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“Homeland Security” Doesn’t Cut It
From Charleston Gazette

As we approach the 14th anniversary of the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building, we must be reminded of just how narrow our perception of “homeland security” really is.

On April 19, 1995, Timothy McVeigh bombed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, taking 168 lives. At that time, it was the deadliest act of terrorism on US soil. McVeigh cited, as justification for the bombing, anger at how the government handled the siege of the Branch Davidian ranch near Waco, Texas and the ambush and arrest of Randy Weaver in northern Idaho (dubbed the Ruby Ridge Incident).

We live in a time when our country is still fighting two foreign wars, is less than 90 days into a new governing administration following a historic election, and in the midst of economic turmoil. Now is a time when citizens may be angry. Now is a time when someone might be looking to get even. Now is a time when vigilance is a necessity.

How can we identify and eliminate threats and still maintain the freedom that we enjoy? It is easy to say that we learned a lesson from Oklahoma City and will look out for suspicious activity.

It is true that we have stepped up our efforts and passed a series of legislative bills to guide our vigilance. After September 11, 2001, we now have the color-coded National Threat Advisory. Several federal public safety agencies were combined under the new Department of Homeland Security to focus on terrorism. The federal government has made billions of dollars available to states and local communities to aid in planning efforts.

But with all of this focus on terrorism, have we forgotten about the other hazards we face? The response to Hurricane Katrina was disastrous in and of itself. Basic security, an orderly evacuation, and effective media relations were botched during the response. Here at home, the Sago Mine Disaster occurred and demonstrated how critical managing public information could be to a successful response. History shows that we did not learn that lesson. On April 16, 2007, Seung-Hui Cho opened fire on two buildings on the campus of Virginia Tech, killing 32 people. Just days ago, a gunman went on a shooting rampage in Binghamton, New York, killing 13 people before taking his own life.

Why have all of our increased planning and lessons learned not helped us react better to these emergencies?

Our view of homeland security is shortsighted. The term has created a neatly-framed box in which to work. After Oklahoma City, we learned to watch for suspicious activity to prevent potential domestic terrorism, yet we have not learned to question the suspicious activities of someone who may have a history of mental illness as was the case with Seung-Hui Cho.

The evacuations during Hurricanes Katrina and Rita were ineffective. Have we only learned to improve hurricane evacuations or have we learned to strengthen our capabilities to evacuate populations from any type of hazard?

The answer lies in whether we will only think in the narrow confines of the funding program that is paying for our most recent plan or buying our newest piece of equipment. For instance, we should not just do a continuity of operations plan because we were given money to do one in preparation for pandemic flu. We should have continuity plans that are flexible and applicable to numerous emergencies ranging from power outages to pandemic flu. We should not just spend the money we receive on an evacuation plan to talk about westward migration from the National Capitol Region. We must plan for an “urban to rural” evacuation from any major metropolitan area.

The West Virginia Legislature recently passed legislation regarding notifications for accidents that may delay traffic for more than two hours and legislation to regulate suitable amounts of time for industrial operations to report emergencies at their facilities. The state continues to fund local planning efforts for westward migration (or urban to rural evacuations).

Such measures are an excellent beginning. The true test is whether we can challenge ourselves to think broad and creatively to address our risks. The old ways of thinking narrow and planning small don't work. We do not need to re-prove it.