



Memorial Weekend Terrorist Threats - What Happens If A Dirty Bomb Goes Off?

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May 23, 2003 Harrisburg, Pennsylvania - This week Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge raised the terrorist threat level to Orange and told the House Select Committee on Homeland Security that the terrorist attack drills held in Seattle and Chicago two weeks ago showed there are definite problems in the nation's ability to respond. The exercises called TOPOFF2 because "top officials" participated - were the largest security drills the U. S. government has ever played out. Seattle emergency responders were challenged with a dirty bomb; in Chicago the scenario was a bioterrorist attack of pneumonic plague. The exercises lasted a week and involved dozens of federal, state and local emergency-response agencies.

One of the biggest problems was that the Department of Energy and the Environmental Protection Agency did not agree on the size, amount of radiation or even direction of movement in the hypothetical dirty bomb's radioactive plume over Seattle. The result was that Seattle's Mayor Greg Nickels did not know what areas of Seattle should be warned about the spreading radiation.

Another problem in Seattle and Chicago were cell phones. Many kept dropping out, raising a serious question: why would government agencies even try to rely on problematic cell phones in a radioactive emergency? Shouldn't satellite phones be made available to all emergency workers across the nation? Another communication snafu: when Seattle emergency responders tried to call Washington, D. C. agencies for guidance, several times they got voice mail recordings.

Ridge acknowledged also that in the Chicago terrorist exercise, hospitals nearly ran out of beds for the sick and wounded, and nurses and doctors became exhausted. Ridge said that bed and medical personnel shortages were a problem, and the Defense Department had to provide additional beds, doctors and nurses.

So what happens if Al Qaeda or other terrorists manage to set off a *real* dirty bomb somewhere in the United States this weekend, or any time in the future? Do terrorists need to import radioactive materials from Europe or Russia to make a dirty bomb in the United States? One man who studies the answers to those questions is Scott Portzline, former security chairman for Three Mile

Island Alert in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. For eight years, Scott Portzline helped the volunteer civilian Three Mile Island Alert group monitor radiation and security. He has testified before the U. S. Senate, the U. S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, the Advisory Committee on Reactor Safeguards and before other governmental bodies in an effort to close security gaps that he has found. His research has been cited by the U. S. Department of Energy and various military branches. Scott Portzline also maintains a data base of lost and stolen radioactive materials in the United States, which is shockingly large.

Scott is convinced that terrorists can easily get all the radioactive materials they need right here in the homeland to make dirty bombs. He also thinks the much ridiculed duct tape and plastic really are products all of us should keep ready in our homes and offices to use, if necessary. But for some unknown reason, Homeland Security, the White House and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) are not giving clear, straightforward facts on their websites or in public announcements. Even many of the problems in the Seattle and Chicago terrorist drills are expected to be classified in order to keep the information away from terrorists. But Americans are often left in the dark, too, about exactly what we should be prepared for and why in the event of a dirty bomb or suitcase nuke attack.



Scott Portzline, Former Security Chairman,
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Interview:

Scott Portzline, Former Security Chairman for Three Mile Island Alert (TMIA), Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: "Ridge's Homeland Security is woefully inadequate in communicating to the people of the United States and woefully inadequate in pulling all of the security measures into one sector and being sure that things happen with some speed, that things that are simple to change they are just doing a very poor job, in my opinion.

I'll give you another example. The day that they put up the website called www.ready.gov. I looked at that in a minute of it being announced and went right to their page on radiation threat. Nowhere in that section on radioactive dirty bombs did it discuss the priority, the immediate needs, to not inhale any dust.

You must have respiratory protection following any explosion from now on. You probably always should have after what people in New York City say they inhaled there.

BECAUSE NONE OF US ARE GOING TO KNOW IF IT IS RADIOACTIVE UNTIL MUCH LATER.

That's right. But here we have a page coming from the TOP levels of the government who are saying, 'We are doing everything possible and we are doing our very best,' and they fall way short. That should be a simple thing from now on that people need to know: If you are near some sort of explosion I don't care what it is it could be a gas explosion cover your mouth with a wet cloth. Get away from the immediate area. Get out of the dust cloud and if you are near your home or whatever, go into your home and put the plastic up with duct (gaffer's) tape around the windows because what can happen in a dirty bomb blast is that some of the radioactive particles cling to the dust and if that dust comes into your home, then you inhale it. Now you have a serious problem, possibly not only can you end up with pneumonia, but you can end up getting a serious dose of radiation to your entire body, depending upon what the isotope

is.

Now the reason plastic works is that most of the radioactive sources that are alpha emitters, they just can't penetrate even your skin. The alpha ray is stopped at that point and plastic would certainly do that. But if it's clinging to a dust particle and you inhale it, that's where your problems are.

