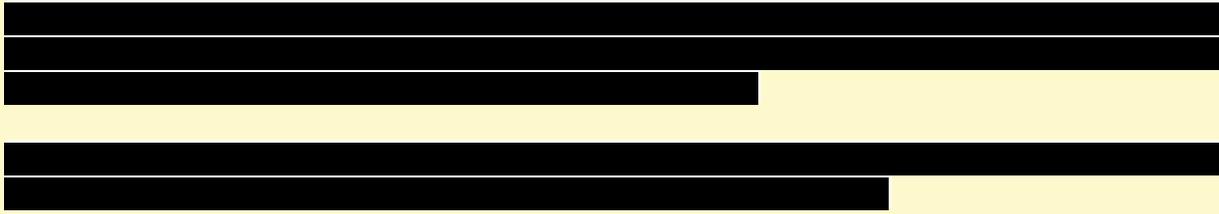


Featured Publication & Special Members Only Downloadable Chapter

ILA Members publish on the topic of leadership from a variety of perspectives. We are pleased to feature a selection of these publications in this newsletter and our Web site.

In the *Member Connector*, authors take you behind the scenes, sharing their perspectives on the work, how the work informs contemporary issues, and highlighting points of interest to ILA members.



Featured Publication

by Arjen Boin, Paul 't Hart, Eric Stern, and Bengt Sundelius
(Cambridge University Press)

The Politics of Crisis Management: Public Leadership Under Pressure



This month, ILA member Richard Couto continues in his role as a special guest interviewer for this feature. Richard Couto helped found the Antioch

Ph.D. program in Leadership and Change as well as the Jepson School of Leadership Studies at the University of Richmond, Virginia. His recent books focus on community leadership, To Give Their Gifts; democratic theory and practice, Making Democracy Work Better; and higher education, Courses in Courage.



Paul 't Hart is a Professor at Australian National University. Prior to that, he was research professor of Public Administration at the Utrecht School of Governance, Utrecht University (where he maintains a part-time appointment).

His published works in English include, among others: Coping with Crises: The

Management of Disasters, Riots, and Terrorism; Public Policy Disasters in Western Europe; and Governing After Crisis: The Politics of Investigation, Accountability and Learning, due out in 2008. In addition he has written or edited 12 books in Dutch and contributed numerous book chapters and journal articles. He is an editorial board member of several scholarly journals and regularly reviews manuscripts for many more. Paul has received several awards including the 1988 Blozo Award from the government of Flanders, Belgium for his book on the Heysel Stadium soccer disaster; the 1990 GA van Poelje Award from the Dutch Society of Public Administration for his dissertation on Groupthink; and the 1997 Erikson Award for Early Career Achievement from the International Society for Political Psychology for outstanding contributions to the field. He has taught, trained and lectured to thousands of mid-level and top-level public officials in the Netherlands and beyond. In the last few years he has been a member of several government advisory or evaluation committees in Dutch local and national government.

Congratulations to Paul and his co-authors!! In August *The Politics of Crisis Management* was awarded the prestigious 2007 Herbert A Simon Award by the American Political Science Association (APSA) for Distinguished Contributions to the Study of Public Administration.

Richard Couto: Paul, fifteen years ago a colleague pointed out to me that there was a hole in the curriculum of the Jepson school. We didn't have a single course on leadership and crisis. So the two of us set to fill that hole; so we put together a course. But when I was looking for reading materials, there wasn't much. I'm talking here about 1993, but since that time we have a lot more scholarship, including of

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course your book. What changed? Why the recent attention to crisis?

Paul 't Hart: Well, I have to say I share that experience. I remember when we started, my colleagues and I, first in Rotterdam and later in Leiden, doing crisis research in the early 80s we were basically regarded, to put it bluntly, as a freak show. You know, you were placing yourselves at the very very margins of political science and public administration because you were looking at these, at what were seen to be extremely rare events. And so your object of analysis was so marginal that your work really didn't count. I think what has changed is on the one hand, in some societies, the sheer frequency of disasters, emergencies, let's call them sort of unscheduled, extraordinary large scale shocks to the system. On the other hand there's been, like any other aspect of political life, the media amplification effect. The effect that the media have on human drama in things like disasters has become quite prominent over the last 10-15 years because the media are on the spot much quicker now and can transmit very powerful images of these events into everybody's room. So if you like, the pressure on policy makers to act quickly, decisively, etc, etc, has increased from that. And thirdly I think 9/11 has generated an immense industry. You know, 9/11 has meant the securitization of almost everything, and therefore emergency, crisis, risk, that whole if you like, "jargon" or vocabulary, that whole way of looking has become mainstream now. So certainly I find myself now being a mainstream person.

