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Hearing on "Nuclear Terrorism: Providing Medical Care and Meeting Basic Needs in the Aftermath"
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Introduction

Mr. Chairman, Senator Collins, and members of the Committee, I am pleased to testify in front of you today on behalf of Hill & Knowlton, as this panel examines the issue of nuclear terrorism and providing a strategy for clear communications that will save as many lives as possible in the aftermath of such an event.

This Committee has taken a real leadership role in ensuring that our nation is as prepared as possible for nuclear terrorism and other large-scale emergencies, and it is a privilege to be able to provide our firm's insight as part of the information you are gathering for your oversight responsibilities in this area. Likewise, this Administration, with the Department of Homeland Security in the lead, has made solid efforts aimed at improving the means of communication in the event of a terrorist attack.

Norman Augustine, the retired chairman and chief executive officer of Lockheed Martin, once said, "*When preparing for a crisis, it is instructive to recall that Noah started building the ark before it began to rain*." It is encouraging that this committee recognizes the value of this approach. Put more succinctly, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, and even more so in a nuclear or other mass-casualty event.

My testimony today aims at delivering our perspective of best practices of emergency response and communications planning, and a discussion of the forces that will affect our government's ability to communicate effectively with all Americans, both in advance of any terrorist attack as part of a public education program, as well as in the event that an attack has occurred. We recognize that, in many respects, our views are aligned with work that the federal government, as well as many state and local governments, already have underway.

Hill & Knowlton is among the oldest communications advisory firms in the world, with over 80 years' experience advising some of the world's largest corporations and governments in many of their most difficult challenges, including natural disasters, industrial accidents, military actions, and serious health

threats. Our firm is one of the global leaders in crisis communications planning, with 72 offices in 41 countries, and we are privileged to count some of the world's foremost experts in crisis and risk communications among our leadership.

As Senior Vice President for Media Relations and Issues Management, I direct our Washington office's crisis communications and public affairs practices, but in developing testimony for today's hearing, our firm pulled together the best crisis planning strategies from across our global network to ensure that we provide our best collective advice for this Committee as it examines the uniquely difficult communications challenges that our federal, state and local officials would face when dealing with this particular disaster scenario.

Importance of Communication to Saving Lives

As a preface to my testimony this morning, I believe it is instructive for us to examine the events of the past two weeks, namely the natural disasters that struck Burma and China. While the death and destruction in these instances were not due to acts of terrorism, they carry important communications lessons that are relevant to the subject of today's hearing.

In Burma, where a military junta tightly controls information, the rest of the world struggled to learn the extent of the impact of the cyclone. Contrast that with the devastating earthquake that struck China earlier this week, where the broad access to wireless and digital communications meant that vast amounts of information – much of it inaccurate – flowed across China and around the world. As *The Wall Street Journal*, in Tuesday's edition, observed,

> "As the world's largest internet and cellphone population experiences a major disaster, many are turning to technology instead of waiting for China's government to spread the news. They quickly disseminated the information via micro-blogging, text messaging and online videos that reached millions. In cities across China, many were glued to their cellphones, getting the latest news. The result was some extremely swift on-the-ground reports, as well as the viral spreading of rumors."

We believe this sort of response following a large-scale disaster is a cautionary tale for those of us involved in communications planning.

The fact of the matter is that because of such technology, we need to be prepared for an overabundance of information; information that moves faster than any government agency, first responder or traditional news organization. If such technology

and information is managed properly, the result can save lives. If not, the outcome can be confusion, chaos and panic.

In today's world such technology cannot be controlled, short of shutting down or disabling networks. Therefore, we need to test our plans and systems to ensure they are designed for such a scenario, to break thru the clutter and noise.

In short, accurate and timely information can prove as vital as shelter, medical care and food supplies in times of national disaster.

