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# SET AND DRIFT

## The Coast Guard Alternative

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Captain Mark H. Johnson, U.S. Coast Guard

**W**HEN CATASTROPHE STRIKES AT HOME OR ABROAD, or when impact is sought in foreign policy strategies, the nation's leaders seem to have the Department of Defense (DoD) programmed into their 911 autodial. Whether for natural-disaster response, law enforcement, domestic terrorism, or nation building, policy makers instinctively call the Pentagon for help in handling such events. Even if effective, such emergency calls frequently waste valuable resources and distract the Defense Department from its

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preparations for deterring and fighting wars and for providing a military presence overseas.

National emergencies may be better handled by a call to the U.S. Coast Guard, which possesses many of the same characteristics that trigger a Defense Department selection. Moreover, many of the missions newly assigned to the Defense Department relate directly to Coast Guard core capabilities. Failure to utilize the Coast Guard's intrinsic capabilities dulls them, and it also weakens the service's budget petitions to Congress. Because of its multimission nature, the Coast Guard could distribute the marginal cost increases across its broadly based, but fiscally strapped, resource lines, leading to a winning situation for itself, DoD, and the country.

Why is the Department of Defense the first choice of the U.S. government? The military performs extremely well its primary mission of projecting war-fighting power globally. It has evolved from its Vietnam and Iran-era malaise by increasing the education levels of its all-volunteer members (particularly officers, many of whom possess graduate degrees), state-of-the-art technology capitalization, and employing the philosophy of "bringing a shotgun to the knife fight." Victory in conflicts from Grenada to Iraq have earned American public support and the heady sense that the military will get the job done.

Successful combat operations also require skills that are valuable for engagements other than traditional wars. For example, following Hurricane Andrew in south Florida in 1992, the military displayed the same superb logistical capability that was necessary for the DESERT STORM victory. While it had previously managed domestic natural disasters, as well as man-made disasters like the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, the Andrew operation seemed to showcase the breadth of the military's capabilities. Coupled with Panama and Iraq victories, the result has been broad public respect. A recent Lou Harris poll ranked confidence in military leadership highest among U.S. national institutions—two times higher than organized religion, and 17 percent higher than its nearest competitor, the U.S. Supreme Court. It is this popularity that prompts policy makers to call upon the military to solve problems.

What does the military bring to a "crisis"? First, it brings the uniform. Uniforms help not only to identify crisis responders but also imply efficiency and professionalism among those responders. The

uniform means order and authority amid chaos, and it elicits from the public an expectation of crisis mitigation.

The military also brings “practical spans of control” (a management term for the efficient supervision of five to eight people for each supervisor) and disciplined units capable of effective behavior under deplorable conditions. Massive amounts of equipment and expertise can be delivered quickly to all types of terrain and environments.

Finally, the U.S. military carries its lethal capability wherever it goes—a fact that creates a paradox in the minds of American citizens. While the public may approve of U.S. peacekeepers protecting Red Cross workers overseas, many are wary of the military performing the same duty on domestic soil. Lethal capability became an issue, for instance, when a Marine accidentally shot to death a young Texan goatherder during a May 1997 antidrug patrol on the U.S.-Mexican border.

However, despite such incidents, recent decisions to use the military as an emergency *agency* and protector of emergency-response teams abroad make sense for U.S. leaders, because the military will likely be successful and appreciated by the affected constituency. In addition, if a complex problem can be defined as a “war,” so much the better. A war on drugs or a war on crime can provide tremendous resource possibilities.

At issue is whether this expanded use of the military is the best strategy. An article in the *Christian Science Monitor* by Jonathan Landau captured one concern: “There is a majority sentiment that the Pentagon tends to cook things up and exaggerate the threat. . . . Some people might believe [the military] is trying to scare them to justify an increase in the defense budget.”<sup>1</sup> Although the military has been used successfully for crisis mitigation, it would make sense to expand the use of the Coast Guard and provide policy makers with another option.

The U.S. Coast Guard is a uniformed service of nearly forty thousand personnel under the jurisdiction of the Department of Transportation; the Coast Guard becomes part of the Department of the Navy when war is declared. (Members of the Coast Guard describe this legality more colorfully by claiming they are the hard nucleus about which the Navy forms in time of war.) The Coast Guard’s annual budget is approximately four billion dollars, including an

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annual \$300 to \$600 million augmentation by the Navy for national security, a sum that has become critical to Coast Guard operations. As DoD becomes increasingly restrictive (needing a nine-billion-dollar emergency supplement for readiness in fiscal year 1998), the annual stipend to the Coast Guard is viewed less benevolently.

It may seem illogical to expand the uses of a Coast Guard already struggling with scarce resources, but that is precisely why the nation should consider reallocating new resources destined for DoD to the Coast Guard, whose start-up costs are much lower, because the service already performs similar missions. Adding resources to intrinsic duties is a recipe for effectiveness and efficiency.

Domestic terrorism has become a particular concern, especially because of the threat of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). It has been dealt with in two ways: the prevention of an attack (antiterrorism) and responding to an attack's aftermath (counterterrorism). Worried policy makers have automatically turned to the military to handle these issues.

Counterterrorism activities are further divided into crisis response and consequence management. Crisis response is the process of finding and apprehending the perpetrators. However, the Posse Comitatus Act (in Title 10 of the U.S. Code) prohibits the Defense Department from enforcing domestic law, although by defining a crisis as a war the prohibition can be loosened a bit. Landau's *Christian Science Monitor* article quotes civil libertarians as warning that "the best way to convince the public that the military isn't crossing the line into civilian law enforcement is to draw the line darker and heavier, not to blur it." Currently, Presidential Decision Directives 39 and 63 direct the Department of Justice, working through the Federal Bureau of Investigation, to act as the lead federal agency for crisis response to domestic terrorism.

