

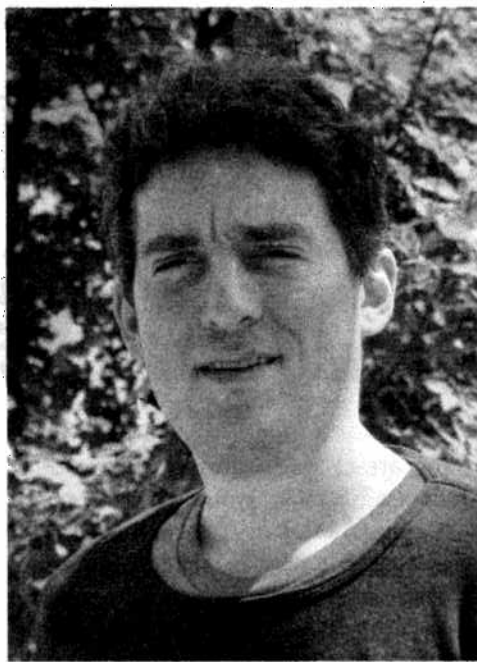
ENOUGH IS ENOUGH**Peter Schwartzman****Must we wait to act?**

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 case of how poorly we 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 considered inevitable along the Gulf Coast. And the day before Katrina made landfall in Louisiana, the National Weather Service offered the following ominous forecast for New Orleans (issued at 10:11 AM on Sunday; Katrina hit at 6:10 AM on Monday): "HURRICANE KATRINA...A MOST POWERFUL HURRICANE WITH UNPRECEDENTED STRENGTH...RIVALING 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 HOMES SEVERELY DAMAGED OR DESTROYED. THE MAJORITY OF INDUSTRIAL BUILDINGS WILL BECOME NON FUNCTIONAL. PARTIAL TO COMPLETE WALL AND ROOF FAILURE IS EXPECTED.ALL WOOD FRAMED LOW RISING APARTMENT BUILDINGS WILL BE DESTROYED. CONCRETE BLOCK LOW RISE APARTMENTS WILL SUSTAIN MAJOR DAMAGE...INCLUDING SOME WALL AND ROOF FAILURE. HIGH RISE OFFICE AND APARTMENT BUILDINGS WILL SWAY DANGEROUSLY...A FEW TO THE POINT OF TOTAL COLLAPSE. ALL WINDOWS WILL BLOW OUT." (All CAPS are used as this is how such reports are presented; For the full version:http://www.srh.noaa.gov/data/warn_archive/LIX/NPW/0828_155101.txt) So, even without levees failing, it was 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 go back home, even if home and surrounding areas remain decimated. Yet, when it comes to hurricanes and the Gulf, history will repeat itself. Hopefully, emergency plans will be much better executed next time and the levees will hold up as they were supposed to.

Less visible but just as serious are the impacts of air pollution in major cities. In 2006, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that over a half a 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 the breathing of fine 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 beat goes on.

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 numbers. 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 a very important factor as well (and we generally don't choose to be exposed to these pollutants). Devra Davis' new book, *The Secret History of the War on Cancer*, provides detailed evidence 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 be clear headed 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 we should be very careful about how we raise livestock and how close human and pigs or human and chickens should be cohabitating. We overuse antibiotics (mostly on animals we intend to eat) and allow microbes to mutate more quickly. We know (or should know) these things but we remain unwilling 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 wait until one occurs before we do the things we need to do? Let's get serious people. Too much is at stake.

When one looks at these problems we face—impending death and destruction from another Gulf hurricane (and the environmental refugees that such a disaster will entail), continued illness and death from dangerous contaminants emitted into the atmosphere and rivers, constant threat of thermo-nuclear war or a terrorist attack on nuclear power installations, or the potential spread of a deadly virus—we should be able to acknowledge that we don't need to live so precariously. We need to act now to make our lives healthier and safer.