Would you say that 9/11 was the tipping point?

Well, I think speaking at least from the European experience, things started to happen earlier, but you know there were definitely national variations that were simply a function of "how many big bangs have you had in your society?" It so happened that Holland had a couple of pretty severe emergencies in the mid 90s. And Sweden, the other place that I've worked and where two coauthors of the book come from, had things like the Estonia disaster. Obviously they had the assassination of Olof Palme [the 26th Prime Minister of Sweden, assassinated in 1986] and some other major things in their society. So while 9/11 has had, if you like, a global impact, its global impact is in sort of drawing attention to issues of risk and vulnerability. Clearly you had a prior development in a couple of other countries, and you in fact had social scientists putting names on these things. You had particular Ulrich Beck the German sociologist who came up with this nice concept of the risk society, which you know sort of gives people the metaphor that they can organize their thoughts around. So I think the development started earlier, but 9/11 was a sort of global amplifier of this.

That background helps explain one characteristic of your book. Its breadth is just incredible, and the range of events and different locales and countries is equally quite incredible. I kept thinking, "Well, only a cast of four co-authors from different parts of the world could have a collection of incidents and access to information like this."

Well, thanks for that. And you know, the book was written by four people, but in fact those four people represented, or were set at the peak if you will, of two much larger teams. Arjen Boin and I were involved in setting up and running a thing

called the Crisis Research Center at Leiden University in the Netherlands and Bengt Sundelius and Eric Stern modeled something after the Dutch experience at something which they called Crismart in Sweden. And both of these teams at some stage had 10-15 researchers, many of whom were involved in in-depth case study research for long periods of time. As a result, both of our teams built up fairly large catalogues of cases. Particularly the Swedes who think they are close to 100 now where they have worked very closely with scholars—with local researchers—particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, the Baltic region, etc. After these countries became Democratic, you know, the Swedes were very proactive in getting communication going with their colleagues, and so there's an immense empirical richness there. And what we tried to do, we weren't always successful, I must say, was to try and sort of get all of the case study researchers to employ the similar set of analytical questions and tools and so on so that you could get a certain degree of comparability. So these are not teaching cases. They're research cases meant to accumulate evidence about certain propositions on crisis behavior.

You and your co-authors integrate that material very well.

Yeah, because the book itself, as you have noticed, is not very empirical in the sense that it doesn't report research. It draws quite heavily on those case experiences to give the readers vignettes—illustrations—but the book itself makes sort of a more generic argument rather than built theory.

Lets cover some of the fundamentals of the book now, starting with what makes a crisis. And let me go back to my colleague. She had been Attorney General of the

State of Virginia and got into a conflict with the Governor of the State of Virginia over the use of pension funds. She talked about losing sleep and worrying. This conflict between her and the governor was a crisis for her. What makes a crisis? Would her experience fit your definition?

It depends on how public that conflict was. You know, a lot of us, I guess at one stage during our lives, have either personal or professional conflict; we have the experience of deep conflict with a significant individual in our lives. And certainly that conflict may generate a lot of stress. So in terms of the effects that such

an experience has on a person, it comes pretty close to the kind of things that we write about in the book that deal more with events occurring at the societal level or community level, which have this strong impact upon the people who are then looked at to somehow address or resolve these situations. And we argue that there is a lot to be learned from

research on how people behave under stress, whether this is stress from interpersonal conflicts such as the one that your colleague went through or the stress from having to make really important decisions under conditions of time pressure and threat and so on. In a sense the original source of the pressure doesn't really matter all that much. What matters is that people perceive that they are under severe time pressure and that they're facing a situation where almost all of the alternatives are unpleasant and so on. And once you're in that domain the effects that that has on people

So in a sense it doesn't matter if the trigger is a conflict of an interpersonal kind or a terrorist event or a hurricane or something. It's the perception of the consequences and the stakes that matters in making something a crisis from the perspective of the people who have to deal with it.

and organizations turn out to be quite similar. So in a sense it doesn't matter if the trigger is a conflict of an interpersonal kind or a terrorist event or a hurricane or something. It's the perception of the consequences and the stakes that matters in making something a crisis from the perspective of the people who have to deal with it.