Through this important series of hearings, the Committee has heard testimony that our government can do much more to plan and prepare our medical, mass-care, and response infrastructure to respond to a nuclear terrorism event. The committee has also recognized that one of the biggest life-saving techniques that government at all levels can employ in the aftermath of such an event is preventing further casualties through effective communication that keeps people out of harm’s way, or removes them from a dangerous area, and frees up response resources to respond to those most in need of care.

It is important to note at the outset that our firm was not asked by this Committee to evaluate the current state of communications preparedness of the federal government, but, rather, to give our best thinking, as an agency with global expertise in crisis communications, of how we would advise the government and this Committee on communications planning for an event of this magnitude. Nor, I should note, does Hill and Knowlton currently work with the Department of Homeland Security or other federal agencies on such scenario planning.

Research

In preparation for this hearing, our firm commissioned a nationwide survey to provide a benchmark of current opinions on key communications factors following the detonation of a small nuclear device in a major American city. The Hill and Knowlton survey was conducted by one of the top research firms in the country, using standard methodologies in telephone interviews of over 1,000 Americans from Thursday through Sunday of last week.

An expanded version of the results is included in the attachment, but we wish to highlight three key findings:

1. Almost half of all Americans believe they are not equipped with sufficient information about what they should do in the event of such a terrorist event;

2. The closer people are to an actual attack, the more likely they are to look to, and rely on, information from local emergency management authorities, as opposed to federal authorities and leaders; and

3. Of all the types of information provided in the aftermath of an attack, people place a premium on messages that are, in order: (1) accurate, giving the full facts, no matter how negative, followed by (2) information that is timely. Comparatively few are interested in more abstract, general information such as how the nation will respond to the attack.

We will discuss this information further below, but it is important to understand these three findings at the outset as we approach the issue of communications planning for such an attack.

Communication in Situations of High Emotion

In developing a strategy for communicating effectively in the aftermath of a nuclear terrorist attack, it is essential to recognize the body of scholarship known as ”risk

communications," that has revolutionized communications planning for situations of high concern or emotion.

The principles of risk communication draw upon more than 35 years of behavioral scientific research and are being applied regularly with success by governments and leading businesses in crisis planning. They have also been applied internationally on issues such as SARS, bird flu and the terrorist attacks in the London Underground.

Risk communications research demonstrates that, at times of high concern, the normal rules for effective communication must change if messages are to be heard, understood and remembered.

"Mental noise," for example, reduces people's ability to receive messages, on average, by 80 percent in times of high emotion. To penetrate that remaining 20 percent window of opportunity requires developing messages that are clear, concise, brief, and positive or directive.

Fig. 1 Processing Communication/Mental Noise

(Source: Center for Risk Communication)

Underlying risk communication is an understanding of the factors people consider when evaluating risk. Trust has been confirmed in the research as the most important factor. And, at times of high concern, caring and empathy is equal to the combination of three other clusters of factors that have been found repeatedly to determine trust: competence and expertise; openness and honesty, and dedication and commitment. Recognizing this is critical both in terms of actions to be taken and in communicating about those actions.

