

A Failure of Vision – : The Final Report of the Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to the Denver Asteroid Impact of March 9, 2007

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In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina the U.S. House of Representatives approved House Resolution 437 which created the Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina.

According to the legislation creating it, the Select Committee was charged with conducting “a full and complete investigation and study and to report its findings to the House not later than February 15, 2006, regarding-- (1) the development, coordination, and execution by local, State, and Federal authorities of emergency response plans and other activities in preparation for Hurricane Katrina; and (2) the local, State, and Federal government response to Hurricane Katrina.” The Committee’s report, A Failure of Initiative: The Final Report of the Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina was released on February 15, 2006.

Using this report as the basis, the author developed a notional report that would no doubt follow if a small asteroid were to impact with l no warning near a moderate sized U.S. city. The author believes that this type of notional approach to the political response is a realistic and useful tool to improve planning and to better educate senior government officials and members of the disaster management community to the risks associated with asteroid and comet impacts.

The lack of preparation for the Denver Asteroid Impact event should disturb all Americans. While the Select Committee believes all people involved, at all levels of government, were trying to warn of the possibility of such an event and there was no way to predict this specific event this just wasn’t good enough. It is also clear there was a complete failure in government to prepare and educate the first responder and disaster management communities of what to expect following an asteroid impact of this magnitude. Overall the first responder and disaster management communities’ response to the incident was adequate but in the first hours this response was severely hampered by an understanding of exactly what had occurred. The uncertainty whether this event was a terrorist nuclear event or a force of nature slowed initial response. This caused undo suffering of those affected and cost lives.

In this report the committee has tried to tell the story of the inadequate preparation and response. We cover a lot of territory – from the underlying science of the asteroid and comet tracking and impact prediction - to post impact scenarios and evacuations, medical care and communications. We hope our findings will prompt the changes needed to make all levels of government better prepared and better able to respond the next time.

The resolution that created the Select Committee charged us with compiling findings, not recommendations. But in reality that’s a distinction without a difference. Moving from our findings to legislative, organizational, and policy changes need not be a long or difficult journey.

We are left scratching our heads at the range of inefficiency and ineffectiveness that characterized long range government research and planning before this event. But passivity did the most damage. This failure of vision cost lives, prolonged suffering, and left all Americans justifiably concerned that our

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government is no better prepared to protect its people than it was before 9/11. In many respects, when comparing things to the “surprise attacks” on 9/11 we ask why was this a “surprise” to those in government responsible to planning for the worst case?

How can we set up a system to protect against passivity? Why do we repeatedly seem out of synch during disasters? Why do we continually seem to be one disaster behind? We have not found every fact nor contemplated all successes and failures. What we have done over four months is uncover a multitude of problems. We have learned more than enough to instruct those who will now have to craft and execute changes for the future.

We leave it to readers to determine whether the committee has done a fair and thorough job, and whether we identified and supported findings in a way that will foster change. Some predicted we would place disproportionate blame on one person or another, or that we would give some others a pass. We hope it is clear we have done neither.

We have not sought to assign individual blame. We have tried to tell the story of the government’s failure of vision to what most in government and the public used to consider to be science fiction.

Our discussions with the White House, NASA, the U.S. Air Force and the Department of Homeland Security illustrate this point. Some insist the White House and the Department of Homeland Security lacked of vision and deserved blame while others argued that it was the scientists at NASA and the U.S. Air Force that were to blame because they lacked the vision to adequately educate and inform. For an event such as the Denver Asteroid Impact, an event with no precedent in modern human history, there really is no place for blame.

While our dealings with all involved sometimes proved frustrating and difficult, we ended up with more than enough information to determine what went wrong and where with respect to adequate preparation and education things should be improved. The initial response activity was overcome by the fog of war. There is a big difference between having enough information to find institutional fault, which we do, and having information to assign individual blame, which we do not and did not attempt.