Let me follow up on two parts of your answer. First of all, it was her experience and her opinion that crisis brings out the true values of a person or an organization or a government. Do you find that in your research?

What crises certainly do is that they put a spotlight on things in such a shrill manner that all the nonessentials disappear. You're almost sort of forced to go back to the essence of what are really the core values or the core interests that we are trying to protect here. And the same goes with peoples' personal behavior. There's only so much posturing and spin you can do in a crisis because the difference between crisis and politics

as usual is that the intensity of scrutiny in a crisis is just unbelievable. I've often been at—you know we did a lot of observational research, and I've seen a lot of situations where you've had local political leaders being completely overwhelmed by the sheer number of media they were dealing with. They were dealing with international media and their every move was scrutinized. Not just their moves, incidentally, during the event themselves but as the event unfolded. Some of those media started retrospectively scrutinizing each and every move of these

people prior to the outbreak of a crisis. So increasingly in recent times, the question about how could this happen and who is responsible is on the table almost from the moment an acute emergency happens. Whereas in the old days that question about responsibility and who did what was sort of put on hold until the acute emergency was over. That's all gone. The scrutiny is sort of complete and absolute and goes in both directions.

Yeah, you have this wonderful example of a government minister who decided to remain on vacation instead of going to the scene of the tsunami.

Yeah, there were a couple of these cases. There are quite a few classic cases of things happening during the holidays and then politicians are faced with the dilemma, "Do I go back or not?" Those that do go back sometimes face criticism of being, if you like, "disaster tourists," and playing politics with the emergency operation. But those that decide not to interrupt their holidays are almost inevitably portrayed as callous and insensitive and so on. So it's almost a choice between two negatives, but certainly if I would be making that choice, I would go. I would interrupt a holiday; I would go, but I would try and go in a low key fashion. You need to be seen to be making the efforts—you don't necessarily need to be seen trampling all the way through the actual response operation which then has to be halted because of VIP security that you bring about.

Let me follow up on the other aspect of the comment that you made before, and that is decision-making under stress. I often think of leadership in terms of critical thinking; that leadership requires making decisions in the

face of doubt. And that requires getting the very best information that you can. Can you talk a little bit about crisis leadership and intelligence, thinking, information? Your comment about making incredible decisions under a great deal of stress brought my comment to mind.

8. The question is clear. This is one area of crisis research that I think has the strongest empirical foundations going back thirty, forty, fifty years, in psychology in particular, where a lot of work was done by people in psychology to examine the effects of stress. I think a lot of this research actually got started in the Second World War and received a lot of government support in the post-war, Cold War period because they really wanted to know how humans coped with extreme stress. So there were all sorts of both experimental approaches and more empirical approaches. You know, sending teams of researchers to the site of major crisis events. And all that research has shown that under high levels of stress—the basic graph that you see in almost all these pieces is one of an inverted “U”—so the relationship between stress and performance goes something like this: if you have very low levels of stress, people aren’t sensitized enough to do their best. They’re in routine mode and they make mistakes because of not paying enough attention. They think the stakes are low, etc.

So if stress increases, then peoples’ performance, their cognitive performance and also their social performance initially tends to increase, and I guess that’s something that we all recognize, you know, that you “rise to the occasion.” But inevitably, all

of us reach a point where the diminishing marginal returns set in and where the sheer number of stimuli and the unpleasantness of some of those stimuli start to have an affect on us and basically start to defeat our coping repertoire. And so inevitably you see peoples’ performance going down. People become impatient, people turn a blind eye to information that they would otherwise scrutinize more carefully. People become more prone to engage in wishful thinking. They become more irritable in their dealing with colleagues and so on and so forth.