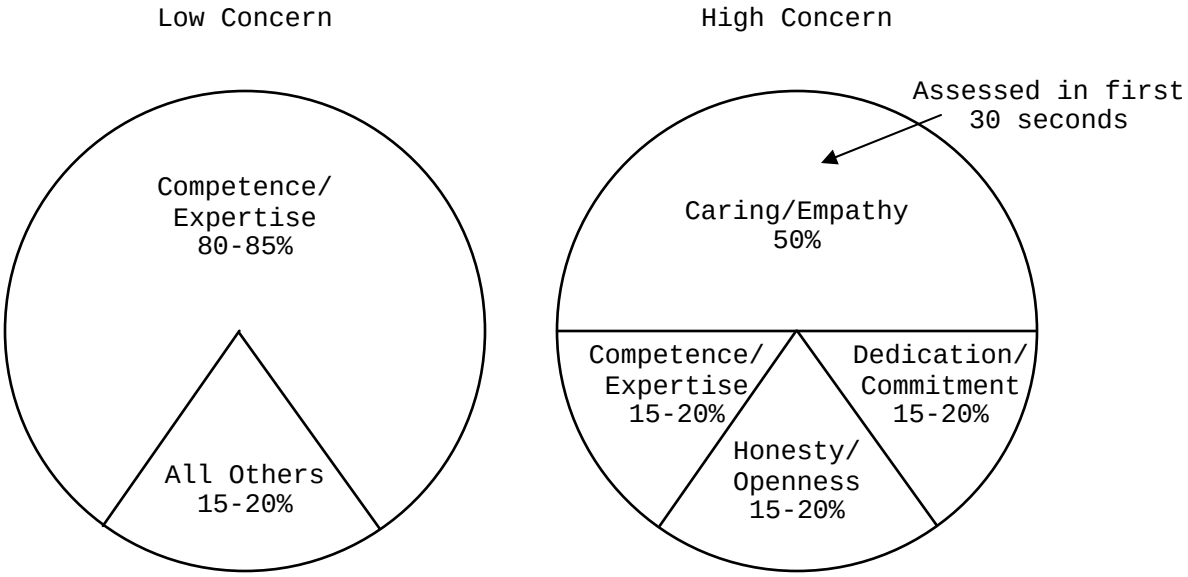

Fig. 2 Trust Determination Factors

(Source: Center for Risk Communication)

Finally, risk communications scholarship posits that the credibility of spokespeople -- in a crisis or otherwise -- generally relates to perceptions of the sources' proximity or independence, so the most credible sources of information are respected local citizens and those without a perceived agenda, and less credible sources are paid consultants and governmental officials. Our research from last week bears this out, as those closest to a nuclear attack are more trusting of their local responders and governmental officials than those at the federal level.

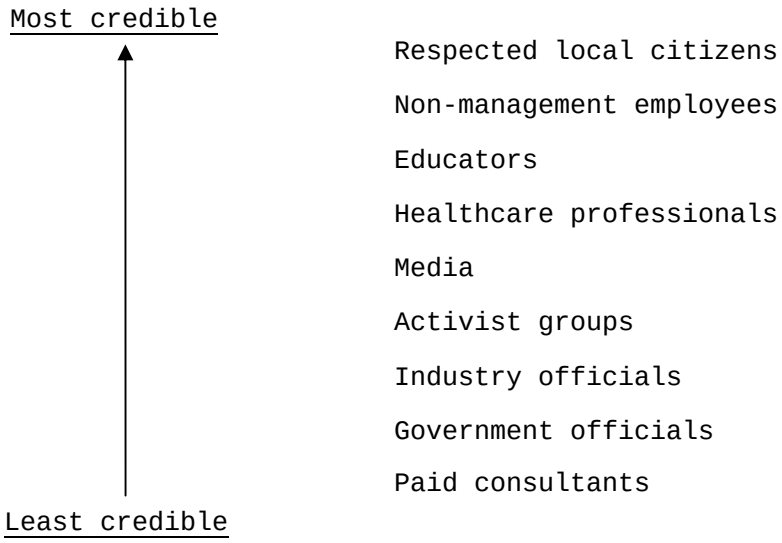

Fig. 3 Credibility Ladder

(Source: Center for Risk Communication)

In sum, then, mental noise, the importance of trust and empathy, and the natural variance in credibility of spokespeople -- favoring those most familiar to the audience -- are key principles to understand in preparing to communicate in situations of high emotion and risk.

Unique Emotional Demands of a Nuclear Event

Nuclear terrorism carries with it a particularly heightened emotion because it represents the pinnacle of possible threats facing the nation. Of the 19 types of major disasters listed by the Department of Homeland Security on its educational website -- from influenza pandemics to floods, hurricanes and tornadoes,

and even radiological devices, or “dirty bombs” –- probably none is as emotionally freighted from a communications perspective as a nuclear attack.

