Can Cities Prepare for Terrorism?: Perspective from the United Kingdom

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Traffic slowed almost to a halt, and fire helmets lit up a dull English Saturday. Yet there was no conflagration, no flood—just local brigades running a sponsored car wash for the families of colleagues in far-off New York. That simple gesture says more about countries standing shoulder to shoulder than any presidential or prime ministerial rhetoric—or indeed historical comparisons.

Does urban Britain, which has lived with terrorism for years, have lessons for US cities? I doubt it. The Irish Republican Army never used suicide or hijackings. Nor, despite the current nostalgia of some newspapers, does World War II have much to teach. In the fall of 1940, terror fell on London for 57 consecutive nights. *The Lancet*, in “don’t panic” mode, calculated that the chance of a bomb landing within 50 yards of you was only 1 in 280,000. All the same, over 13,000 civilians died. My home had metal-framed Morrison and bunker-style Anderson shelters, but neither was designed for the collapse of a multistory building or a hit from aircraft laden with fuel. In 1940, London had no very tall buildings. We all had gas masks, but never needed them; in the fall of 2001 they sell for \$55, but few Londoners have bothered.

In World War II, experiments with anthrax left a Scottish island uninhabitable for decades. Today, Dr. Graham Pearson, a former director of the United Kingdom’s biological defense establishment, tells the *Sunday Times* reassuringly: “We have been aware of this biological threat for a number of years.”¹ Funding for bioterrorism research along the lines of the \$1.5 billion being asked for in the United States has not been sought here.

The British government claims to be both informed and prepared. But how? *Health Services Journal* hints that the availability of decontamination equipment is not all it could be, and the British Medical Association demands more information.^{2,3} However, openness has a price. The chief medical officer, Professor Liam Donaldson, believes that “the UK is as well prepared as any country could be to protect the health of its citizens in the event of attack.”⁴ If it were not, would he say so? If cities are ill prepared, would government admit it—and even if the plans are brilliant, why tell the world and risk the plans being circumvented? Reporting that police officers visiting New York City were impressed by the Pier 39 operation, the *London Times* named three buildings that might become the capital’s command-and-control centers.⁵ In the bombardment of Iraq, Kosovo, and Afghanistan, command-and-control centers have been at the top of the hit list. Terrorists can think on similar lines.

The London Emergency Services’ major incident manual has been revised, but it was really written for accidents. Aircraft in serious trouble over London are supposed to ditch fuel and aim for a large park. Al-Qaeda affiliates committing suicide

will have other ideas. Civil defense is being dusted down, too, but its budget has suffered with the ending of the Cold War.

A free society cannot reveal all to its citizens or plan perfectly for the aftermath of urban terror, and its hands are tied in other ways. Four years after the United States declared its independence, John Philpot Curran said (in Ireland) that “The condition upon which God hath given liberty to man is eternal vigilance.”⁶ In the civilized world, there is no perfect vigilance against evil from the skies or via anthrax or nerve gas. When the British Parliament reconvened on October 15, 2001, it announced, with only muted protest, antiterror legislation that to some extent curbs the very freedoms that vigilance was thought to guarantee. A hardened attitude to civil liberties may prove to be the longest lasting effect of Tuesday, September 11, 2001.

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