11 is that it gave academics, including yours truly,
7 something new to write about. This volume is one such product. In November 2001
8 Barbara Reskin, the president of the American Sociological Association, and Felice
9 Levine, the ASA executive officer, made it possible for me to organize a special
10 session at the 2002 Chicago meetings on “The 9.11 Terrorist Attacks as Disasters.”
11 I then recruited a number of people to speak at the session. The final roster included
12 Tom Kneir, Special Agent in Charge at the FBI, in Chicago, Andrew Greeley from
13 Universities of Chicago and Arizona, Kathleen Tierney from the Disaster Research
14 Center at the University of Delaware, William Freudenburg from Universities of
15 Wisconsin and California-Santa Barbara, and myself as moderator.

16 The session was so well attended that people were sitting on the floor. The
17 speakers were dynamic and interesting, although the FBI representative didn’t say
18 anything surprising. But the others certainly did. Tierney drove home two points:
19 that panic is rare and that command and control models are the wrong ones to
20 follow if you’re preparing for disaster. Greeley looked at data on religiosity and
21 religious commitment following 9.11 and found *nothing* – people didn’t go to
22 church more, nor did churches get new members. The events of 9.11 had no sig-
23 nificance for religion in the United States. Freudenburg talked about some political
24 and organizational aspects of disaster response. The session couldn’t have been
25 more relevant, which is not always true of sessions at the ASA meetings.

26 Some time later, Bill Freudenburg asked me to edit this special issue of *Research*
27 *on Social Problems and Public Policy*. I asked all those who participated in the
28 ASA session to contribute. Kneir and Freudenburg declined. Greeley thought his
29 non-findings weren’t all that interesting and I failed to convince him otherwise.
30 In the meantime I asked a number of other people to submit something and the
31 results appear in this volume. It was a terribly demanding production schedule,
32 because we wanted to get the volume out as quickly as possible. Our authors
33 are to be commended for producing high quality work under quite pressing time
34 constraints.

35 You will notice that all the work here is not of a type. I solicited work from people
36 in the humanities as well as in social science. If we are to gain any illumination
37 from 9.11 it must come from several sources. Certainly, the social sciences are
38 not the only legitimate source of knowledge about 9.11. That Freudenburg and
39 Ted Youn, who usually co-edit this journal, encouraged this unorthodox approach
40 attests to their intellectual flexibility.

1 One of the things we all want to know is whether we're safer now than on
2 September 10, 2001. As a group, our authors are pessimistic that we are. They
3 don't think that actions now being taken by those who claim to protect us will do
4 much good, and they do think that survivors will continue to suffer far into the
5 future. Our authors also do not shy away from what we *should* be doing. That's all
6 to the good. It is foolish to withhold our advice, as long as we're clear about the
7 limits of what we know.

8 One issue no one raises is that there have been no attacks in the U.S. since
9 September 11, 2001. Many of us thought there would have been more, certainly
10 within the first year. The issue is hard to address because of a paucity of evidence,
11 and because of national security concerns. Clearly one possibility is that Al Qaeda
12 networks have been sufficiently disrupted that they've not been able to mount
13 another attack. If that were the case then we can only hope that our leaders are
14 learning the lessons from the disruptions. There is no reason to be confident that
15 is the case.

16 This volume, like all edited collections, is not perfectly coherent. I don't see how
17 it could be so. My goal was not to present a coherent work but to gather together
18 in one place some smart people with interesting things to say about the events of
19 9.11 or about larger questions, concerning disaster, posed by those events. I think
20 the effort has been successful, and I hope you do too.

21 Orlando Rodriguez and Phyllis Schafer Rodriguez's son died in one of the
22 collapsing towers. His name was Greg. Two months after 9.11, Orlando was asked
23 to give a speech at Fordham, where he is a professor, on the meaning of civil
24 defense and the proper response to the attacks. His lecture, in the main, took the
25 form of asking important questions. He's expanded that lecture considerably for
26 this volume. His intent is to make us think through our values and what those values
27 entail for responding to the terrorists. The Rodriguez' implore political elites not
28 to commit further violence in their son's name. I'm not sure I could do the same.

29 Ann Larabee tells us a cultural story about the stories that are told about 9.11.
30 Fear is now part of the social fabric, she says, in new ways. Our institutions and
31 leaders were revealed by the attacks to be inadequate to the task of protecting
32 us. Their legitimacy was threatened, although it's hard to find evidence of that in
33 opinion polling regarding institutional trust and confidence. In response, leaders
34 now assert more control over the world than they actually command, setting them-
35 selves up for embarrassment later on when their promises will be, again, shown to
36 be hollow. The new empire of fear colors nearly everything we see, and Larabee
37 points out that pervasive fear fits well with the urge to command and control. Crisis
38 management now becomes an excuse to stifle dissent and narrow arguments about
39 public policy. In that way the worldview of the terrorists is quite similar to the
40 worldview of key policymakers in the Bush administration.

