



Global Resilience Institute
at Northeastern University

Resilience Expert Thought Piece

Reflecting on 9/11 and the Resilience Imperative

by Stephen E. Flynn

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Reflecting on 9/11 and the Resilience Imperative

At 8:35 AM on September 11, 2001, my commuter train arrived at Grand Central Station in New York City. I reached my office on Park Avenue just moments after the first plane had struck the North Tower of the World Trade Center. My office neighbor at the Council on Foreign Relations had her television on and she called me over. Together we watched as the second plane flew into the South Tower at 9:03 AM and erupted into a ball of fire. At that searing moment, I said aloud, “Well, here it is.”

In the prior two years, I had been supporting a U.S. Commission that was charged with assessing America’s national security challenges at the dawn of the new millennium. The central task of this bipartisan commission, led by former Senators Gary Hart and Warren Rudman, was to provide recommendations on how best to address those challenges. *The final report* was released in January 2001, outlining as a core finding that a direct attack on American citizens on American soil by terrorists, potentially with a weapon of mass destruction, was likely. The Hart-Rudman Commission also concluded that the United States was not organized or adequately preparing for managing this risk.

Watching the Twin Towers collapse on 9/11, I shared with so many of my fellow Americans the profound sense of grief and anger at the tragic loss of so many innocent lives. But sadly, I was not shocked that it had happened. What I primarily felt was a sense of frustration that more could have been done and should have been done to not just prevent such an attack, but to help Americans to be better prepared in responding to it and recovering from it.

On 9/11, Al-Qaeda did not import a weapon of mass destruction to attack the United States. Instead, they transformed four U.S. passenger airliners into such weapons. The two planes that struck the Twin Towers, American Airlines Flight 11 and United Airlines Flight 175, originated in Boston. The 9/11 attacks made

clear that America’s security threats cannot be neatly divided between those that are foreign and domestic. Nor do they lend themselves to a tidy division of labor where the U.S. military fights the nation’s battles beyond our nation’s shores, and federal, state, and local law enforcement shoulder the responsibility of protecting the U.S. homeland. 9/11 highlighted the imperative for Americans to take greater collective responsibility for looking out for the safety and well-being of each other in the face of risks that that we can’t always prevent. In the face of catastrophic events, whether they are man-made such as major terrorist attacks or naturally-occurring such as a pandemic or hurricane, there are never going to be enough professionals to go around. The true first-responders are rarely firefighters, paramedics, or police officers. Instead, they are almost always a neighbor, bystander, or family member.

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An important but often overlooked lesson from 9/11 is that dealing with the risk of disasters requires the means to capably respond and quickly recover. Inevitably, in a free and open society, some terrorist attacks will happen. Of course, when it comes to earthquakes, tornados, and storm surge, while these hazards can be mitigated, there is no way that they can be prevented. We all need to embrace the fact that disasters are not rare and unknowable events, but instead are increasingly commonplace risks to our lives and way of life. There are actions we can and must take to bolster our resilience at the individual, family, community, and societal levels.

During World War II, the British people embraced the ethos of, “Keep Calm and Carry On” in the face of the Nazi Luftwaffe’s aerial bombings on London and other English cities. This is the essence of resilience which can be an important deterrent for adversaries who seek to target the U.S. homeland. If we are successful as a society at being ready to deal with the consequences of terrorism and other disasters, to include ably responding to those who have been injured, and then quickly returning to normal, terrorism will be less consequential.

Immediately following the 9/11 attacks, New Yorkers were demonstrating their resilience. As the towers came down, people fled in all directions, with many heading south where they found themselves stuck between the wreckage and debris of the World Trade Center site to the north, and water to the east, west, and south. An armada of ferry boats, tugboats, and party boats came together with a call from Michael Day, then a Coast Guard Lieutenant, that “all available boats” come to their rescue. Working together, New Yorkers found themselves participating in the largest boatlift in world history – even bigger than the Dunkirk evacuation of 1940 when 338,000 British and French troops were rescued by naval and civilian vessels over the course of 8 days. On 9/11, nearly 500,000 New Yorkers were evacuated from lower Manhattan – it took just 8 hours.

For the 10th Anniversary of 9/11, I worked with my colleague Sean Burke, award-winning documentary filmmaker Eddie Rosenstein, and the actor Tom Hanks as narrator, with sponsorship from Adrienne Arsht, in writing and producing [Boatlift: An Untold Tale of 9/11 Resilience](#) which now has over 12.5 million views on YouTube. The short film was released at the main anniversary event in Washington that I organized with [Voices of September 11th](#), the leading organization for the survivors of the 9/11 attacks and their families. The themes of the 9/11 Tenth Anniversary Summit were Remembrance, Renewal, and Resilience and our ambitious goal was to catalyze a national movement to foster community and national resilience in the face of future crises.