So, when people objected to the idea of duct tape and plastic, there are actually benefits from using that. But did the Homeland Security people explain that to us? No. Unfortunately, we saw one man putting plastic sheets over an entire house which was a huge health hazard to do that. The Homeland Security dropped the ball. It did not explain how we can protect ourselves properly.

And if the biggest problem with a radioactive bomb is the psychological aspects of it, then shouldn't this be explained to us thoroughly to avoid the psychological trauma that they expect to result. If we understand what is controllable, what actions we can take, how and why it works and what the government will be doing, it will give us a better sense of control and less fear and less panic. But they are not doing that.

I really think the Homeland Security should have a program on television every two weeks until they cover all the topics explaining what the government can do and what you can do and it will help us deal with the panic and fear that could result. And the health problems that's the number one thing we're trying to protect against: the loss of human life and suffering.

We have a serious problem right here in our own country where every other day lost and stolen materials are found or reported stolen and there is about 30,000 lost and stolen sources (radioactive) in the United States. Some of these are quite dangerous.

There is no need for terrorists to import dirty bomb material.

Another thing that I see that people don't understand is that media reports that Al Qaeda might have the capability now to create a dirty bomb. "Capability" is a very poor word because a dirty bomb is basically a nail bomb. Instead of nails, they are using radioactive sources to disperse the radiation. The government uses the term, "radioactive dispersal device (RDD)." It's a very simple thing to make and it does not take, it's not like acquiring knowledge to create a nuclear bomb. It doesn't take that capability. It just takes getting hold of radioactive sources that can be harmful to people or to contaminate the streets and buildings which could be very costly, if not deadly.

With nuclear fuel, the potential is there that fragments of the fuel could be embedded in peoples' bodies from the blast, in people who are close to the blast. A radioactive dispersal device can include anything from solid powder, liquid or gas. I'll give you an example. Tritium that's in an exit sign, some of these self-illuminating signs that some buildings have. There are tens of thousands of these across the United States. They can contaminate your home like two New Jersey boys who broke open one of those signs did and took it home from a construction site and broke it open. They were eating sunflower seeds and contaminated themselves and the entire house and it costs thousands of dollars to clean that up, just from the gas in an exit sign, tritium gas.

WHAT HAPPENS WITH DIRTY BOMBS?

Following any explosion, emergency responders will check the air for contamination and use Geiger counters to see if radioactive material has been dispersed. If that's discovered, they might immediately have to go away from the area, take protection for the respiratory system, order people out of the area. Order some people to stay in their homes until the radioactive dust has passed. They'll call for assistance from the federal government immediately and the FBI becomes the lead not only in the investigation but in control of the scene.

First, the public will be getting very little bits of information from the government because, one, there will be tremendous amounts of confusion; and

two, it's going to take time to get the assets into place to measure the size and the boundary of how serious the radioactive particles are to peoples' health. Decisions will have to be made and they aren't necessarily going to be made in a timely manner. That's not necessarily going to be due to the government being irresponsible or dragging their feet. That's just the nature of these types of events.

Then at some point, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) will take over and people will have to listen to the newscasts for what protective actions they have to take in addition to putting up the plastic and duct tape.

So, for me, I personally have my own Geiger counter and I'll be paying attention to what way the wind is blowing, what way the cloud of radioactivity and dust is blowing, and hopefully have a feel for what the roads are like whether they are congested or not and whether or not I need to leave. But primarily, I will be relying on what the authorities tell us to do.

The problem with that is that you will be in the dark probably for the first hour and a half.

MEANING YOU WON'T KNOW EXACTLY WHAT'S HAPPENING, HOW SERIOUS THE RADIOACTIVITY IS OR ANYTHING UNTIL AUTHORITIES AND EXPERTS HAVE BEEN ABLE TO GO TO THE SCENE AND ACCESS HOW SERIOUS IT IS?

That's correct. And with just a small wind on an average day whether it's just a little bit of wind there could be a dirty bomb happening 5 or 10 miles from your house and within 10 minutes that cloud can be over your house. So, just about the time you might have heard about this explosion, it might already have passed over your house. There is going to be a lot of fear and that's why it's really important that we all be educated in advance about what we can expect, what the limitations are of the information that is going to come out and how we can protect ourselves.

SCOTT, NOBODY WOULD HAVE THE ABILITY TO GET DUCT TAPE AND PLASTIC AND GET UP ALL OVER THE WINDOWS ON A NORMAL SIZED HOUSE IN TEN MINUTES.

You have what I recommend is that you have plastic already cut to the size that you need for one room and you tape up the windows in that room. Maybe it's the biggest one you need for your family or maybe it's the one you can seal up the quickest. You can make those decisions for yourself. But if you already had the sheet of plastic cut up, you have an advantage over people who don't even have the plastic.