1 Kathleen Tierney has spent a great deal of time since 9.11 debunking disaster
2 myths. She is uniquely qualified to do it, having served as the Director of the
3 Disaster Research Center, at Delaware, and now as Director of the Natural Hazards
4 Center, at the University of Colorado-Boulder. One reason such debunking is
5 important is that disaster myths are not politically neutral, but rather work
6 systematically to the advantage of elites. Elites cling to the panic myth because
7 to acknowledge the truth of the situation would lead to very different policy
8 prescriptions than the ones presently in vogue. The chief prescription is, she
9 notes, that the best way to prepare for disasters is by following the command and
10 control model, the embodiment of which is the federal Department of Homeland
11 Security. Thus do panic myths reinforce particular institutional interests. But it is
12 not bureaucrats who will be the first-responders when the next disaster, whether
13 brought by terrorists or some other agent, comes. It won't even be the police
14 or firefighters. It will be our neighbors, it will be the strangers in the next car,
15 it will be our family members. The effectiveness of disaster response is thus
16 diminished to the degree that we over-rely on command and control. This is
17 another case where political ideology trumps good scientific knowledge about
18 how the world works.

19 Ken Mitchell talks of the “hard won lessons” that are being ignored in the
20 political and organizational response to 9.11. He points out that defense is trumping
21 real security, and in ways that compromise not only democratic culture but also
22 make us less safe. Certainly he's right. But we have to ask what *can* the government
23 actually do against such things? He is clear that the things the American government
24 is doing in the name of protecting its people are in fact putting its people in greater
25 danger. The larger issue is that in times of great emotional turmoil there's a tendency
26 to think about the government as a protector of us all, as per the phrase “the national
27 interest.” But it is unwise to forget, especially when emotions and patriotic fervor
28 are running high, that there are very few single interests. Mitchell also notes that the
29 goal of preventive efforts is directed mostly at “critical infrastructure.” That means
30 that most attention is directed at protecting things rather than people, leaving us
31 terrifyingly vulnerable.

32 Brent K. Marshall, J. Steven Picou and Duane A. Gill are ambitious. They
33 mine the literature on disasters to see what predictions might be made about the
34 prospects of long-term recovery for 9.11 survivors. They see parallels in how people
35 typically respond to natural disasters. But they especially draw lessons from work
36 on technological disasters. Technological disasters, they note correctly, have been
37 shown to be highly correlated with the development of a “corrosive” rather than
38 an “altruistic” community. The primary reason for that is that lawsuits are more
39 likely to be filed in technological events. That sets people against each other, which
40 has obvious implications for possibilities of developing a sense of community and

1 common recovery. Marshall et al. predict that the 9.11 survivors will look much
2 like survivors of other technological disasters, which is to say recovery will be
3 halting and possibly won't happen at all for many people.

4 James Kendra and Tricia Wachtendorf were scheduled to be in New York City
5 on September 12, 2001. As researchers from the Disaster Research Center, they
6 were going to witness a simulation of a bioterrorist attack. That simulation was
7 upstaged by the real attack, and on September 13 Kendra and Wachtendorf went
8 to New York, where they were welcomed into the reconstituted New York City
9 Office of Emergency Management. They stayed in New York for two months.
10 They thus have a unique perspective on what happened in lower Manhattan in
11 the intermediate aftermath. One thing they observed was what they say is a new
12 kind of convergence in disasters. Convergence – where people of all sorts are
13 drawn toward a disaster scene – has long been noted in the disaster literature.
14 Kendra and Wachtendorf advise disaster managers to plan for and explicitly
15 incorporate unofficial volunteers. This is yet another way in which informal
16 organization becomes at least as equal as formal organization in disasters. Their
17 chief conceptual innovation is to point out the study of convergence should center
18 on how people negotiate legitimacy in their attempts to be part of recovery.

19 In the Fall of 2002 I published an article in *Contexts*, the American Sociological
20 Association's magazine directed at a general audience. That piece concerned the
21 myth of panic in general, although I used some stories from the 9.11 attacks
22 as evidence. The *Contexts* article was extracted and refined from a longer, more
23 academic piece that I was working on. That article appears here. My chief point is to
24 suggest the outlines of a theory of people's response to disaster that gets away from
25 usual categories. Specifically, I suggest the idea of "failing gracefully" as a social
26 structural perspective on what we usually see as panic. Behavior is embedded in
27 social contexts of various sorts, and that central fact doesn't disappear in disaster.

28 This collection of articles raises more questions than it settles, but that is
29 appropriate. We are only now beginning to fathom the deeper meanings of 9.11. It
30 will be a long time, I think, before anyone should feel confident in their knowledge
31 about those meanings.

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