

## **The 9/11 Commission as an Incident Debriefing**

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Often in the aftermath of a disaster, there is an incident debriefing. Such a debriefing normally involves those who were directly involved in managing disaster response and recovery efforts. It can also involve those who may have been involved in disaster prevention and mitigation efforts or who will be in the future. In a way, the 9/11 Commission is engaged in an incident debriefing writ large.

An incident debriefing can be helpful in identifying lessons that can be learned from the disaster, how and why it happened, how it might have been prevented, how the effects might have been mitigated, and how efforts to respond to and recover from it might have been improved.

Incident debriefings can result in a great deal of useful learning that can then be applied to current and future disaster prevention, mitigation, response, and recovery efforts.

Incident debriefings can also be the occasion of strife, even internecine warfare and vitriolic attacks on the part of those who had (are deemed to have had) any part in the disaster. Incident debriefings can be a battleground involving direct and indirect victims and those whom they would hold responsible. This can even include those who were not responsible for what happened. When an incident debriefing turns toxic, little learning may take place and future efforts to prevent or address disasters can even be undermined.

If all those affected in any way in a disaster, or in this case the 9/11 attacks, were in some way traumatized as a result of the attacks, the incident debriefing would be apt to reflect certain psychological symptoms. While these symptoms may differ markedly among victims, first and second responders, others in roles of public responsibility, and the public in general, these symptoms may nonetheless persist and affect in discernible ways the conduct of those involved in the debriefing. It can also affect their capacity for assimilating lessons that could be learned. The 9/11 debriefing process that is currently going on in the hearings of the 9/11 Commission is no exception. The behaviors that are evident reflect the widest possible array of unaddressed and unresolved psychological symptoms that typically follow a traumatic shock. These include anger, guilt, and anxiety, denial, powerlessness, and inability to face up to reality.

One psychological symptom is particularly evident in the current 9/11 debriefing process: the apparent inability to realistically assess who was responsible for the

attacks that occurred: the persons to blame are none other than those who perpetrated the heinous attacks.

Simplistic understanding of the nature of governmental decisionmaking and policymaking processes is widespread among those who have not been in roles of responsibility in government. Even those in roles of responsibility can have very different views concerning these processes. Few people outside of government have any idea of the endless amount of information concerning innumerable matters of importance that those in government need to address.

And who among us, except perhaps some science fiction writer, ever imagined that attacks as horrific as those that occurred on 9/11 could ever have occurred anywhere, let alone on American soil?

Why is it apparently so difficult for many people to come to terms with the fact that the events of 9/11 have forever changed the world? Suicidal/homicidal terrorists have committed these crimes against humanity. Their actions have implications not only for the future of America, but of the future of humankind. These are not easy realizations to live with.

One reason that it may be difficult for many to come to terms with the change in the world since 9/11 is that there is in effect nothing that can ultimately be done that will guarantee 100% that such terrorist actions will not occur again in the future.

One way to deal with this new reality is to deny it pure and simply and to turn one's attention to the false hope that surely such acts could have been prevented and surely they can be prevented in the future. The person who is in denial wants fervently to believe that we can get the upper hand over this new brand of suicidal/homicidal terrorism. If we could not, then we would be living in a world that is on the brink of chaos or in a state of chaos and the very future of civilization would be in jeopardy. Is it any wonder that so many people are having a difficult time coming to grips with such a reality? There is no comfort in such a perception. Making believe that it is not true, does not make it go away. Neither does focusing on very limited and narrowly circumscribed aspects of the challenges before us.

There are those who avoid coming to terms with reality by submerging themselves in activity. They invest this activity with meaning; the meaning gives a sense of purpose where a sense of purpose was lacking. They may tenaciously hold on to a new sense of purpose to right the wrongs that they feel have befallen them, to place blame for those wrongs, to vilify the wrongdoers, and to make sure that such wrongs never occur again. They may submerge themselves in sorting out the historical record. They may focus narrowly on responses to events that might occur in the future. The problem with these approaches is that those who are taking them are overlooking the true nature of

the problem: there are suicidal/homicidal terrorists in the world that will stop at nothing to kill anyone who disagrees with them. The problem with many of these approaches is that by focusing on the past, energy, attention, and resources are not being directed at addressing the challenges before us.

Those to blame for the heinous attacks of 9/11 are the perpetrators of the acts. Vilifying anyone else is to misplace the responsibility for these actions.

Believing that it is possible to ensure that no terrorist actions will ever occur again is nothing less than wishful thinking. Certainly we must do everything we can to make sure that terrorist attacks do not occur again, but this does not mean that we can be 100% certain they will not occur again.

The incident debriefing process that we are engaged in as a nation however vitriolic and toxic it may be, however far removed it may be from reality, may nonetheless result in waking many people up and help us to focus on what we can and should be doing to address the threats and challenges posed by this new brand of suicidal/homicidal terrorism.

Shortly after 9/11, a psychologist told me about a patient of his who had suffered from post traumatic shock syndrome long before 9/11. I asked him how his patient had reacted to 9/11. He said his patient had told him, "Now everyone knows how I feel."

We have all been through a traumatic event. The 9/11 Commission hearings have revealed that the symptoms of post traumatic shock syndrome are extremely widespread. These symptoms have become particularly apparent in recent Commission hearings. Those in the helping professions could do much to help shed light on the behavior that we are seeing, nurture needed self understanding and compassion for what people are going through, and contribute their efforts to the healing process. The statesmanship of our leaders can also do much to aid the healing process and focus us on productive pursuits. Instead of looking backward and trying to ascribe blame to those who had nothing to do with perpetrating the crimes that have occurred against humanity, we need to pull together as one and do all we can to combat this new brand of terrorism that threatens the very future of humankind. We need to avoid fixating on limited aspects of the overall challenges that we face. We need instead to bring as much understanding, knowledge, common sense, and good will as possible to our efforts to address the monumental challenges facing us.

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