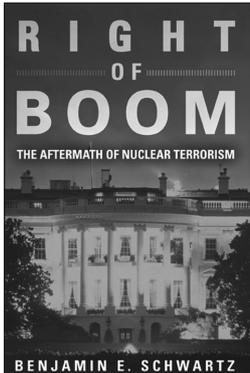


Book Review



Right of Boom: The Aftermath of Nuclear Terrorism

Benjamin E. Schwartz

The Overlook Press, New York, NY, 2015, 237 pp.

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Right of Boom: The Aftermath of Nuclear Terrorism provides a glimpse of the issues associated with responding to a nuclear terrorist attack, in this case, the detonation of a small nuclear weapon in Washington, D.C. Against this background, Benjamin Schwartz describes the inherent danger of a world with nuclear-armed states (some which may not have the will or capability to appropriately secure such weapons) and new types of terror threats, the lessons learned in nuclear deterrence and counter terrorism, the global impact of a nuclear terror attack, and the “red lines” that would forever change as a result. What emerges is a bleak picture of potential political and policy consequences of both the terror attack and the American response.

In the aftermath of a nuclear terrorist attack on the most important political capital in the world, the confusion, the desire for attribution and retaliation coupled together with the overarching question, “How did this happen?” combine to produce the environment that political leaders would face. At first glance, the author posits, the response to such an event seems straightforward: The U.S. undergoes a nuclear attack, and the U.S. responds in kind. However, the follow-on questions reveal that things are not nearly so simple: From where did the weapon come? In a terror attack in which attribution is not certain, against whom do national leaders direct a response?

The history of international nuclear agreements, from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) program are all predicated on international relationships that operated at the nation-state level. However, the attack in question reveals that these state-to-state agreements may no longer be sufficient in the face of nuclear terrorism. The proliferation of nuclear knowledge and technology now makes the nuclear terror threat plausible. Hence, Schwartz argues, “we are more vulnerable to nuclear terrorism than at any time since the dawn of the nuclear age.”

Could an attack like this actually happen? On the one hand, Schwartz notes legitimate reasons for skepticism. After all, since 9-11, there have been no societally significant terror attacks and no nuclear terror attacks. Moreover, the continual crying of “wolves at the door” by national leaders only makes the lack of terrorist success more pronounced. The failure of intelligence regarding WMD threats—leading to the Global War on Terror—has also cast a pall over the intelligence community’s predictive powers. On the other hand, Schwartz also notes that neither past intelligence failures nor

the absence of a nuclear terrorist attack changes the fact that the proliferation of knowledge and technology—especially dual-use technology—increases the threat of nuclear terrorism. Access to the knowledge necessary for nuclear proliferation has itself proliferated since World War II. Even if the hardest part of developing a nuclear weapon is acquiring fissile material, the plans for simple weapon systems can now be found with a quick internet search. Hence, Schwartz argues that, while the threat of thermonuclear war recedes into history, a new threat—like that of the detonation of a small nuclear weapon in a city such as Washington, D.C.—is actually growing. The breakup of the former USSR states created one of the most dangerous situations for the “loose nuke” phenomenon. While CTR provided one of the most successful bi-lateral programs to protect against that possible threat, nations, such as Pakistan or North Korea, outside the scope of CTR may provide material support to terror organizations, or they may simply have insufficient control over their nuclear materials.

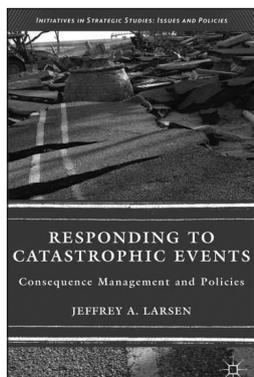
In light of these complexities, the question naturally, but uncomfortably, arises as to the ongoing role of nuclear deterrence. The working assumption has been that, when faced with total annihilation between two warring states, each opponent may be deterred from nuclear weapons employment. Although this very model arguably worked well for 60 years between the USSR and the United States, Schwartz highlights that the present nuclear world is faced with a different problem: How does a nation-state deter a stateless organization? For that matter, how does a nuclear nation-state deter even a non-nuclear nation-state committed to the support of nuclear terrorists? As a testament to such, since World War II, four out of the five NPT nuclear powers has “lost” a war to a non-nuclear foe without ever using nuclear weapons.

