

Kelman, I. 2006. "The Myth of 9/11". Disaster and Social Crisis Research Network Electronic Newsletter, no. 28 (October-December), p. 4.

Full Text

The horrendous terrorist attacks in the northeast USA on 11 September 2001 are frequently identified as indicating a paradigm shift in disaster risk reduction and disaster research. They are discussed as being unique, changing the world, epitomising the unforeseeability of events, and forcing us to think of disasters differently.

One author wrote "We didn't foresee – could probably never have foreseen – the eventuality of airplanes being used as missiles to take out civilian targets". Yet Adam Hall's novel "Quiller Solitaire" (William Morrow & Company, 1992) details such an attempt and Toronto's CN Tower and Paris' Eiffel Tower were both threatened by that possibility prior to 2001.

Meanwhile, we are told that 9/11 introduced amazing new challenges for disaster management. Yet many were addressed to some extent long beforehand. Mass casualty identification was written up following the 27 March 1977 jumbo jet collision on Tenerife. A 1988 paper is entitled "The collapse analysis of steel columns in fire using a finite strip method". Much has been learned due to 9/11 (although not necessarily applied) but the challenges are hardly new, different, or unique.

Will the events of that day dictate how we prepare for and react to future disasters? In the USA, it will have an influence because of funding. Compare FEMA's budget with DHS' anti-terrorism budget. Compare the USA's 9/11 and terrorism research budget with the USA's ISDR contribution and research budget for non-terrorism disasters. Compare the funds available for addressing root causes of terrorism with the funds available for iris scanners at airports. 9/11 will influence views of disaster, but by a deliberate choice to make that happen, not from any inherent 9/11 characteristics.

9/11 was no more complex than hospitals in Niue (South Pacific) and St. Kitts (Caribbean) being destroyed by cyclones only to be reconstructed in the same locations and then destroyed by later cyclones. 9/11 killed no more people than several individual heat waves and earthquakes over the past decade. 9/11 affected almost as many people as some pandemics – but only through the American government's decision to close American air space. 9/11 was an unacceptable, despicable, human action – as have been all the other unacceptable, despicable, human actions which continue to kill millions through disease, drought, famine, floods, environmental degradation, poverty, injustice, and inequality.

9/11 was a catastrophe. 9/11 shows the worst that humanity offers. But it will change our fundamental views of disaster risk reduction only if we are blinded to the worst that humanity offers on a daily basis.

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