The interesting thing is that the psychologists have been able to show that people have quite different stress curves, that you can train people to alter the shape of their stress curve, and there’s been quite a lot of work done on increasing peoples’ mental preparedness and physical ability to deal with stress. In areas of training police commanders, fire brigade, let’s say all sorts of emergency services, command, and leadership positions, if people belong to well-run organizations they will receive training and the organization will have a regime in place that at least is aimed at exposing people to levels of stress that are beyond their coping patterns or coping abilities. So for example, I think it’s pretty standard practice in

the armed forces, but also in police command situations that in a crisis people will stick to rosters. They will work for at most 12 hours and then

they will be sent to sleep. They will have rigid shift systems. This is done to combat the effects of fatigue that set in very quickly when people make the mistake of thinking, “Ah, this is such an important situation, I cannot be missed therefore I should stay on.”

And you see a lot of politicians falling into this trap. You know, they think they are indispensable. And in fact the media sort of increase that pressure because it’s hard to explain to the public that when the towers are collapsing the Mayor is actually going home to sleep. So people tend to sort of work on and on and on. And they forget that the crisis in many cases these days is not over in 48 hours. These things, they last. First it’s the on the ground turmoil, but then quite quickly after that you get this whole pressure of investigations and media and aftermath issues, mass burials, all sorts of things. So these things last for weeks if not longer. So if you don’t prepare yourself and save some of your

The creeping crises are much more insidious. They are basically potentially high-impact phenomena that lack that element of acute time pressure. So they are sort of things that are building up. Obviously climate change is the one of the current era, where it’s quite clear that if this thing materializes, its going to be really really bad.... [But when is a creeping crisis] bad enough to go out on a limb in communicating to the public and to your political environment and say we are now in a state of emergency. We now have to prioritize this particular nagging problem, this looming threat. We have to prioritize it over all sorts of other things that people want done. We’re going to massively reallocate resources, much in the same way that you would when you’re dealing with an acute event. That’s a very hard judgment call.

resources in the early days, you’ll burn out very very quickly, and you’ll get this sort of stress-driven behavior that leads to really bad decisions.

That was an insight that you provided me in the book. When a crisis is over is not easy to tell. The end of a crisis is politically constructed. Can you talk about: how does one bring closure to a crisis?

Yes, this is something that I guess we learned experientially. We studied a lot of riots that we had in Amsterdam in the early 80s when there were a lot housing shortages and social movements of people just seizing empty premises, usually office buildings, turning them into housing and then being kicked out on juridical orders, protecting the property, etc. And this led to mass encounters with the police, and what we noticed very clearly was that the police were dealing with these periods from an exclusively operational perspective. So they thought, ok, we have an eviction date, we will plan towards that date, we will do the eviction, then there's going to be the protest fall out, which will last a couple of hours on the street, and then we will clear everything up, we will see through the people who have been arrested, etc., and by the next day we will return to normal.

Well, in many of those cases, that really proved to be naïve because the very events on the day when you have the confrontation can create so much public concern, public interest, media interest, and political ammunition for critics. For example, if the cameras catch a policeman hammering a protester over the head in a needlessly long or intensive fashion, those images speak a thousand words, and they create a political fact that isn't over by the time the riot has actually run its course. And so the next day the police commissioner will find himself besieged by cameras, explaining an apparent incidence of police brutality.

So yes, crises are not dictated by, if you like, physical events on the ground alone. In fact, we argue that

the rhythm of crisis, the pulse of crisis is dictated by the perceptions of those events and the framing of those events in political terms by all sorts of parties who obviously have interests in either playing up or down what is going on on the ground. And so terminating a crisis is not something you can do by decree. Of course you can declare a state of emergency to be over, but that doesn't mean that the level of collective stress in a community abates at that same moment. If the crisis has generated issues that people are genuinely concerned about, well the media and inquiries and all sorts of other mechanisms will keep those alive and keep the story of the crisis and the pressure of the crisis going.

There's another very rich aspect of leadership and crisis that you talk about and you go back to Murray Edelman's work on politics as ritual and symbolism. Talk a little bit about leadership and the importance of leadership symbolically and the rites of leadership in dealing with the crisis.