The goal is to be better prepared the next time. This was not about some individual’s failure of vision. It was about organizational and societal failures of vision. There was more than enough failure to go around:

- Acceptance and recognition by all levels of government and the public concerning the impact risk and possible consequences.
- Failure to include asteroid impact into the National Response Plan lexicon.
- A perplexing inability to learn from history, albeit geologic history.
- A complete breakdown in initial Federal, State and Local response to a perceived Weapons of Mass Destruction event and the resulting break down in command and control and information sharing that made situational awareness murky at best in the initial hours.
- Asteroid search programs that did not address the most likely impact scenario but focused on global extinction possibilities.

It is evident that much has been learned and put in practice in the disaster response community from past events like 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. The Select Committee observed few shortcomings among the response activities. The military performed a valuable role once forces were deployed; there was coordination with FEMA, the National Guard, and state officials. State-to-state emergency aid compacts were critical in accelerating relief supplies even though too many people remain unfamiliar with the overall process. Clearly the confusion in the initial hours and the initial thought at the White House that this was a nuclear incident complicated response activities.

The Select Committee acknowledges it was often torn between sympathy and incredulity, compassion and criticism. On the one hand, we understood the Denver Impact event was so big and so devastating that death and chaos were inevitable. We understood that top Federal, State, and Local officials

overlooked some steps and some needs in the hours and days after impact because they were focused on a nuclear attack response and then in assuring the public this was not a terrorist or state sponsored nuclear attack. But on the other hand, a dispassionate review made it clear that even an extraordinary lack of situational awareness could not excuse many of the shortcomings and organizational inactions evident in the documents and communications the Select Committee reviewed.

Leadership requires decisions to be made even when based on flawed and incomplete information. Risk management is a difficult task. It is clear leadership failed in this regard. Too often during the immediate response to the Denver Impact Event, sparse or conflicting information was used as an excuse for inaction rather than an imperative to step in and fill an obvious vacuum. Information passed through the maze of departmental operations centers and ironically named “coordinating” committees, losing timeliness and relevance as it was massaged and interpreted for internal audiences.

As a result, leaders became detached from the changing minute-to-minute realities of the Denver Impact event. Information translated into pre-cast bureaucratic jargon put more than geographic distance between Washington and the residents of Denver. Communications aren’t a problem when you’re only talking to yourself. This repeat is clearly a failure to learn from the past.

The Select Committee believes too many leaders failed to demonstrate the vision needed to lead. Top aides failed as well, primarily in misprioritizing their bosses’ attention and action. As has happened in the past critical time was wasted on issues of no importance to disaster response, such as winning the blame game, and waging a public relations battle about how or why no warning was issued.

We further urge public officials confronting the next major national disaster to remember disaster response must be based on knowledge, not rumors. Government at all levels again lost credibility due to inaccurate or unsubstantiated public statements made by officials regarding law and order, nuclear issues, and overall response efforts. This loss of credibility had a direct influence of those trying to place blame concerning the failure to warn. Those who understand the science appreciate the difficulties involved and accept there was no possibility for a warning for the Denver Impact event and NASA and the U.S. Air Force are not involved in a cover-up to protect reputations and budgets. The Committee understands the public’s skepticism after sitting through hours of obscuration by both NASA and the U.S. Air Force concerning their capabilities and assigned missions in this regard.

The media must also share blame. Media can and should help serve as the public’s “first informer”. In the Internet Age, Americans depend on immediate and accurate reporting, especially during times of crisis. The government does not well serve this function. But it’s clear accurate reporting was among the Denver Impact events many victims. The stories of nuclear attack at best were unsubstantiated, at worst simply false. And that’s too bad, because this event needed no exaggeration.

As discussed in our report, widely-distributed uncorroborated rumors caused unnecessary resources to be deployed and necessary resources to be delayed, and important time and energy wasted, chasing down the imaginary. Already traumatized people in Denver and elsewhere were further panicked. The sensational accounts delayed rescue and evacuation efforts already hampered by the scope of the event.

The relevant “elected officials,” we are sure, would contest that. In fact they did, in testimony before the Select Committee. But the facts and the public perception of what was stressed is what are important here. The failure of vision was also a failure of empathy, a myopia to the need to reach more people on their own terms.

Americans deserve more than waiting for the inevitable or the state of nature after disaster strikes. With this report we have tried to identify where and why lack of vision and chaos ensued, so that even an event like the Denver Asteroid Impact can be met with more order, more urgency, more coordination, and more vision.