In the immediate aftermath of a nuclear terror attack in the United States, the political need to demonstrate control, resolve and to hold someone accountable will be intense. Yet, how does the U.S. determine what objectives to pursue? It is simple to say, “Go kill the terrorists!” It is another to comply with that statement. Individual targets in multiple nations with multiple governments involved do not necessarily constitute an effective counter-terrorism program. How does the U.S. build an international coalition when political interests diverge and intelligence agencies have different opinions about governmental complicity? How does it create a coalition of allied governments whose very citizens may be involved? How does it counter terrorism when “terrorism” itself is an amorphous concept? On this account, Schwartz provides historical examples that run from the Comanche to the United States’ current fight with Al Qaeda and its affiliates. Countering terrorism will be the battle of the future; it will not be an easy one—particularly if it acquires a nuclear dimension.

A nuclear terror attack on the United States will affect more than the U.S. It will re-write the international legal system. There may still be treaties and agreements, but after a nuclear weapon detonates, they may simply be pieces of paper. Establishing new arrangements and treaties will have to follow. The idea that what happens within the borders of another nation-state is only that nation-state’s business will be robustly challenged. The risk is simply too great to trust that another government would even be capable of keeping its nuclear issues within its borders. The Peace of Westphalia may simply fade away. Further, the people of the United States could be affected by unprecedentedly intrusive surveillance of goods, materials, and information being imported and exported. In this environment, it is possible that the Baruch plan—or a reasonable facsimile—may be pursued with broader support than it originally had. In the end, Schwartz suggests, an event like this would do more to change the global security calculus than did 9-11.

The advances in technology, the free flow of information coupled with the rise in extremism has made the world a more dangerous place than it used to be. Technologies like additive manufacturing make the possibility of nuclear proliferation greater than ever. The challenge of acquiring fissile material remains the greatest obstacle to overcome, yet the possibility exists that it will be achieved by a non-state actor. Indeed, what happens if the question moves from being “If?” to “When?”

In sum, *Right of Boom* represents a thoughtful but accessible treatment of a complex subject, particularly for one who is uninitiated in the subject. While the historical presentation it contains may seem at times to outweigh the specific idea of “right of boom”, it provides necessary context in support of the central theme. It is a particularly valuable reference for students of interagency operations. **IAJ**



Responding to Catastrophic Events: Consequence Management and Policies

Edited by Jeffrey A Larsen

Initiatives in Strategic Studies Series, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, NY, 2013, 276 pp.

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“Catastrophic events”, particularly as the term gets applied to weapons of mass destruction events, are, curious as it may seem, easy to dismiss as someone else’s problem in the big, lumbering federal bureaucracy. This is so because the events thus characterized are so overwhelming that they befuddle the imagination (and certainly would exhaust the resources) of any one agency that sought to deal with them. However, it is this fact which, more than any other, makes the response to catastrophic events the quintessential interagency challenge. The present anthology assembles the work of some of America’s most insightful public servants and clearly demonstrates that every organ of government at every level—tribal, local, state, and federal—is remiss if it fails to ask the question, “What is my role when the unthinkable happens?” and “With whom should I be talking as I imagine the unthinkable?”

Editor Jeffrey A. Larsen reminds us that when the unthinkable happens, it always happens somewhere: “All disasters are local.” Nevertheless, he also notes that “From the local perspective, federal resources often seem to arrive too late and leave too early.” While this is largely perceptual and part of that perception is unavoidable when people are suffering catastrophic loss, it is nevertheless the case that such perceptions, just like catastrophes themselves, must be managed if the public is to have and retain confidence in the proposition that, when all the local, familiar agencies have been overwhelmed, government will still be there to restore public order and function.

Part I examines the immediate aspects of a coordinated response: The first of these requires obtaining a proper degree of situational awareness, i.e., one that correctly scopes the problem, enables an effective, unstymied response, and discerns larger implications. However, as author James J. Wirtz notes, “larger implications” may arise in unexpected ways: anthrax in the food supply, the collapse of a major dam, or a chemical release in an urban setting. None of these