

3Qs: Boston shows compassion, resiliency in face of tragedy

April 19 2013



The community's rapid response to the Boston Marathon bombings on Monday afternoon "shows the world how a tragedy can be met with competence and compassion," said Stephen Flynn, an expert in community resilience and critical infrastructure protection. Credit: Thinkstock

Twin bombings at the Boston Marathon on Monday afternoon killed three spectators and left scores more injured. In the last 24 hours, news agencies have reported that authorities believe security video footage shows a potential suspect or suspects. Stephen Flynn is the founding co-

director of Northeastern's George J. Kostas Research Institute for Homeland Security and an expert in community resilience and critical infrastructure protection with a faculty appointment in the Department of Political Science. In spite of the dearth of clues and rampant uncertainty, the community's rapid response to the attack, he said, "shows the world how a tragedy can be met with competence and compassion."

How would you characterize the attack at the Boston Marathon? Is it symptomatic of a growing trend? Could it have been predicted or prevented?

First, we don't know if the attack at the Boston Marathon was an act of a maniacal killer or killers or an attack by a terrorist group with an agenda. If it turns out to be the latter, it is consistent with a trend toward acts of terrorism involving relatively small numbers of individuals and crude weapons. The profile of a terrorist has become increasingly blurred as the Internet has become a tool for [radicalization](#), allowing the ranks to be filled by those who are drawn to radical causes from the privacy of their own homes. Some of the newest operatives are drawn from Western nations, with the only common denominator being a newfound hatred for their native or adopted country; a degree of dangerous malleability; and a religious fervor justifying or legitimizing violence that impels these very impressionable and perhaps easily influenced individuals toward potentially highly lethal acts of violence.

These smaller-scale attacks present a formidable challenge for intelligence and law-enforcement agencies. Sophisticated attacks such as those carried out in New York and Washington, D.C., on Sept. 11, 2001, turn out to be more susceptible to being detected and intercepted than smaller-scale attacks that are planned and executed locally. This is because they require a group of operatives working as a team that is

supported by ongoing communication with those overseeing the planning. To boost the prospect of a successful attack, operatives must conduct surveillance and rehearsals. Money, identification documents, safe houses for operatives, and other logistical needs have to be supported. All this focused effort and activity, along with the time it takes to organize a major attack, creates opportunities for detection and interception by intelligence and law-enforcement officials.

Less sophisticated attacks, on the other hand, particularly those being conducted by homegrown operatives and lone wolves—or what terrorism expert Brian Jenkins more appropriately refers to as "stray dogs"—are almost impossible to prevent. In the May 2010 bombing attempt on Times Square, it was a sidewalk T-shirt vendor, not the NYPD patrolman sitting in a squad car directly across the street, who sounded the alarm about Faisal Shahzad's explosive-laden SUV. Shahzad was not in any federal or NYPD database that identified him as a suspected terrorist.

How would you describe Boston's response to the attack?

In the community's response to the attack, Boston has shown the world how tragedy can be met with competence and compassion. As President Barack Obama noted: "Boston is a tough and resilient town. So are its people. I'm supremely confident that Bostonians will pull together, take care of each other, and move forward as one proud city."

Meeting attacks with resilience is exactly how Americans need to respond to the terrorism. Terrorism's primary appeal for an adversary is its potential to generate a reaction by the targeted society that is costly, disruptive, and self-destructive. When an attack is met with fearlessness, selflessness, and competence, it fails. The British and Israelis have

learned and practice this. Shortly after the attack, I received a note from an Israeli friend who reminded me that "the most effective way to cope and to beat terror is to return as fast as you can to routine. That takes the stinger from its goal."

What we have seen in the aftermath of the bombing is a truism about any major disaster—the first responders are always bystanders, reinforced by emergency responders at the local level. The United States is a powerful country and it is helpful in dealing with many of the world's dangers to have a second-to-none military. But in the critical seconds and minutes after a disaster strikes, it is your family members, neighbors, perfect strangers, and local public safety personnel that will often spell the difference between life and death. In dealing with the risk of terrorism, security requires more of a bottom-up approach than a top-down one. We got this wrong after the attacks on 9/11. How Bostonians have responded to the attacks on Patriots Day provides a teachable moment of how to do it right.

Given how important resilience is in responding to terrorism, what role can people play individually and collectively to become more resilient?

Ultimately, resilience is the capacity to be strong in the face of adversity by being able to withstand, rapidly respond and recover, and adapt to risk. As a stepping-off point, it requires us to be risk-literate. By this I mean understanding the distinction between real and imagined risks and what reasonable measures can be taken to manage these risks.

It turns out that the more probable and often consequential hazards we face arise from accidents and natural disasters. So we should not fixate on the much lower probability threat of terrorist attacks, but instead become better prepared for storms like Hurricane Sandy.

The good news is that the same skills you need to deal with the more familiar dangers from Mother Nature or accidents—knowledge of first aid, having a few days of supplies in your home, and having a plan to evacuate and reconnect with your family should your home become unsafe—will serve you and your community well in the event of a terrorist incident. The bottom line is that it is within our individual and collective powers to not succumb to fear. We need to embrace the fact that danger is a fact of life, but we have enormous capabilities individually and collectively to manage the dangers posed by the 21st century.

Provided by Northeastern University

Citation: 3Qs: Boston shows compassion, resiliency in face of tragedy (2013, April 19) retrieved 26 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2013-04-3qs-boston-compassion-resiliency-tragedy.html>

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