

REVIEW ESSAY

***The Edge of Disaster*, by Stephen Flynn**

(New York: Random House, 2007)

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Stephen Flynn has sounded a clarion call at an ideal moment. As the 2008 presidential election nears, the nation needs a debate over the foundations of U.S. security strategy. Flynn frames that debate in a novel and compelling fashion. He also offers a vision for progress that includes an array of important, well-supported proposals. *Edge of Disaster* does something more daring, however, that helps make it essential reading for homeland security professionals, policymakers, and scholars. Flynn not only proposes fundamental improvements in U.S. strategies and programs, but also offers a plan to overcome the immense political impediments to change. Some of Flynn's recommendations will encounter problems still more difficult than those he identifies. At the same time, however, little-noticed changes on Capitol Hill are weakening other barriers to change. *The Edge of Disaster* arrives at the right time to capitalize on those changes, and to help transform the nation's approach to security.

Edge of Disaster is free of jargon and rich in ideas, both in terms of analyzing U.S. security problems and in recommending solutions to them. Flynn offers dozens of examples of innovative programs adopted by states and localities – programs that need such visibility if other jurisdictions are to benefit by adapting them to their own circumstances. In other hands, the range of topics addressed by this book might have resulted in a grab bag of disparate recommendations. *Edge of Disaster* (mostly) escapes that problem by revolving around a core theme. Flynn argues that “Our top national priority must be to ensure that our society and our infrastructure are resilient enough not to break under the stain of natural disasters or terrorist attacks.” Page #? This review will examine three critical components of that argument. The first is that the United States should abandon its current focus on fighting terrorism abroad and invest more heavily in strengthening the resilience of the United States against terrorist attacks and natural hazards alike. The second component lies in the way Flynn would have us build resilience – especially by rebuilding U.S. infrastructure. The third, and most problematic, part of Flynn's argument lies in the *realpolitik* path that he lays out to make his proposals actionable by Congress.

I. “The Best Defense is a Good Defense”

The title of Flynn's sixth chapter captures the essence of his proposal to radically shift the balance of effort between eradicating terrorism abroad and defending against it at home. Flynn notes the degree to which the Bush administration treats “the war on terrorism as an overseas military campaign,” and argues that the war in Iraq is a poster child for terrorism recruitment. He also emphasizes the degree to which U.S. defense spending gobbles up resources that might strengthen preparedness against terrorists (or their weapons) who slip into the

United States. That balance of effort is profoundly out of kilter, according to Flynn. He writes that

The Pentagon's budget and the war in Iraq are costing U.S. taxpayers more than half a trillion dollars annually. That amount represents approximately one half of all federal discretionary spending for 2007. It is illogical to invest so much in confronting the terrorist threat beyond our shores while being so parsimonious when it comes to protecting ourselves from acts of terror or catastrophic events here at home.... Conventional national security has been allowed to trump all other federal budget priorities. As the wealthiest nation in the world, we can afford both a second-to-none military and pragmatic investments that will make us a more resilient society. It is self-defeating to pursue the former at the cost of the latter. (p. 169)

The balance between security investments at home and abroad is a subject that has yet to gain sufficient attention in the congressional budgeting process, especially in the annual Budget Resolution (which provides one of the few – if not fully binding – opportunities for Congress to explicitly trade off one government function against another). Flynn does a great service in bringing this issue to the fore. Recent U.S. National Intelligence Estimates also support Flynn's argument that Iraq has become a valuable recruitment tool for al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations.¹ When the United States finally leaves Iraq, however, the upward pressures on the defense budget will not cease. To the contrary: war opponents such as Rep. Jack Murtha (D-PA) argue that given the degree to which Iraq has chewed up U.S. military personnel and equipment, hundreds of billions of dollars will be required to "reset the force."²

Afghanistan poses a different problem for Flynn's recommended shift in budget priorities. He makes no mention of the security benefits of having evicted al Qaeda from its "state within a state," including the destruction of its large-scale training bases. Yet, the benefits of eliminating safe havens for terrorists must be taken into account in evaluating the proper balance between efforts abroad and at home. Afghanistan also poses a more immediate problem in striking that balance. As the Bush administration has focused on Iraq, Taliban forces have grown increasingly resurgent in Afghanistan. Additional U.S. forces (and a substantial increase in development assistance) will be essential to reverse that trend and to minimize the risk that al Qaeda's sanctuaries in Pakistan will expand once again into Afghanistan.³