Yeah, it's funny. I wrote an article in 1993 on the symbolic aspects of crisis leadership, which was heavily influenced by Edelman's work, which I read in that period. And for me it was a fundamental breakthrough in my entire thinking about crises. Up to that point I had defined crises and looked at crises very much from this perspective that I had outlined earlier, which is a crisis is a situation where a decision maker faces conditions of threat, urgency, uncertainty, and where they have to cope. Whereas Edelman calls attention to the other side of the coin, where he says the term crisis is basically a semantic ploy, if you like, to denote a situation where the status quo in a particular part of society, or a policy sector, is deemed to be critical, or to be problematic. So to call something a crisis

is to label it as inherently problematic, if not illegitimate. And that label can be used both by people who wish to criticize the government or the incumbent elite, and it can also be used by the incumbent elite itself to break through aspects of the status quo that it wants to change or that it wants to call into question.

So he directed my attention to the strategic use of crisis language, crisis symbolism, crisis rituals. And it opened up a whole new window for me to look at crises as highly political events, not just as unfortunate episodes that have to be managed and that are by definition managed in a, let us say, consensual way oriented towards achieving the common good. These events are in fact highly political because people make them political, because people see opportunities in them. I know in the US for example, you've got this whole politics surrounding disaster declarations. You know, the federal government can declare specific instances a disaster, and when they do it opens up a whole flow of money and federal resources into the state, and there's been a lot of research—I think Gary Wamsley at Virginia Polytechnic—has written a very good article about this—you know this whole dance to frame your emergency as so serious that the federal money can flow in. And that's just one example. There are many other examples of crisis politics and I think the Edelman perspective or the symbolic perspective on crisis communication is very useful in helping us understand that dimension of crisis.

I have a wonderful example in my own experience. When my hometown, Lawrence, MA, was ranked lowest in terms of quality of life and places to live in the US,

the mayor immediately called our congressional representative and said, “We have a crisis—I’ve been telling you! Send us some money down here and help turn things around.”

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Yeah, what by now has become cliché, but for the uninitiated it’s interesting to note that the word “crisis” in Chinese actually means two things.

It means threat, and it means opportunity. I think that basic ambivalence is a good way to look at crisis events because there’s always an opportunity in there for somebody.

One of the case studies I did early on in my career was the Iran-Contra affair. And as you may recall, that began very much with a crisis, namely American hostages in Lebanon, which was a big crisis for a president like Reagan. Even though their numbers weren’t very high—they were nothing like the hostages held in Iran under Carter, it was just a couple of individuals—but it was a big crisis for Reagan because he had been obviously elected on a platform of “nobody will mess with America anymore.” So if you pose as a strong man, then grabbing a couple of nationals is a big crisis. So for Reagan this was really difficult to handle, and he made what many would regard as the technical mistake of meeting with the hostages families so not only was it politically a crisis for him, but it became a crisis personally because Reagan was actually a nice guy and could actually take to people. So he internalized the grief and the stress of the relatives, and started groping around for solutions to that problem. And what was a big crisis for Reagan was for that very reason a big opportunity for some people around Reagan who up until then had not been in the Presi-

dential favor, had been marginalized in the foreign services establishment, namely the people in the National Security Council. You know Reagan ran his foreign policy initially through the State Department. And so this very crisis that the State Department didn’t want to touch because it was very complex and Congress had placed big restraints on let’s say creative solutions that one could pursue in these matters. Reagan sort of turned to people who were very gung-ho and saw this as a great opportunity to prove their utility to the president. And that’s essentially how the arms for hostages scenario unfolded. So, crisis for Reagan, huge opportunity for Poindexter and North.

It strikes me that this example offers a startling parallel to 9/11 and the decision to invade Iraq.

Yes, I mean, I’ve just completed a paper on comparing Bush’s initial response to 9/11 to his initial responses to Katrina. And it was quite clear that in the initial stages, everybody was still very much in the crisis as problem mode. You know, how the hell do we deal with this? But if you start following the trail of 9/11 and just beyond the first 72 hours, very clearly you see the equation changes. And people are starting to think very strategically about this and see that it offers all sorts of opportunities to, if you like, alter the course of foreign policy and to attend to some hidden desires they may have had a long time before that now suddenly became possible to pursue more overtly

and in fact quite decisively. So yes, it’s the same sort of ambivalence that you can detect in 9/11.