The fear and emotion associated with this type of disaster is probably greater than any other disaster, as it involves not only the attack itself, likely from an unknown perpetrator acting with the element of surprise, but because of the radiological exposure and contamination that could linger in the area after a detonation. Overcoming the “mental noise” in a nuclear event through clear communications not only represents a greater challenge than in other types of disasters; it can make the difference in saving potentially hundreds, or even thousands of lives.

For example, citizens adjacent to the immediate blast area, who may be better off sheltering in place, might expose themselves and their families to lethal doses of radiation through succumbing to the natural desire to evacuate, if not given clear and direct messages from authorities they trust. Similarly, those not immediately at risk from fallout or other dangers, but needing some degree of medical care, might divert precious resources from first responders and hospital personnel,

if they do not receive clear and specific information addressing the priority of care.

In sum, the importance of clear and credible communication in a disaster situation increases exponentially in the case of a nuclear attack, and governments at all levels need to plan with that understanding if they are going to communicate effectively to save lives.

Roadmap for Successful Communications

With all of this in mind, then, the question is, what should the government focus on in the area of communications to save as many lives as possible? As this Committee examines strategies for effective governmental communications planning for and execution after a nuclear attack, we think it is most helpful to focus in detail on the following nine areas, each of which we will discuss in turn:

1. Role of Interagency Coordination
2. Pre-event Message Development
3. Stakeholder Identification
4. Spokesperson Identification and Preparation
5. Involving Media and Digital Organizations
6. Importance of Public-Private Partnerships
7. Importance of Education and Awareness Efforts
8. Criticality of Period Immediately After an Event
9. Training and Lessons Learned

Role of Interagency Coordination

By establishing the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) through the Homeland Security Act of 2002, and well before then, this Committee and the Congress have long recognized the importance of the interagency approach in establishing clear lines of responsibility and coordination in disaster preparedness and response. The interagency approach remains just as critical in the area of communications planning for disasters, including an act of nuclear terrorism.

Although we have not conducted enough analysis to make a specific recommendation to the Committee in this area, the Committee could consider, as part of a subsequent review, whether to expand funding for such communications planning, or even to centralize it in an entity with a more dedicated focus for such planning.

Pre-event Message Development

With the vast amount of information literally at the public's fingertips, quality of information is more important than quantity, and the ability to break through the clutter is vital.

As our opinion research mentioned earlier, close to half of all Americans believe they do not have sufficient information to make smart decisions in the event of a terrorist attack with nuclear weapons. The objective of any communications plan –- whether it be in public education before any terrorist attack, or emergency response information following an attack –- is not solely to disseminate information, but also to affect behavior.

For this reason, it is critical that public agencies at all levels have confidence in the effectiveness of their message. The best way to achieve that is through research: both in determining the existing level of awareness, and in crafting messages and information that can be shown to be compelling.

Message testing is *de rigeur* in the corporate sector. It ensures the effectiveness of the investment. Going back to the "ounce of prevention" lesson, the investment in message testing will be far less than the consequence of ineffective messages.

Additionally, we would be well served by capturing the lessons learned from past events -– including Y2K, 9/11, and Katrina -– to identify best practices and other lessons for message development and delivery.

Stakeholder Identification

It is also important to understand the various audiences, or “stakeholders,” and their diverse needs and perspectives. From this we will be better equipped to define the appropriate messaging – and means of delivery – both for public education and emergency response.

It would be a mistake to view the public citizenry as a monolith – all with the same concerns, level of understanding, and degree of trust in the various institutions they rely on for information. These are only some of the variables. Perhaps the most important variables are whether individuals are directly affected, or at immediate risk, or whether there is any separation from the specific event and their home, their work and their family.

We do not want to suggest that there can be a set of messages for every conceivable audience subset. Indeed, simplicity and clarity of message should be the order of the day. However, our experience simply tells us that messaging must work equally well across all audiences. Again, this underscores the importance of message research.

