

Leadership After a Disaster: Why We Still Don't Have it

By R. Jerry Adams, Ph.D.

We all know how government works: The president is in charge of the governors. The governors are in charge of the mayors. The mayors are in charge of the cities. We have a clear chain of command, right?

Not right, of course. The United States does not have such a hierarchical command and control structure for government. Let's take an "all too possible" example:

A couple of marines are on leave in New Orleans and decide they are going to help stop the looting after another hurricane strikes the city. They find a spot to hold their ground in a building 100 yards from a Wal-Mart store. They decide to neutralize (kill) anyone leaving the store with anything in their hands since the store is officially closed. They start killing men, women, and children who leave the store with food and water. The men are in uniform and using their assault rifles to create the carnage. Communications are "out" throughout the city. The local police do not know if the men are acting under state, federal, or military authority.

Question: Do the local police have the authority to use lethal force, if necessary, to stop the soldiers? Do the local police have the authority to arrest the soldiers? Are the local police derelict in their duties if they do not stop the shooting? Do the local police know how to find out what they should do?

What if the soldiers are not acting alone but are under orders from their local commander to use "any means necessary" to stop the looting? Since the military is not authorized to "police" cities in the United States unless martial law has been declared, this would make it more complicated. What if the order is approved by the mayor? What if the order is approved by the governor? What if the order is approved by the president, but without invoking martial law?

What if a gas explosion starts a fire in a volatile chemical plant in the building next to where the snipers are operating? Do the firemen have the authority to order the police to back off while they try to prevent a huge explosion that might take out a city block? Do the police have the authority to make the firemen back off?

In the United States, command and control authority varies, depending on the context. It takes much work to clarify and agree upon command and control authority among the levels of government, and often within levels of government, at a local level during a disaster. The President of the United States does not have direct authority over governors unless martial law has been declared. In a national emergency, federal resources work under federal guidance and take control of state level resources - at the request of the governor. The governor, in turn,

provides resources, such as the National guard, at the request of the mayor. Instead of direct “line authority” between levels of government, we have guidelines for coordination of joint efforts. Note: exceptions exist in the field of law enforcement.

Local representatives can exercise authority over state and federal representatives who violate laws. For example, if a federal judge gets drunk and disruptive, he or she may be arrested. If a soldier starts shooting civilians, local police have the authority and responsibility to stop him or her. Our laws include checks and balances rather than strict hierarchical organizations of levels of government.

Prerequisites to Effective Leadership

In a disaster, context changes rapidly, communications are typically weak, and command and control can easily fall apart. What is needed for us to have good leadership during and after a disaster: **clear command and control authority.**

We need for our leaders at all levels of government to quickly gain an agreement on command and control authority and be able to change those understandings as the local needs of people and the nature of the disaster change. FEMA centralizes command and control authority for federal resources in a natural disaster after a national emergency has been declared by the president. Although FEMA can pre-empt local authority, it does not *automatically* take responsibility for all services.

In New Orleans, it was clear that federal, state, and local leadership did not establish operational command and control procedures partly because each level of government had a different understanding about authority, as well as responsibility for services. To solve the dual problems of a lack of clear command and control authority and lack of clear responsibility for essential services, the following steps are needed:

- Each city and municipality needs to develop a local disaster plan that includes clear command and control authority and clear responsibilities for essential services. Each city and municipality must communicate its plan to the appropriate officials in state government.
- Each governor needs to develop a state level disaster plan that includes clear command and control authority and clear responsibilities for essential services. The governor needs to collect local plans from local governments and recommend changes to provide a fit between state and local command and control, as well as for responsibilities for essential services.
- Homeland Security or FEMA needs to develop a national disaster plan that includes clear command and control authority and clear responsibilities for essential services between federal, state, and local authorities. (FEMA was designed to clarify command and control authority among federal agencies.) The Director of Homeland Security or FEMA must collect state plans from state governments and recommend changes to provide a fit

between federal and state command and control, as well as for responsibilities for essential services.

- Homeland Security or FEMA needs to conduct a national study on the state of disaster preparedness regarding clear command and control authority for leaders and responsibilities for essential services. (This is different from past studies to determine disaster resources available.)
- Homeland Security or FEMA needs to develop and recommend state and local standards for disaster preparedness for leaders.
- Homeland Security or FEMA must develop and recommend state and local training for leaders for passing the standards for disaster preparedness.
- Homeland Security or FEMA needs to develop/adopt/adapt a simulation-based system for helping states and cities to practice, improve, and assess their state of disaster preparedness for leaders at least annually. The simulation-based system could be conducted regionally within each state using appropriate federal, state, and local officials to participate in the simulations. The actual decision-making officials would need to participate rather than persons representing those officials.

The last step is the “bottom line” in disaster prevention. Each city and municipality needs to know for certain that its leaders are ready for the next disaster by practicing, improving, and assessing preparedness in simulations.

We require pilots to pass training, practice and assessment requirements in simulations before taking the lives of others into their hands. How can we require less of our leaders, working together, to ensure that thousands of lives and billions of dollars are not lost each time they share command and control of a disaster?

We sometimes say that two things in life are certain: death and taxes. Actually, three things are certain: death, taxes and disasters. Many of us plan for death and taxes: How can we not plan for disasters?

About the Author

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Dr. Adams has developed a survey to aid municipal and state governments to clarify command and control agreements across agencies and domains. You may request a copy of the survey via email at checklist@crisissimulations.com.

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