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Dealing with annihilation

By Richard W. Rahn

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At some point, it is almost certain that some group will set off one or more nuclear devices or other weapons of mass destruction in major cities of the U.S., such as New York, killing tens or hundreds of thousands, or even millions. How will we, as a nation, deal with it? How will we protect our economy and our liberties?

In 2006, Fred Ikle, former undersecretary of defense for policy (under President Reagan) and former director of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, wrote an extremely important and readable book, "Annihilation from Within," that requires attention. Dr. Ikle is a brilliant, serious man who understands science and global political forces. He notes: "Science makes cumulative discoveries and hence can advance at an accelerating rate. It has acquired an inner dynamic of progress that is nearly self-sustaining. But the sphere of government and international affairs is marked by alternating periods of advance and decline, of gains and losses."

As more nations develop nuclear programs, Dr. Ikle explains: "the control of national governments over nuclear materials and bombs is far from secure ... all too soon, we must expect these weapons to be acquired by doomsday cults, anarchists, and terrorist gangs."

In the early 1990s, I was an economic adviser to the Russian government, and was solicited by former Soviet government officials to buy destructive conventional weapons. Some would sell to the highest bidder, whether the U.S. government or some unsavory group. I was aware that many nuclear materials were not stored under secure conditions. The U.S. and other NATO members were unable to acquire everything that was for sale and undoubtedly included some nuclear materials. The open question is who got them and where are they now?

Dr. Ikle argues that our military planners must give more thought to averting annihilation from within, from nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction. But even if we were better prepared, the chances of catching everyone who has or will develop the capability to set off such devices is small, given that even a nuclear device could be set off by as few as two persons.

The response of government units, and particularly Congress, to recent disasters — September 11, hurricane Katrina, and the Minneapolis bridge collapse — gives even greater concern. Notwithstanding the heroic efforts of the firefighters, police and individual citizens, there was a lack of serious thought and preparation to these crises by many of the political class.

Congress usually throws other people's money at emergencies, ignoring whether the money will be effectively spent and what precedents it will establish. After September 11, Congress voted very generous payments to the surviving family members. This seemed like a nice thing to do (and it partially kept the trial lawyers at bay). Our nation could afford it since there were only a few thousand victims, but what happens if a hundred thousand or a million are killed in a terrorist attack? We established the precedent of generous payments, but in a large-scale attack the country could not afford such generosity without causing severe economic damage.

Hurricane Katrina has been a failure at all levels of government, with some of the relief spent trying to preserve the status quo (a major part of the problem in the first place). Why should the taxpayers in West Virginia and Florida be held partially liable for rebuilding the Minneapolis bridge? After all, Minnesota is a prosperous state, and should not the local users pay for it?

We have a national energy problem; but Congress, demonstrating its ignorance of both science and economics, has consistently made the wrong choices to solve it. The mandated increase in ethanol use requires diverting huge amounts of food cropland, driving up food prices, and the destruction of hundreds of thousands of acres of woodland that protects wildlife. Opening a couple of thousand acres in Alaska and off-shore areas for drilling in the U.S. would obtain the same amount of fuel without destroying cropland and killing wildlife.

If we wait until catastrophe occurs, the administration and Congress will almost certainly make the wrong decisions, which will greatly damage our economy and unnecessarily diminish our liberties. Isn't that exactly what the terrorists want? For instance, if a nuclear device is smuggled into the U.S. in a cargo container, Congress would probably vote to prohibit containers from coming in, rather than just improving inspection sampling. This would shut down much of the U.S. and international trade, causing a global economic depression and more damage than the original attack.

What should be done? The Department of Homeland Security is a massive and unmanageable bureaucracy without adequate plans. What we need are carefully thought-out procedures, without additional bureaucracy. The administration, after consulting with Congress, should appoint a commission of knowledgeable, serious people, without partisan agendas, like Fred Ikle, to look at likely terrorist scenarios and then prepare plans for a rational economic and civil recovery to be

implemented by existing agencies immediately after the attack, rather than allowing the emotions of the moment make matters worse.

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