Now I’m not saying that the opportunity side of crisis is necessarily a bad thing. If you look at Iran-Contra, and to some extent 9/11, you can see that some people run with the ball of opportunities a little too fast, and it has pretty disastrous consequences. But let me give you another example of where exploiting the crisis-generated opportunities can be quite defensible and beneficial. We had in my own country in the Netherlands a rather traumatic experience during the inauguration of our current queen, Queen Beatrix. She was inaugurated on the 30th April, 1980. All the crown heads of Europe were there; Bush was there as vice president, the old Bush. And there

Crises are not dictated by, if you like, physical events on the ground alone. In fact, we argue that the rhythm of crisis, the pulse of crisis is dictated by the perceptions of those events and the framing of those events in political terms by all sorts of parties who obviously have interests in either playing up or down what is going on on the ground. And so terminating a crisis is not something you can do by decree.

were about one billion people watching the ceremony. But outside, these squatters that I mentioned earlier that had the big conflict about housing, they staged this huge demonstration, and they broke through police lines and approached the church. And so the media picked up on this, and so on the day, you could actually see this. They split the television image in half. On the right you saw all the dignitaries in the church and the coronation and so on. And on the left hand side of the screen you saw massive fighting, tear gas, arrests; it was really really very ugly.

And so this was a big crisis for the Netherlands in international prestige terms and so on. But it was-- to a couple of people in the Ministry of

Interior in the Netherlands—probably the best thing that ever could have happened, because these people were in sort of the law and order section of the department. They had been arguing that Dutch police were chronically under prepared to deal with forms of violent protest, and they had been arguing this for many years very unsuccessfully. But obviously in the wake of that incident, within a few days, they got 10-15 million worth of training and equipment and all sorts of other stuff to beef up the police to basically cope with an era that we may not like, but that was a reality. And so there you see policy makers, in this case bureaucrats, practicing the art of waiting for a crisis that basically helps them make a point, get a point across that they are seeking to make for a long long time. So it comes very close to this idea that was once launched by John Kingdon, the idea of the policy entrepreneur. Policy entrepreneurs may actively use crises to get stalemated policy controversies moving again and force through policy reforms that would otherwise be impossible. Some of those reforms may be hastily put together and ill-considered and lead to really dramatic policy fiascos, but some of them may have been actually very well considered, very much in the public interest, but simply lacked the political momentum until the crisis happened.

You talk of those opportunities for reform or blocking reform in relationship to crisis; you develop the idea of the policy entrepreneur very well in that chapter. Let's go back to some fundamentals for those who want to get a taste of your book. There are three key components of crises: threat, uncertainty, and urgency. Do you want to talk about those three and how they come together to make an event a crisis?

This is a bit of crisis research that owes a lot of intellectual debt to the field of international relations, where people started studying the behavior of states that got caught up in big foreign policy crises. There were lots of American scholars for example studying in great detail the outbreak of WWI, which I guess was one of those tragic occasions where nobody really wanted the war but the war happened anyway because the course of events assumed a momentum that nobody was able to control. And they, partly collaborating with psychologists, came up with these characteristics that make for a different state of mind among decision makers than politics as usual. The idea is simply that, yes, in politics as usual, or management as usual for that matter, you sometimes have situations facing your organization that may be threatening, but most of the time that threat is not necessarily urgent. So you have time to think about it, to consider what to do, etc. Moreover the threat is known: competitor moving in on your market share or whatever, but the threat is known, there's time to respond to it, and so you know there's no need to get upset, and you deal with these things. Likewise, in day to day managerial life, time pressure is omnipresent, but it's the time pressure associated with having to do ten different things at the same time, etc, etc, busy lives—it's only when these things start coming together, so something that you perceive to be a big threat—so if we don't act now something really bad will happen or will materialize or will even aggravate—combined with the idea that we've got to not only act but we've got to act sooner rather than later. And that combined with the fact that sometimes there's a large degree of uncertainty about what will happen if we act, who is with us, who is against us? What are the implications of implementing a certain policy in this kind of pressure-cooker

situation. So the argument is really that it's the accumulation of threat, urgency, and uncertainty that places crises in a category of their own in terms of the likelihood of generating high levels of stress among decision makers, even experienced decision makers.

That's terrific Paul. And would you outline the five critical tasks of crisis leadership?