Consequence management, while technically under the control of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), is heavily dependent upon the Department of Defense. Using the tested methods of the Federal Response Plan, it was thought that consequence management of a terrorist action would be similar to that of a flood or hurricane. Federal agencies would support FEMA, which provides the checkbook and a loose organizational diagram for coordination with state and local response agencies.

However, domestic terrorism carries with it much more emotion than does a hurricane, particularly if a weapon of mass destruction is used, in which case the necessary consequence management resembles less that for a hurricane and more like what is needed after a hazardous material discharge—something that happens thousands of times each year across the United States. Domestic terrorism requires a blend of both crisis law enforcement and aftermath mitigation. It is here that the Coast Guard has a competitive edge over the other services, because of its considerable experience and expertise in handling such events. The Coast Guard routinely works with federal, state, and local government agencies, as well as private companies, to coordinate the management of hazardous material discharges; in addition, the Coast Guard performs daily law enforcement activities (it is exempt from *posse comitatus*). As domestic crisis response confronts more complicated scenarios, the consequences of those emergencies will require the attributes routinely practiced by the Coast Guard.

For example, tomorrow's consequence manager will have to consider and plan for several problems simultaneously: evacuating people based on trajectory modeling of toxic air or water plumes, minimizing economic and transportation disruptions during the response, mitigating the resultant environment impact, and preserving evidence. Coast Guard officers already employ these problem-solving skills with the National Contingency Plan for Oil and Hazardous Substances. While no one supposes that a low-yield nuclear explosion is the same as a large anhydrous ammonia release in a populated port city, the basic principles of integrating government and private response, obtaining specialized expertise, and implementing a tested contingency plan are already practiced by the Coast Guard. That, of course, is a powerful alternative to the creation of new protocols and infrastructures.

The Department of Defense's foray into this area has shifted from only technical response support and logistical expertise to consequence management. The Nunn-Lugar Act (a 1996 amendment to bill S.1894, which provides \$150,000,000 to defend the United States against weapons of mass destruction) directs the DoD to train the 120 cities with the largest populations to respond to a WMD attack. However, the training given failed to integrate technical expertise with the response protocol already in place—and the DoD was

highly criticized for this oversight. Use of existing infrastructure and protocols ensures greater probability of success during a time of crisis. To introduce new agencies or processes at the time of the incident is a recipe for disaster.

In a time of tight budgets, the U.S. government should look to efficiency as well as effectiveness when dealing with contingencies for which the Coast Guard can provide the same service as the DoD. The use of existing agencies in scenarios not very different from their daily responsibilities will take fewer resources than the creation of new infrastructures. For example, a recent study looked into the feasibility of creating special National Guard units throughout the country to respond to WMD releases. The study cost approximately ten million dollars. For little more than twice the cost of the study, the existing Coast Guard National Strike Force—the nation's premier oil and hazardous material response unit, with a long history of skilled mitigation and a significant equipment inventory—could be expanded to provide nationwide coverage for WMD response. The Coast Guard Strike Force already responds promptly anywhere in the nation to clean up oil and hazardous material discharges. In addition, Coast Guard hazardous material coordinators have a long history of establishing emergency response organizations that include local agencies. Although some additional equipment and training would be required, such change would be marginal, given the deep base already in place. The Coast Guard currently spends just \$300,000 annually on Strike Force operations. An increase of twenty million dollars could alleviate much of the national angst about consequence management of a WMD terrorist incident.

Another example of trying to fit a round peg in a square hole occurred not long ago when a DoD regional commander in chief requested information on environmental protection and response so that he and his staff could set up training regimes for foreign countries in his area of operations. One must question the duplication of effort (gathering the environmental information, learning the material, and distilling it into a practical form needed by the emerging countries) and resources that would result from new research and training when a uniformed service with daily experience in environmental protection already exists. It would cost little to deploy several Coast Guard teams in this worthwhile endeavor. In fact, the Commandant of the Coast Guard, Admiral James Loy, views this as an

excellent example of how to exploit the service as a unique instrument in meeting the broadened definition of national security. The Coast Guard's history of working closely with civil authorities and private enterprise in order to carry out federal responsibilities has great appeal to countries searching for that fine line between government support and control. Domestically, the same relationship with civil authorities could (and should) have made the Coast Guard the agency chosen to provide the Nunn-Lugar city training for WMD response.

An objective review would conclude that it is logical to utilize existing agencies' resources for newly mandated missions. Using the Coast Guard infrastructure would allow economies of scope and most likely economies of scale. The Coast Guard likes to boast about its high rate of return to the taxpayer in lives and property saved, pollution mitigated, and drugs interdicted for its four-billion-dollar budget. Hyperbole aside, it is a well run and highly successful organization.

Public acceptance of broader use of the Coast Guard could put policy makers in the enviable position of reducing overall treasury outlays and removing peripheral missions from the military. Budget savings could be realized by funneling those portions of DoD's new, nontraditional-contingency resource allocation to the Coast Guard. The remainder could then be allocated elsewhere, or the savings difference could remain in the DoD budget to support greater readiness for power projection. Even more attractive than the budgetary savings is the operational effectiveness that both the DoD and the Coast Guard could realize—the DoD by concentrating on higher-risk tasks, and the Coast Guard from a natural extension of its core missions.

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### Notes

1. Landay, Jonathan, "Delicate Task of Rallying Public about Threat of Terrorism," *Christian Science Monitor*, 3 February 1999, p. 2.