Spokesperson Identification and Preparation

As our own opinion research indicates, the closer people are to a nuclear terrorist attack, the more likely they will rely on local authorities as the primary source for trusted information on how to respond.

What this suggests is a need for a planning approach that recognizes the literally hundreds or even thousands of possible spokespersons across all fifty states, even if we just concentrate on the largest urban and metropolitan areas.

If we are to ensure an adequate standard of communications across all these levels and geographic areas, then a plan will need to be put into place to identify these possible spokespersons (or the offices they represent), together with a means of engagement, information sharing and training.

Involving Media and Digital Organizations

Historically, news media organizations have been a vital conduit of emergency response information, dating back to the legacy Emergency Broadcast System.

As we saw this week, the rapid expansion of digital and wireless communication means that information can be sent around the world as it happens, bypassing both government resources as well as the traditional news media. We witnessed a similar phenomenon in the wake of the London Tube bombings in July, 2005, where images captured on cell phones were being transmitted around the world, even as first responders were in transit to the scene (at least until the cell phone networks began to suffer under the stresses of demand). And on the day of the bombings, the BBC's website recorded some 1 billion hits.

This speaks to the likelihood of an overwhelming demand for immediate information, following a major incident, that will tax even the most robust systems. And in the event of a nuclear explosion, digital and wireless communications might in fact be disrupted by the incident itself.

As we saw on 9/11, in the event of a national emergency, people will turn to the broadcast media for immediate information, and will return to it on a regular basis for updates. In times of national emergency, television networks –- CNN, ABC, CBS, Fox, MSNBC, etc. –- have become the modern day

version of the old town green, where people gather to collect information, and to share experiences.

On the other hand, these networks – particularly cable news outlets -- must provide content on a 24/7/365 basis. And in the absence of new or fresh content, they turn to analysis and commentary, often offered by people with very little specific information. The result is a vacuum that is too-often filled with speculation and alarmism.

For these reasons, it is important these communications plans – both the public education and emergency response -- recognize the need to have a means of providing sufficient content and spokespersons to these networks so as to ensure a consistency of accurate and contextual information.

Equally important, DHS must recognize the new world order in which digital communications are increasingly becoming the primary source of information. To illustrate this point, according to a Zogby survey published earlier this year, 55% of Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 cite the Internet as their primary news source. Understanding that this important audience was only between the ages of 11 and 21 at the time of

9/11, we can see how rapidly public behavior and expectations can change.

Importance of Public–Private Partnerships

One of the successes of the Y2K exercise was the ability of the government to develop productive partnerships with the private sector -- including industry sectors, colleges, universities, hospitals, etc. –- in the coordinating and communications elements of this plan.

The Y2K strategy recognized –- and rightly so -– the important role these institutions can play both in education in advance of an event, and in emergency response, if needed. Indeed, because much of the population may be at work at the time of a terrorist event, it is likely that many Americans will need to rely on their employers for immediate information. We must harvest the lessons from Y2K and apply them to this planning exercise.

Likewise, the lessons of emergency notification and mobilization learned and put into place by colleges and universities following the tragic events at Virginia Tech ought

to be considered by DHS as it prepares for a terrorist attack scenario.

It is encouraging that DHS already recognizes the value of third-party and private sector collaboration.

Importance of Education and Awareness Efforts

As I noted earlier, almost half of our entire population believes it does not have adequate information to deal with a scenario such as a terrorist nuclear attack. This, more than anything else, is the proverbial problem that should keep us awake at night.

The objective of public education is second to none in importance. But it is also among the most challenging:

- How do we connect with a population that is already suffering from information overload?
- Seven years after 9/11, with the public becoming numb to the ongoing warnings about the terror threat, how do we connect with Americans without alarming them?
- How do we break through the barriers of cynicism and mistrust in the wake of Hurricane Katrina?