Yes, that's basically how we have organized the entire book. And the five tasks are—the first task is basically a cognitive one. We call it sense making. The idea is that before you can act, make decisions, or whatever as a leader, you've first got to develop your own picture of the situation. So literally, what the hell is going on? Who is doing this? Why is this happening? Some of these questions are much easier to ask than to get clear answers to in a crisis. If you take for example the Chernobyl crisis in 1986, for quite a long time people, the specialists, picked up high levels of radiation, but nobody had any idea where it was coming from. In Sweden for example, they were under the distinct impression that it was one of their own nuclear power stations that must have been the problem. And so sense making sounds easy, but it isn't. Sure enough a bomb explodes in a building. But at a political or strategic level, that raises many more questions than it answers. So sense making is very very important. You stressed it before that decision making to a large extent is about high quality information and dealing with that information very carefully. Well sense making, under conditions of crisis, is difficult because it's not very clear what the relevant information is. The experts may disagree; information is manipulated for political

reasons and so on.

Second task is decision making. This has been the best researched aspect of crisis management, as I mentioned all those studies by psychologists and by people in international relations sort of minutely reconstructing the Cuban missile crisis and all these sort of big events. This is really about the leader's role as, you know, the Truman version of "the buck stops here." Making the big calls. Do we invade or not. Do we send the military onto the streets or not. Do we use emergency powers to evict people. Do we order a mandatory preventative evacuation when we have a hurricane warning. Yes or no. Those are the big calls that ultimately have to be made by the people at the very top of the organization or the political system. So that's the second one.

The third one is meaning making, which is about dealing with that ambiguous nature of many crises, where certain things happen for all to see: a bomb explosion or a flood or some sort of social conflict that escalates to levels of violence. You know, the Waco example comes to mind. Those things seem obvious but what you will very quickly see is that a lot of players, including the mass media, will then start to weave these events into stories about what this means, what is going on. And meaning making refers to the role that leaders have, or at least the need for leaders to be authoritative in communicating a story about the crisis to the public. And whatever one may think of his subsequent actions and so on, Bush was pretty effective in weaving a story about what 9/11 meant, a story that was so powerful that it was almost morally impossible to criticize that story. It became a moral tale. And he was very effective in imposing that

tale on almost everybody else in the American political system. And if you contrast it to Katrina, obviously he was not in control at all of the meaning making process. You know the story of Katrina very quickly became not a story about the power of nature, it became a story of government incompetence, of government negligence in the pre-crisis phase. So the meaning making there was a complete and utter disaster.

There's only so much posturing and spin you can do in a crisis because the difference between crisis and politics as usual is that the intensity of scrutiny in a crisis is just unbelievable.

The fourth leadership task is what we call accounting. This has to do with the question of who is responsible. How could this happen? And leaders are often faced with the difficult task of managing responsibility and accountability for rather unpleasant events. One of the choices that's always in there is, do I take responsibility, or do I push it away? And what happens if I push it away? There's always an incentive or seduction to push blame down and to keep it a long way away from yourself, but quite often you see that that strategy backfires because the media and other what we call accountability forums, watch dogs if you like, will not give up and are not satisfied, because that's what anthropologists have taught us: if something really bad happens in a society, there needs to be some sort of process of bloodletting—somebody needs to be punished. And quite often it needs to be somebody high up and or somebody or something that is already unpopular in a society. And since we live in era where many citizens are already quite critical about their governments, it becomes increasingly difficult for governments and government leaders not to proactively absorb responsibility in the wake of a

crisis. If they try to push blame down, it will backfire because people will not accept that some low-level operators or bureaucrats or operators will have to take the fall for what has been widely constructed by media as government indifference or government incompetence, etc; etc.

And finally, the last leadership task is learning from crisis. How do you—you know, the rhetoric of learning is always there in the aftermath of a crisis, but how do you organize that learning process? How do you prevent, on the one hand, that the recent

crisis becomes forgotten very quickly, papered over, or that we sort of not utilize the occasion to draw some lessons about what we can learn and how to prevent these events from recurring in the future? But on the other hand, you also want to prevent a situation where the recent crisis becomes the model on which the entire learning effort in a particular area becomes based. There's this danger of kind of fighting the last war. In fact, you could argue that there's sort of a proposition there that says, the bigger the crisis, the bigger the chance that it will become a dominant historical analogy, that it will crowd out other sources of learning and it will crowd out a more comparative approach, a multi-case, multi-experiential approach to learning how to deal with emergencies. We have some pretty powerful examples of that as well, where the learning process in the wake of a crisis becomes completely focused on the most recent event and people draw lessons which basically say, let's invest everything in preventing a reoccurrence of this particular scenario, and of course in the future that particular scenario is never going to be repeated. It's much more likely that a difference scenario is going to be played out. And if you completely

focus the learning on the last war, you're just not prepared for the next one.

