

BY SHARON GHAMARI-TABRIZI

## LETHAL FANTASIES

With its eye on the “Universal Adversary,” Homeland Security is failing to prepare for more likely, foreseeable catastrophes.

SEVERAL DAYS AFTER HURRICANE KATRINA swept through the Gulf Coast in late August 2005, Sen. Susan Collins, a Maine Republican, furiously demanded to know how Department of Homeland Security officials could explain the pandemonium following the storm. After pouring billions of dollars into preparedness, if this was the nation’s response to a disaster “where there was no enemy,” she fumed, “then how would [government] . . . have coped with a terrorist attack that provided no advance warning and . . . was intent on causing as much death and destruction as possible?”

Hurricane Katrina was a damning demonstration of Homeland Security’s inability to respond to a catastrophe with no enemy. What, then, has the government been preparing for? It might come as a surprise to learn that precisely because the government was preparing for a disaster touched off by no identifiable enemy, it was able to overlook the predictable dimensions of a tragedy that many saw coming.

The events of September 11, 2001 gave President George W. Bush the pretext to introduce a new strategic framework: the “global war on terror.” This framework deflected the public’s attention away from a world with observable contours and toward a ghostly enemy that encompasses all possible threats, including those not yet imagined. Homeland Security aligned itself with this larger mandate (what it called the “great calling of our generation”) and began preparing to confront, in the words of Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, “a dangerous and merciless evil.” Invoking the chaos at Ground Zero, in January 2005 Homeland Security introduced its

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National Response Plan, which called for “a new paradigm for incident management.” Rather than sequestering responsibility for domestic terrorism from industrial accidents and the depredations of the weather, the plan reckoned it was better to think of them as belonging to “a broad spectrum of contingencies, from acts of terrorism, to natural disasters, to other man-made hazards (accidental or intentional).”

National preparedness would no longer be “event driven” but would subsume response and recovery under prevention. At first glance, it seems reasonable to lump together natural disasters with terrorist strikes. Both categories require first responders’ attention and the tortuous coordination of local, state, and federal efforts. But there’s a twist. After 9/11, preparedness came to mean reducing U.S. vulnerabilities to terrorist attack. Or as Chertoff explained in April 2005: “As consequences increase, we respond according to the nature and credibility of the threat and any existing state of vulnerabilities.” This attractively simple calculus became the logic for disbursing Homeland Security funds, including monies destined for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and other agencies within the department. “We’ll be looking at everything through that prism,” Chertoff promised. The result was that customary allocations for predictable natural disaster response were slashed.

Recognizing that it was “impossible to maintain the highest kind of preparedness for all possibilities, all of the time,” Homeland Security sought to work out which incidents qualified as “catastrophic threats with the greatest risk of mass casualties, massive property loss, and immense social disruption.” The centerpiece of Homeland Security’s efforts was the National Planning Scenarios, which “illustrate a broad range of potential terrorist attacks, major disasters, and other emergencies.” Rather than aiming for comprehensiveness, officials chose scenarios to dramatize response and recovery capabilities, selecting those “for which the nation is currently the least prepared.”

Three scenarios involved natural disasters; twelve de-

pected terrorist attacks. Because the focus was on incident response, any old terrorist would do. The enemy was a cipher, identified simply as the “Universal Adversary.” (In fact, the planning scenarios report declared, “The FBI is unaware of any credible intelligence that indicates that such an attack is being planned.” Rather, the scenarios “generally reflect suspected terrorist capabilities and known tradecraft.”)

Think about it: Twelve of the fifteen scenarios used for determining Homeland Security’s organizational and funding priorities were wholly untethered to evidence of the intentions and powers of actual people. More importantly, the scenarios justified the curtailment of federal support for disaster relief in annual weather events, such as hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, and wildfires—any one of which would surely, one day or another, develop into a disaster of catastrophic proportions. With Homeland Security’s energies trained on the Universal Adversary, the humble necessities of levee construction could hardly be descried.

Why did responsible people accept the idea of a Universal Adversary? How did the featureless cunning of a phantom justify the diversion of public monies from actual needs to possible ones? How did we become spellbound by the fiend who threatened to skulk across our borders, infiltrate our ports, menace our power grid and communication hubs, and oppose us in our homes, workplaces, malls, sports arenas, and amusement parks?

Last February, in testimony before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Deputy Secretary of Homeland Security Adm. James Loy obligingly allowed that a terrorist attack “could come in any form, at any place, on any timetable.” This is the touchstone of the new paradigm. The Defense Department’s 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review Report announced that uncertainty would henceforth

frame national security analysis. Because no one can know “with confidence what nation, combination of nations, or nonstate actor will pose threats to vital U.S. interests,” the report stated that it made better sense to guess what targets an enemy could plausibly attack.