I would be wrong if I told you that we have the answers to these questions today. But we would encourage current and future administrations that there cannot be a let-up in public education of the terror threat. Indeed, there very likely needs to be an expansion, and one that recognizes the new dynamics that shape the way Americans receive and share information.

Criticality of Period Immediately After an Event

As we saw during the initial hours and days following 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, the volume of uncertainty and misinformation following a nuclear terrorist attack will likely far outweigh the amount of accurate, credible and balanced information.

At the same time, this is the period of a national crisis when the public's appetite for information is most acute. Several factors will influence whether the public embraces the government's response or turns against it.

First is whether the public has a choice in terms of credible information sources. During 9/11, aside from those in the direct impact areas, the answer was "no" -- the federal

government was the main source of credible (official) information. But during Katrina, the various public audiences had a number of seemingly credible information sources at their disposal, some more reliable than others; some with a greater level of trust than others.

If there is only one source, that source will most likely enjoy a certain “honeymoon” period, in which the public, the media and other institutions withhold any attempt to challenge, contradict or criticize the federal response.

During Katrina, FEMA’s “honeymoon” ended swiftly and abruptly because the media felt empowered to challenge the agency, and there was insufficient coordination of message among federal, state and local authorities.

The second factor is whether the event is seen as avoidable. A natural disaster is not, but the public –- rightly or wrongly –- could view a terrorist attack as being wholly preventable, particularly since almost seven years have passed since 9/11, and, during that time, billions of dollars have been spent to prevent another attack.

And while we have no empirical data to support this opinion, simply based on observation, we would postulate that the federal government could well enjoy a very short grace period with the public in the event of a terrorist nuclear attack, unless it can overcome the level of cynicism over an apparent failure to deter a terrorist attack, by way of exceeding the public's expectations for a government response.

The third factor relates to the quality of response from other institutions – including state and local governments, the media, large employers, or even international institutions. The federal government's response will be compared against these – in terms of content, speed and degree of empathy.

One of the lessons from Katrina is the need for wholly aligned coordination and communication among federal, state and local authorities. While politics is an inevitable force that will impact public perceptions of a government response, I think we can all agree is that the collapse of coordinated communications fed the cynicism and lack of trust amongst the public and the news media.

In short, the cacophony of Katrina must be replaced with a symphony of communications, in which all instruments work together.

Training and Lessons Learned

Finally, it is essential to say a word about the importance of rigorous training to successful communications execution in the event of a nuclear attack or other mass casualty disaster. As Penn State's legendary football coach, Joe Paterno, has said, "The will to win is important, but the will to prepare is vital."

Congress and the Executive Branch have recognized the importance of training for disaster response, including the mandate of major "TOPOFF" exercises every two years that test the coordinated capabilities of emergency personnel at all levels of government, including communicators at the principal levels. The communications training at TOPOFF includes message testing and interacting with media roleplayers, including a notional broadcast network.

Once again, DHS and the interagency are to be commended for their efforts in the past several years to expand the rigor of

these scenario tests for the communicators, including the involvement of state and local spokespeople, and the critical after-action, or “lessons learned,” element of this training. This Committee has recognized the importance of continuing to improve on these and other exercises and it is our hope that some of the ideas we have presented today will aid the committee in this effort in the area of communications.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, Senator Collins and Members of the Committee, it has been a privilege to be able to outline our thinking for you as this Committee considers how governments and first responders at all levels can communicate most effectively to save lives in the event of a nuclear attack.

We believe this Committee and the Department of Homeland Security have accomplished a great deal in terms of preparing our nation for such an event. The opportunity now is to build on this progress, by ensuring that the communications planning recognizes the powerful technological and societal forces that have fundamentally changed the manner in which the public receives and shares information, and by identifying those remaining barriers to effective communications.

Government has no greater responsibility than the protection of its citizens, and we at Hill & Knowlton are humbled to be part of your critical efforts in this direction.

I look forward to your questions.