

Weapons of Mass Destruction: Current Questions for the Interagency

by **John Mark Mattox**

Nothing is simple about weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The issues they raise are of enormous consequence by any imaginable measure; however, it is easy to lose sight of the magnitude of these issues for several reasons:

- The U.S. has never experienced a nuclear attack, and the last nuclear attack, August 9, 1945, in Nagasaki, Japan, is but a dim memory. George Weller, the first foreign reporter to enter Nagasaki following the attack, described it this way: “In swaybacked or flattened skeletons of the Mitsubishi arms plants is revealed what the atomic bomb can do to steel and stone, but what the riven atom can do against human flesh and bone lies hidden in two hospitals of downtown Nagasaki.”¹
- The U.S. has never undergone a chemical attack of the kind experienced in Belgium during World War I. It is hard for Americans to relate to British Lance Sergeant Elmer Cotton’s diary description of the effects of chlorine gas: “It produces a flooding of the lungs—it is an equivalent death to drowning only on dry land. The effects are these: a splitting headache & terrific thirst (to drink water is instant death), a knife edge of pain in the lungs [and] the coughing up of a greenish froth off the...lungs and stomach [sic] ending finally in insensibility and death—the colour of the skin from white turns a greenish black or yellow, the tongue protrudes & the eyes assume a glassy stare—it is a fiendish death to die.”²
- The U.S. has never undergone a biological attack that killed more than a half-dozen.

“Massive destruction”—whether the result of WMD or something else—is simply a concept that is difficult for Americans to get their minds around. They may have read in history books about massive numbers of deaths from the Black Death in 14th-century Europe, the 1942–1943 Battle of Stalingrad, or more recently, the 1984 Bhopal, India, Union Carbide chemical plant disaster, but in

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reality, the broad ranges of numbers reported killed in these events are so imprecise that we cannot even pin down what “massive” really means when it comes to the loss of human life—not to mention losses of other kinds. Given the invitation to reflect seriously on what “massive destruction” means, the average lay person would probably find such an invitation no less than revolting. Nevertheless, government, if it is to take seriously the conventional wisdom that its first obligation is to protect its own citizens, must think about it. Moreover, no single agency of government can successfully undertake the task. It is truly an interagency effort.

This special issue of the *InterAgency Journal* presents a variety of topics that are timely for engagement by the interagency:

- John W. Andrews explores the important ramifications of emerging manufacturing technologies on the interagency’s mission to contain the proliferation of nuclear weapons and materials.
- William T. Eckles notes that because the U.S. border is and must be semi-permeable, just as the borders of a healthy cell in a living organism must be, the passage of human beings through that border without a passport is not the only thing the interagency has to worry about. It also must concern itself with the illicit transit of nuclear weapons and materials.
- John B. Foley reminds the reader that in 2001 the interagency learned from its own war-gaming that the U.S. is not prepared to respond adequately to a pandemic-producing bioterrorist act, and that a decade and a half later, some important concerns identified then linger on today.
- Joshua D. Foss insightfully observes some interesting correspondence among all types of illicit trafficking, to include nuclear materials and fine art. Taking notice of this correspondence opens the door to important opportunities for cooperation and economies of effort across the interagency.
- Michael J. Kwon, noting that countering WMD is essentially an interagency task, recommends solutions for how that task might be more effectively managed with some relatively simple solutions for coordinating the task across a broad spectrum of organizations.
- Patricia Rohrbeck imagines the “perfect storm” that would result from simultaneous biological, electromagnetic pulse, and cyber-attacks.
- Finally, Daniel Sproull introduces a new WMD challenge to the interagency, namely, the one portended by the advent of kinetic energy weapons.

All of these important articles point to massive problems with massive consequences, but such is the nature of the interagency’s task. **IAJ**

NOTES

1 George Weller, “A Nagasaki Report,” <http://www.nuclearfiles.org/menu/key-issues/nuclear-weapons/history/pre-cold-war/hiroshima-nagasaki/weller_nagasaki-report.htm>, accessed on January 31, 2017.

2 Elmer Wilgrid Cotton, diary, May 24, 1915, Imperial War Museum Document Collection, Imperial War Museum, quoted in Marian Giard, *A Strange and Formidable Weapon: British Responses to World War I Poison Gas*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE, 2008, Introduction.