Yes—as I was reading that section I jotted in the margin, “where would we be without Munich?” [An agreement between Britain and Germany that Hitler soon broke. It has come to symbolize the futility and danger of appeasement.]

Exactly. There's some work, I've done a little of the work myself, but there's many more scholars who have done more work on this whole phenomenon of historical analogies, and certainly in the domain of international politics you've got a couple of those ready-made analogies, and Munich has been extremely powerful. It inspired the Domino Theory in the Cold War period and indeed it inspires the current administration's defenses of its Iraq policy. But you've also got the Vietnam analogy, and those two obviously compete with one another. So I guess many Democrats now are arguing that Iraq equals Vietnam, whereas many, let's say Bush administration people tend to argue we're in Iraq because we don't want any more Munichs.

Paul, this is my last question. You talk in a footnote about “creeping crises.” And it seems to me that those demand even more skilled leadership than crisis events. Can you talk a little bit about the nature of creeping crises and how do the five tasks relate to that?

Yeah, that's a really tough one. I think you're absolutely right in making that point. In many ways, dealing with a straight forward big acute event need not be all that hard. There's so much research that we have now, not just us but the community of crisis scholars, that we

could probably if we sit down we can map out a whole range of set responses and variations on those responses that would cover a vast amount of experience on how to deal with those extreme, immediate, overwhelming events. The creeping crises are much more insidious. They are basically potentially high-impact phenomena that lack that element of acute time pressure. So they are sort of things that are building up. Obviously climate change is the one of the current era, where it's quite clear that if this thing materializes, its going to be really really bad. But as yet, the symptoms aren't that clear or that prevalent, that dominant that we can sort of go out and say, this is now a national emergency, we've got to act. In fact, I think the most important challenge here with creeping crises is possibly the meaning making one. When is a situation in your own opinion bad enough to go out on a limb in communicating to the public and to your political environment and saying we're now in a state of emergency. We now have to prioritize this particular nagging problem, this looming threat. We have to prioritize it over all sorts of other things that people want done. We're going to massively reallocate resources, much in the same way that you would when you're dealing with an acute event. That's a very hard judgment call.

Here in Australia we've got a terrific case at the moment that illustrates this. It deals with the very painful issue of the indigenous Australians, the aboriginals. A report was released a couple of weeks ago showing that there's an enormous incidence of child abuse among the indigenous population in one particular area of Australia, the northern territories where most live. And this was one of many reports detailing the truly abysmal quality of life that indigenous Australians enjoy. The life expectancy of an aboriginal male is lower than

50. So you know it was one signal of many that there is this big, massive, unresolved problem in Australian society. Yet on this particular occasion, a couple of days after the release of the report, the prime minister and a minister for indigenous affairs went public and declared a national emergency-- declared that they would send in the army and the police to restore order in that part of Australia. That they would effectively take over local government in as far as it was dealing with the indigenous affairs. And so they basically made the call that they had had enough, and that they were sort of switching from latent, policy, nagging problem mode to full scale national emergency mode. The prime minister was highly criticized, quite possibly because of its timing. We're heading for an election in the next couple of weeks so a lot of people were saying, they are playing politics with what is a very delicate problem that cannot be solved by heavy handed measures. It needs to be solved with the aboriginals, not by policing them more intensively. So I think this is a nice illustration of how difficult it is to elevate the status of a nagging problem to one of a crisis. You need to have moral authority to do that. In this particular case it's quite clear that the policy makers in question did not have that moral authority.

Paul, this is fascinating. It's a wonderful book. I didn't realize that it was the product of about twenty-five years of research and thought. It's a phenomenal step forward for the field. Thank you very much.

Well Dick, thank you for taking the trouble to read it and asking all those pointed questions. I really enjoyed the interview.

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