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Of Black Swans and Ostriches

The phrase "black swan event" was coined by Nassim Taleb, author of “The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable” published in 2007. Black Swan has been thrown around to describe the current pandemic. Taleb himself refutes this in a recent Bloomberg interview: “It was not a black swan. This was a white swan.” While we could split hairs over the black swan-ness of the current global pandemic, let’s cut to the chase: how can we better adapt and implement the National Response Framework (NRF)—a thoughtful instrument forged in the fires of past devastations—to fit extreme events like the current pandemic?

When we finally have the luxury of soaking in a good hotwash, how can we convert the lessons learned—and there will be many—into a new reality of best practice standards.

A decade ago, as participant in one of those pandemic tabletops in the Baltimore-Washington

region, I remember discussions about devastating consequences. They were always followed up with two points in particular:

Even with likely federal assistance, we (local/regional governments, nonprofits, etc.) do not have the money or resources to devote to preparedness for every possible disaster. (Which, not surprisingly, was one of the key findings in 2019's Crimson Contagion exercise)

Our disaster risk assessment, understandably, gave this worst case scenario a low probability score and, thus, less focus for the limited resources to address its cataclysmic demands.

Yes. I know. Short sighted. Nothing like hindsight to put things into proper perspective.

As always, it comes down to a matter of money. You do your risk assessment, you allocate limited resources to the likeliest scenarios. Period. At least, that's what we used to do it.

Sadly, this was more of an elephant-sized swan in the room, one which we all hoped and prayed would never land in our laps. We could envision it. We knew it was a possibility. However, even in this great and wealthy nation, we did not—do not—have the capability to defend against it. Not the way we battle the annual hurricanes, floods, and tornadoes.

Nor is a pandemic (and it could be much worse than COVID-19) the only cataclysmic event that should cause planners to climb out of the box. Asteroid impacts, supervolcanic eruptions, geomagnetic storms, and the myriad of potential terrorist attacks are only a few of the armada of black swans capable of turning the best planners into head-in-the-sand ostriches.

Where do we draw the line?

All that said, instead of lamenting, "Oh, well. We'll concentrate on the lesser, likelier catastrophes," for future planning, let's summon the mental fortitude and financial belt tightening to realistically address the improbable scenarios with out-of-the-box thinking. Thinking which so many are rushing frantically to do now. Let's learn from the daily barrage of real-time examples—bombarding us in the news and clogging our emergency operations centers—to take note of the bottlenecks and problem areas. One of my own pro-bono focus areas has been on the powerful force of spontaneous, unaffiliated volunteers (SUVs) that unfailingly deluge the system in every disaster, and equally unfailingly overload our traditional methods to connect them with the tremendous needs which they could be meeting. Then, when we can finally catch our collective breaths, we can start planning for a braver, bolder, more streamlined future—a future we could never have envisioned a few months ago.

Let's not lose the current momentum as we finally come out of this devastating period. We'll need to act fast, before our memories and bodies slip into comfortable old ways and, once again, cold feet rule. Far better to embrace the swans of all colors in our planning phase, rather than in the middle of the next mega-event.

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