RIGHT. AND THEN ALL YOU ARE CONCENTRATING ON IS GETTING THE PLASTIC AND TAPE UP OVER WINDOWS IN ONE ROOM THAT YOU CAN SEAL, AND HOPEFULLY HAS YOUR RADIO AND TV IN IT, SO YOU CAN AT LEAST KEEP MONITORING THE SITUATION IN SOMEWHAT OF A PROTECTED SPACE.

Yes, a safe zone. Now, if there is a radioactive bomb containing gamma radiation, the plastic does not offer any protection from the direct energy of that radiation.

BECAUSE GAMMA IS GOING TO PENETRATE ANY PLASTIC.

That's right.

ALPHA WILL BE DEFLECTED FROM PLASTIC.

It will be absorbed, the energy is so low it can't make it through.

BUT GAMMA FROM SOMETHING THAT IS MUCH MORE RADIOACTIVE COULD PENETRATE.

Yes, and even some beta. One thing that emergency workers will have to account

for is some of these injured people who are close to the blast and who have large amounts of radioactivity on their clothing and body, embedded in their body, they will have to be separated by a number of feet from any other victims laying next to them to avoid exposing the other person to higher levels of radiation. There is a lot to think about!

One psychological aspect of a radioactive dirty bomb is that people will have to undress possibly in a mass setting. For me, that's a minor matter if it comes to my life. I don't care if somebody sees me naked for a minute or not. I'm going to undress. But there's going to be a lot of things people would have to cope with that we've never seen before.

THEY WOULD HAVE TO TAKE THEIR CLOTHES OFF BECAUSE THE CLOTHES WERE CONTAMINATED?

Yes. The particles that might be clinging to the clothes will have to be disposed of. Another after affect of any of these events will be: will we return to that area of the city? Is it really cleaned up enough? Mothers of young children are especially vulnerable to fear about their offspring. Pregnant women will seek abortions in record numbers following a dirty bomb event.

IT'S ALMOST INCOMPREHENSIBLE REALLY.

It gets incomprehensible when you start talking about the economic impact. The psychological impacts, we will be able to overcome, especially with proper education. But the economic impact can be absolutely devastating. I'm one of the few people saying this. The results of a large, particularly nasty dirty bomb in say, three cities, Chicago, Houston and New York city could equal the economic loss equal to the national debt.

MEANING IT SETS IN PLACE THE DOMINOES OF PEOPLE RETRACTING, NO ONE GOING ANYWHERE, ALL THE MONEY TO CLEAN UP AND PRETTY SOON, YOU HAVE A NATION THAT IS NOT FUNCTIONING AT ALL?

functioning at a crippled state, yes. What can happen is you have city blocks that are contaminated. Some buildings will have to be raised, completely demolished and buried. All the material has to be moved to a safe place in a safe manner. The loss of business for those areas where you would literally have to move part of a city and all of the offices, all of the businesses to another city somewhere else throughout the country. The people who are in that area will be seeking medical care, whether or not they need it. The impact of that alone will be in the hundreds of billions of dollars.

DO YOU THINK AMERICANS YET HAVE ABSORBED THE FACT THAT IF THERE IS A SUITCASE NUKE IN THE HANDS OF A TERRORIST IN THE UNITED STATES THAT CAME FROM THE SOVIET UNION TIME, THAT IT HAS THE EQUIVALENT POWER OF A HIROSHIMA OR NAGASAKI BOMB EVEN WITH MODERN TECHNIQUES OF PUTTING IT IN A SUITCASE, IT IS A SMALL OBJECT, BUT THE POWER IT CAN UNLEASH COULD TAKE OUT SOMETHING LIKE A MILE OR TWO MILES OF FLATTENING BUILDINGS AND EARTH LIFE WHERE SUCH A BOMB WOULD GO OFF.

I have a blind spot there myself, so I think your assertion that the people have not understood this is correct. I think that if a terrorist had a nuclear suitcase bomb in the United States, it would have been used by now. But that's not good thinking and it's not accurate. It might be arguable that that's the case. But I have a blind spot there because it's just too terrible to think about."

Websites:

<http://www.dhs.gov> U.S. Department of Homeland Security

<http://www.fema.gov> Federal Emergency Management Agency

<http://ndms.dhhs.gov> National Disaster Medical System

<http://www.bt.cdc.gov> Centers for Disease Control Public Health Emergency

<http://www.terrorismanswers.com/weapons/dirtybomb.html> Council on Foreign Relations

<http://www.bt.cdc.gov/radiation/dirtybombs.asp> Centers for Disease Control

<http://www.fas.org/faspir/2002/v55n2/dirtybomb.htm> Journal of Federation of American Scientists

<http://www.nrc.gov/reading-rm/doc-collections/fact-sheets/dirty-bombs.html> Nuclear Regulatory Comm.

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