Must we wait to act?

Many problems that we have endured (or are enduring) now could have largely been avoided if we had acted when we knew a problem was likely, rather than after it began. Why must we wait until things get bad before we act? Isn’t there a better way? What can we learn from our recent history?

Hurricane Katrina, in 2005, serves as a classic example of how we failed to respond to warnings. Several reports and simulations prior to that year (including the mock ‘Hurricane Pam’ Exercise performed for FEMA in July 2004) concluded that New Orleans was ripe for a serious catastrophe brought about by the passage of a moderately strong hurricane, something completely avoidable.

And the day before Katrina made landfall in Louisiana, the National Weather Service offered the following ominous forecast for Eastern Nebraska: At 10:11 AM on Sunday; Katrina hit at 6:10 AM on Monday; ‘HURRICANE KATRINA...A MOST POWERFUL HURRICANE WITH UNPRECEDEDED STRENGTH...RAVING THE INTENSITY OF HURRICANE CAMILLE OF 1969. MOST OF THE AREA WILL BE UNINHABITABLE FOR WEEKS...PERHAPS LONGER, AT LEAST ONE HALF OF WELL CONSTRUCTED HOMES WILL HAVE ROOF AND WALL FAILURE. ALL GABLED ROOFS WILL FAIL...LEAVING THOSE HOUSES SHELTER DAMAGED OR DESTROYED. THE MAJORITY OF INDUSTRIAL BUILDINGS... WILL BECOME NON FUNCTIONAL. PARTIAL TO COMPLETE WALL AND ROOF FAILURE IS EXPECTED... CONCRETE BLOCK AND CONCRETE APARTMENTS III IN PANAMA CITY... GK RXSCFT/YY RZS/FRSTX.F/9173 CONCRETE BLOCK LOW RISE APARTMENTS WILL SUSTAIN MAJOR DAMAGE... INCLUDING SOME WALL AND ROOF FAILURE. THE OFFICE AND APARTMENT BUILDINGS WILL SWAY DANGEROUSLY...A FEW TO THE POINT OF TOTAL COLLAPSE. ALL WINDOWS WILL BREAK. WITHOUT LEAVES FALLING. IT WAS A WELL KNOWN THAT KATRINA WOULD BE AN EXTREMELY SERIOUS EVENT. DESPITE THIS, AND OTHER WARNINGS, THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT ARRIVED MUCH TOO LATE TO PREVENT THE HORRIFIC CALAMITY THAT WE ALL OBSERVED. MORE THAN THREE YEARS LATER, THE CITY REMAINS BELOW SEA LEVEL BUT CONTINUES TO UNDERGO REBUILDING AND RESETTLEMENT. UNDERSTANDABLY, PEOPLE WANT TO GET BACK HOME, EVEN IF HOME AND SURROUNDING AREAS REMAIN DEBRISLED. YET, WHEN IT COMES TO HURRICANES AND THE GULF, HURRICANE WILL REPEAT ITSELF. HOPEFULLY, EMERGENCY PLANS WILL BE MUCH BETTER EXECUTED NEXT TIME AND THE LEVEES WILL HOLD UP AS THEY WERE DESIGNED.’

Less visible but just as serious are the impacts of air pollution in major cities. In 2006, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that 7.2 million people in Asian cities die annually due to urban air pollution (UAP). In the U.S., about the same number of victims die prematurely due to exposure to airborne particles (called aerosols). Do we heed these warnings? Coal-fired power plants, one of the key producers of these particulates, continue to spew out deadly emissions. The best we can do is look.

Cancer has become an everyday disease. Nearly half of American men alive today will have to cope with it at some point and roughly four out of every ten women as well.

These are not natural types. They are driven by the toxic pollutants we continue to put in our air, our water, and our soils. Yes, certain behaviors, e.g., smoking, ‘bad’ diets, and a lack of exercise, can add to the likelihood of contracting this horrible disease but environmental conditions seem to be the most important factor... which explains why our society continues to respond reactively (treating symptoms), rather than proactively (focusing on prevention) towards this disease. Among other things, so much misinformation floods the media that it is very difficult for any concerned citizen to find the clear head on the issue. But we can’t afford to be so confused! How much longer before we react?

Nuclear weapons are very destructive. We all know this. As horrendous as the human carnage left on Nagasaki and Hiroshima in 1945, the weapons we have now are much, much more powerful. The Nagasaki ‘Fat Man’ and Hiroshima ‘Little Boy’ released between 50-92 terajoules of energy each. Many current U.S. warheads can deliver yields 10-30 times as large and we have over 4,000 warheads in our arsenal today. If this wasn’t scary enough, more and more countries are becoming nuclear and as a result increasingly large sums of money are being spent on these weapons of mass destruction. How insane has our species become? If nuclear proliferation is the best idea that our world leaders can come up with to make us ‘safe’, we really do need a new slate of them.