Reflecting back on the events of September 11, 2001 and on today’s headlines about the disastrous conclusion of the two-decade war in Afghanistan, it is not hard to imagine how different things would be today if as a nation we had prioritized investing in building national resilience over engaging in the costly and ultimately failed wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Post-9/11, the consensus in Washington was that the only way to defeat terrorism was to go on the offense and take the battle to the enemy. At that time, I pushed back. As Director of a blue-ribbon task force convened by the Council on Foreign Relations and co-chaired again by Senators Hart and Rudman, we concluded one year after 9/11 that [America was still unprepared and still in danger](#). I spent subsequent years making what would seem to be the self-evident case that the best defense almost always involves investing in a good defense and not just relying on offense.

If over the past 20 years Americans had focused on making the critical foundations of our society less vulnerable to not just acts of terrorism, but the destructive and even more probable risks of pandemics, hurricanes, and wildfires, wouldn’t we be in a much better place? Imagine if we had invested in efforts to strengthen the kind of social capital that is the essence of community resilience. If we had done this, we would have ended up demonstrating to the world an unwavering commitment to bolstering America’s greatest asset, which is not our second-to-none military. Our greatest strength has been our determination to strive to be true to our founding principles in building a most just, equitable and prosperous society, however

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According to Brown University's *Costs of War* project, the non-homeland security cost of the U.S. War on Terror since 9/11 has been \$5.4 trillion. Since that number is almost impossible to wrap your mind around, I like to break it down in this way. \$5.4 trillion translates into spending \$30m every hour, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, for 20 years. By way of contrast, the total FEMA budget for hazard mitigation assistance grants in 2019 was \$410m – or roughly equivalent to what was spent in one-half a day over a period of 7,300 days on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Think about the improvements in infrastructure and community resilience we could have been making had we had not instead placed nearly all of our eggs in the “take-the-battle-to-the-enemy” basket!

As I pen this essay, Hurricane Ida has left a path of destruction across Louisiana on the 16th Anniversary of when Hurricane Katrina nearly drowned the entire city of New Orleans. With climate change, these extreme weather events are becoming more frequent and intense. The COVID-19 pandemic also continues to rage, with over a 1,000 new American deaths each day – the fatality equivalent of a 9/11 attack every 3 days. As was the case on 9/11 and now with COVID-19, there are things we can and should be doing to be better prepared to manage these events so that they are not nearly as destructive and disruptive.

Resilience is the imperative of our time!

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About the Author

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Dr. Stephen Flynn is the Founding Director of the Global Resilience Institute at Northeastern University where he leads a major university-wide research initiative to inform and advance societal resilience in the face of growing human-made and naturally-occurring turbulence. At Northeastern, he is also Professor of Political Science with faculty affiliations in the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering and the School of Public Policy & Urban Affairs.



Dr. Flynn is recognized as one of the world's leading experts on critical infrastructure and supply chain security and resilience. He is co-author of the textbook, *Critical Infrastructures Resilience: Policy and Engineering Principles* (Routledge, 2018) and has led teams in conducting post-disaster infrastructure resilience assessments, initially with support from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, and then from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. In 2014, Flynn was appointed by the Secretary of Homeland Security to serve as a member of the Homeland Security Science and Technology Advisory Council (HSSTAC). He also serves as chair of the Massachusetts Port Authority (Massport) Security Advisory Committee. Additionally, he holds research affiliations with the Wharton School's Risk Management and Decision Processes Center, and the Earth Institute at Columbia University. He previously served as Founding Co-Director of the George J. Kostas Research Institute for Homeland Security at Northeastern University. Dr. Flynn is also the principal for Stephen E. Flynn Associates LLC, where he provides independent advisory services on improving critical infrastructure security and resilience.

Before joining the faculty at Northeastern University in 2011, Dr. Flynn served as President of the Center for National Policy. Prior to that he spent a decade as a senior fellow for National Security Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations.

Prior to September 11, 2001, Dr. Flynn served as an expert advisor to U.S. Commission on National Security (Hart-Rudman Commission), and following the 9/11 attacks he was the executive director of a blue-ribbon Council on Foreign Relations homeland security task force, again co-led by former Senators Gary Hart and Warren Rudman. He served as the principal advisor to the bipartisan Congressional Port Security Caucus, advised the Bush Administration on maritime and homeland security issues, and after the November 2008 election of President Barack Obama, served as the lead policy advisor on homeland security as a part of the presidential transition team. From 2003-2010 he served as a member of the National Research Council's Marine Board.

About the Global Resilience Institute

Based at Northeastern University in Boston, MA, the Global Resilience Institute's (GRI) research and educational mission is to develop and deploy practical and innovative tools, applications, and skills that drive social and technical changes, which strengthen the capacity of individuals, communities, systems, and networks to adapt to an increasingly turbulent world. Launched in 2017, GRI is the world's first university-wide institute to respond to the resilience imperative. Today, GRI undertakes multi-disciplinary resilience research and education efforts that draw on the latest findings from network science, health sciences, coastal and urban sustainability, engineering, cybersecurity and privacy, social and behavioral sciences, public policy, urban affairs, business, law, game design, architecture, and geospatial analysis. GRI works in close partnership with industry, government, communities, and non-governmental organizations, as well as engages in external outreach to inform, empower, and scale bottom-up efforts that contribute to individual and collective resilience.

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