

Chapter Five



The Role of Information and Communication in Disaster Response



Foreword

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The title of this section, “The Role of Information and Communication in Disaster Response” admittedly may not resonate as well as “The Role of the Military in the Next Catastrophe” or “Goldwater-Nichols Equivalent for the Homeland”...or some of the other topics and titles found in this work. In fact, certainly some “warfighters” put up their defenses at the mention of public affairs, public information, media relations and strategic communication. But arguably the United States Government may get the role of the military right (very possibly) and may even get the interagency piece right (perhaps less likely), but if the government doesn’t communicate what they are doing effectively they will lose in the eyes of their audiences, whoever they may be. Perception is reality to the perceiver. Historical examples abound. Expectations that are overblown, or for that matter, not communicated contribute to the problem. The inability to respond to emotive mis- and dis-information exacerbates it even more. To be sure, the government response at all levels to Hurricane Katrina was, to be kind, inadequate. However, the government’s lack of situational awareness compounded by a woefully weak, uncoordinated intergovernmental communication plan created an information vacuum filled by others who then shaped perceptions. And so Hurricane Katrina provides an interesting and important case study in consideration of the strategic value and impact of information in today’s environment. This section addresses these issues and provides recommendations and cautions in consideration of the next catastrophe which, unfortunately but inevitably, will certainly occur.

Dennis Murphy, Professor of Information Operations and Information in Warfare at the U.S. Army War College opens the section by

considering the communications gap that occurred between August 29, 2005 and September 2, 2005...a gap filled by “new” and mainstream media to the detriment of the government. His analysis is anchored in an overview of today’s information environment and how it conflicts with the paradigm of government bureaucracy and current ways of doing business.

Dr. Bob Miller, Senior Research Professor in the Information Management Resources College at the National Defense University, follows with an insightful look at the significant breakdown of critical communication infrastructure and how it contributed to a lack of situational awareness unlike any other previous disaster. Dr. Miller speaks to, among other important factors, the importance of “second responders” as a critical element of immediate infrastructure repair. Among a number of critical national security postings, he is a past Deputy Director of the Critical Infrastructure Assurance Office.

Mr. Mike Perini is the Director of Public Affairs for the North American Aerospace Defense Command and United States Northern Command at Peterson Air Force Base, Colorado. He is a retired Air Force Colonel and has held public affairs positions at all levels of the Air Force. He will pick up where Professor Murphy’s piece leaves off, on September 3rd, when General Honoré and the military began to receive significant positive coverage. Mike was responsible for the military public affairs effort in New Orleans during the Katrina response and so provides first hand lessons learned on how effective strategic communication can be planned, coordinated and executed.