This new “capabilities-based” model for threat assessment focuses more on “how an adversary might fight than who the adversary might be and where a war might occur,” nudging national security analysis into the realm of the hypothetical, the generally suspected, the possible, and the conceivable. It swerves assessment away from actual

political groupings with intelligible politics, means, and intentions to the self-referential conjectures of the American defender. One examines one’s own capabilities and asks, as Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld put it in January 2002, “What design would I be forming if I were the enemy?” This is not only solipsistic, it is ticklishly speculative. According to Rumsfeld, not only must one stand guard against “the unknown,” “the uncertain,” and “the unexpected,” but one must also prepare to defeat “adversaries that have not yet emerged to challenge us.” Capabilities-based threat assessment operates enigmatically, tolerates thin evidence, and generates an assumption train of trend



analysis. It gives us the Universal Adversary.

The pity of it is that even Homeland Security thinks a terrorist strike against the American heartland is fairly unlikely. An internal document leaked to *Congressional Quarterly* last March concluded that America’s enemies were few and unmotivated. The document, called Integrated Planning Guidance, Fiscal Years 2005–2011, identified Al Qaeda and other militant Islamist groups as the principal U.S. foes. But most astonishingly, it concluded, “We are not convinced that any of these organizations acting alone would pursue a major attack against the homeland.” Nor

did Homeland Security believe that terrorist groups would obtain state sponsorship. Of the six “countries of concern” that were cited, five were of “diminishing concern.” Only Iran seemed to harbor “possible future motivation to use terrorist groups, in addition to its own state agents, to plot against the U.S. homeland.” Stop and consider whether the Islamic Republic would truly dare to execute a catastrophic attack on U.S. soil.

For the past four years, U.S. officials have been engrossed in the contemplation of nightmares rather than identifiable social, political, and climatological realities. Advocates of the war on terror renounce the wisdom of engaging with the actual world—a world not entirely of our making, not entirely in our control, but a world we can know—in favor of their own best guesses. To the extent that we have succumbed to the Universal Adversary, we have smothered our good sense with a lethal fantasy. ❄

BY JOHN PRADOS

## THE LONG VIEW

Abandoning National Intelligence Estimates would only worsen the CIA's existing woes.

**I**N THE WAKE OF THE FIASCO OVER ITS PRE-WAR Iraq reporting, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) conducted a series of internal reviews. Such postmortems are standard fare for the intelligence community, but then—CIA Director George Tenet had special reasons for setting up a review panel in May 2003. A huge public controversy had erupted over the flawed October 2002 National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs and the question of whether intelligence had been politicized. Two months later, the review became even more salient following the acrimony over false intelligence inserted into President George W. Bush's 2003 State of the Union address.

Apart from the issues of governance, the vital matter for America's future in an age of weapons proliferation was and is the question of the honesty and reliability of NIEs and other intelligence reports. NIEs are the highest level of U.S. intelligence reporting, representing the

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considered opinion of all U.S. agencies together. They are drafted by a body known as the National Intelligence Council, whose work became the focus of the review. In August 2005, the CIA declassified and released a version of a report produced by the review panel headed by retired Deputy Director of Central Intelligence Richard J. Kerr. The material appeared in the CIA in-house journal *Studies in Intelligence*. Rather than bolster confidence in future intelligence reporting, the Kerr panel reached some unsettling conclusions about the outlook for NIEs, counterproductively throwing into question the intelligence community's commitment to long-term intelligence analysis.

When Tenet first established the Kerr panel—comprised of Kerr, Thomas W. Wolfe, Rebecca Donegan, and Aris Pappas, all experienced intelligence officers—he gave it the limited task of compiling all of the disseminated intelligence on Iraq. In November 2003, Tenet expanded the panel's mandate to encompass examining whether the evidence on Iraq had actually supported the assertions of the Iraq NIE. The group examined 20 binders of documents and eventually compiled a 405-page report on the intelligence. It completed its second report, the so-called Tradecraft Review, in August 2004. The document the CIA released in August 2005 amounts to an overview of the two substantive reports.

The panel concluded that the “uneven performance” of U.S. intelligence “has raised significant questions concerning the condition of intelligence collection, analysis, and policy support.” It contrasts the NIE's mistaken conclusions on weapons with other intelligence reports' *accurate* predictions (based on even less evidence) of resistance to occupying U.S. forces after an invasion of Iraq. Overall, intelligence collection “had nothing like the richness, density, and detail that . . . [the CIA] became accustomed to having on Soviet issues during the Cold War,” and collection strategies “were too weak and unimaginative” to obtain such data. In addition, analysts were guilty of “uncritical acceptance of established positions and assumptions,” and the whole morass was exacerbated by poor quality control.

On the politicization issue, the Kerr report concedes that demands on intelligence in the months and weeks before the war were “numerous and intense.” The group could not bring itself to conclude whether politics influenced the making of the Iraq NIE, but it did break the Bush administration's chain of denial, noting that “some in the intelligence community and elsewhere hold the view that intense policy-maker demands in the run-up to the war constituted inappropriate pressure on intelligence analysts.” Finally, it contrasts performance on WMD with that on allegations of a link between Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, noting that “the Intelligence Community remained firm in its assessment that no operational or collaborative relationship existed.”