Now, we have to deal with swine flu. We have been warned many times from prominent health officials that this should be very careful about how we raise livestock and how close human and pigs or human and poultry with the swine flu should be conducted. We oversee antibiotics (mostly on animals we intend to eat) and allow microbes to mutate more quickly. We know (or should know) that this thing we are revisiting as well to make the necessary changes to our global agricultural systems. Hopefully this flu will not become a pandemic. But, if it doesn’t, the next one might. Must we watch ourselves or do the things we need to do? Let’s get serious people. Too much is at stake.

We are looking at these problems we face—impending death and destruction from another Gulf hurricane (and the environmental refugees that such a disaster will generate) and particles (called aerosols) Do we heed these warnings? Coal-fired power plants, one of the key producers of these particulates, continue to spew out deadly emissions. The best we can do is look.

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I sat next to Ted Stevens at a Washington dinner years ago and found him unpleasant in a raspy, cartoonish way, but I was happy to see his conviction thrown out. A muddy case, a friend doing work on the senator’s house perhaps in exchange for favors in Washington, and I say, have mercy. Let him go fishing in the cold, clear rivers of Alaska and examine his conscience, as we all do in our better hours, and let us all move on to something more promising.

I feel similarly about the Bush people whom some Democrats want to charge with war crimes. The widespread waterboarding and other acts of torture carried out in secret CIA prisons are no small matter. The free play of sadism on the helpless in the name of national service is not to be ignored. What’s needed is a fair and thorough congressional investigation. Subpoena witnesses and lay the whole wretched business out on the public record. Look into the heart of darkness and meditate on it. But don’t resort to a few symbolic suspects and throw the book at them and let all the others go free. Which is what would happen if we launch a criminal prosecution.

What’s needed here is not punishment, but truth. When I hear Democrats talk about ‘holding them responsible,’ I smell the sour righteousness of the victorious bending it over the vanquished. The guy they really wanted to put on trial is the old brush-cutter of Crawford, or else the old grous hunter of Wyoming. They’re the guys who signed off on those memos authorizing torture. The buck stopped at their desks.

Holding the Bush administration responsible for torture would give us some high political drama that would feed the media grist for the next two years and also help the party politics. The health care system would go unfixed, schools would crumble, basic public services would deteriorate, all so that the left could have at the right. I am not on a human-quality northern liberal and I know something about the righteousness of my conferees. I’ve been with old lefty friends who can get emotional about the suffering in Chicago and the innocent men railroaded to the gallows, but dear hearts, it happened in 1866. Let’s move on.

Retribution is not smart politics. That’s part of what killed Rudy Giuliani’s run for the president, the voters’ sense that he was possessed of a cruel urge to pay back old scores. But this is a matter than the voters can decide; they are the president to be. I agree with Senator McCain when he says, “We need to put this behind us and move forward.”

Remember that the country was in high post-9/11 jitters when the dreadful memoranda were written by the lawyers and some Democrats want to haul into court. Apocalyptic visions were afloat of subway bombings, germ warfare, nuclear devices wiping out a major city—Remember walking around Manhattan and thinking much too vividly about such things — and in that atmosphere of painful vulnerability, the great bustling city practically indefensible, zealous men might consider despicable measures in the name of security. As Orwell said, “We sleep safe in our beds because rough men stand ready in the night to defend us on the beaches.”

I think the American electorate knew who they re-elected in 2004. Mr. Bush and Mr. Cheney did not run on a human-rights platform, they ran as rough men who would guard our sleep. So go talk to the voters of Ohio about war crimes.

Rather than square off in a bloody battle over war crimes, let’s return decent train service to the Midwest and test out the German maglev (magnetic levitation) system — the 360 mph trains — and connect Chicago and St. Paul-Minneapolis, Cleveland, Detroit, Omaha, Kansas City. Let’s restore education to the public schools so that our kids get a chance to hear Mozart and learn French.

I’m in Washington today for the Poetry Out Loud program, run by the National Endowment for the Arts. Your tax dollars spent to bring $3 high school kids out (of 300,000who competed for the honor) to recite poetry (Shakespeare, Donne, Elliot, Billy Collins), the winner to get a $20,000 scholarship. It’s a beautiful event. Special Olympics for English majors. I would forgo the pleasures of tormenting a few malefactors for the right of hearing a kid from Newark stand up and give an impassioned recitation of “When in Disgrace with Fortune and Men’s Eyes.”

(Garrison Keillor is the author of a new Lake Wobegon novel, “Liberty” (Hiking).) ©2009 by Garrison Keillor. All rights reserved. Distributed by Tribune Media Services, INC.