

We must find a better way to prepare for disasters

In last Sunday's "Parade" magazine, David Gergen asks a very important question, "When the next disaster hits, will we be prepared?"

In his typically thoughtful and eloquent manner, Gergen describes working with an executive education program at Harvard focused on disaster preparedness:

"What I found was a group of people who are highly professional and care deeply about their performance but are ensnared in a governmental system that is hopelessly entangled and desperately needs fixing."

While I was reading Gergen's commentary, I was instantly reminded of a recent story in the "Washington Post" by Dana Priest and William Arkin about the administrative behemoth that evolved in the national security arena after 9/11.

In that article, Priest and Arkin lamented: "The top-secret world the government created in response to the terrorist attacks has become so large, so unwieldy and so secretive that no one knows how much money it costs,

how many people it employs, how many programs exist within it or exactly how many agencies do the same work."

If we reflect on these two issues for a moment, two conclusions tend to become relatively self-evident.

First, Americans do not have a very good track record when it comes to being prepared for the unexpected.

Whether it's 9/11, Katrina or the Deepwater Horizon, we never seem adequately prepared to deal with tragedies we are encountering at an arguably accelerated pace.

Second, more government bureaucracy is absolutely not an effective way of ensuring that we will be better prepared next time. We need to be a lot less reactive and much more proactive when it comes to facing the very predictable challenges we will inevitably face.

We desperately need to find a better way of preparing for, and responding to, national emergencies.

Aaron W. Hughey
Bowling Green

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