This is not to deny that Flynn makes a strong case on behalf of greater security spending within the United States. Indeed, as I will argue in the next section, his case for doing so is compelling. But we should not draw conclusions about the proper balance between efforts at home and abroad on the basis of the Bush administration's failures in the latter. Those failures are so deep and pervasive that we may need to invest more, rather than less, to rebuild the military and defeat terrorism beyond our shores. Some of the necessary investment funding might be found within the military's own budget. Flynn sensibly urges that we reexamine U.S. weapons modernization plans, and look for savings from programs that are no longer justified by the security environment. His interest,

however, is in freeing up funds to deal with a very different problem: the collapsing infrastructure of the United States.

II. Infrastructure and National Resilience

Of the many reasons *The Edge of Disaster* is a must-read, Flynn's analysis of the brittleness of U.S. infrastructure ranks at the top. He makes a persuasive – indeed, frightening – case that after decades of underinvestment, U.S. critical infrastructure is so vulnerable that it constitutes a threat to national security. Some of the problems that he addresses are relatively well-known (including the fragility of the U.S. power grid). Others, including the vulnerability and economic importance of U.S. inland waterway system, will serve as a wake-up call for readers like me. Flynn does more than reveal specific problems in U.S. infrastructure, though. He also offers a broader framework within which we should address infrastructure protection. He urges that we focus on building national resilience – that is, “reducing our vulnerabilities and increasing our capacity to swiftly bounce back from major manmade or natural disasters.” (p. xxi)

The puzzle lies in how to build support for investing in resilience. Flynn notes that despite years of mounting evidence that U.S. infrastructure is corroding, the federal government and the private sector have done little to reverse that trend. He also argues that our unwillingness to invest in infrastructure reflects entrenched political beliefs. Above all, Flynn claims, “Washington's slavish adherence to free-market and small-government orthodoxy” impedes efforts to build a more resilient nation. (p. 149)

The Edge of Disaster suggests how the American public can be persuaded to support investment in resilience. First, we should emphasize that such investment “has the potential to help generate economic growth” and “strengthen the competitive position and quality of life for current and future generations of Americans.” Second, building the resilience of U.S. infrastructure “supports the national security imperative of confronting the ongoing terrorist threat.” Flynn argues that making our infrastructure less vulnerable to attack (and less likely to cause massive economic dislocation and casualties in infrastructure if struck) reduces the attractiveness of such attacks to terrorists, and therefore reduces their likelihood. Investment in infrastructure benefits both security and economic growth. Framed in this way, embracing national resilience “can engender widespread public support.” (p. xxi-iv)

The book notes that President Dwight D. Eisenhower achieved such a “twofer” with the interstate highway system. Eisenhower justified the vast public works project as essential to national security, and argued that the interstate system would provide enormous economic benefits (especially for rural areas). For Flynn, Eisenhower's strategy provides a model of how support might be built for resilience funding. Ample precedent exists for wrapping a policy initiative in the flag of national security.⁴ Just such an effort is underway today with regard to global warming. Legislators such as Rep. Edward Markey (D-Mass), chair of the U.S. House Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming, argue that global-warming emissions threaten “our national security and military readiness” and that measures to reduce such emissions are therefore still more

essential than they would be on other grounds (such as harm to the developing world).⁵ Others – myself included – urge Congress to treat the threat of catastrophic natural hazards as national security challenges. It's getting crowded out there, folks, as more and more policy entrepreneurs seek political and funding support for their initiatives by framing them as security programs. That competition makes Flynn's analysis of the congressional funding process all the more central to his plan for the way ahead.

III. Pork and the Politics of Choice

Flynn proposes that Congress create an Infrastructure Resiliency Trust Fund to restore U.S. infrastructure. The funding required for that restoration effort will be enormous. Flynn notes that, according to the American Society of Civil Engineers, rebuilding U.S. infrastructure will cost \$300 billion per year (though for how many years that level of effort would need to be sustained, he does not say). But any such funding would be at risk of being diverted by legislators to their home districts, in support of projects that enhance their prospects for re-election but do little or nothing to strengthen overall U.S. resilience. Flynn emphasizes that “members of Congress are content to treat funding for capital investment as so much pork to be divvied up among their districts.” (p. 110)

To limit the impact of pork on congressional decision-making, Flynn proposes borrowing from the example of the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) process. Congress appointed an independent BRAC commission to identify bases for closure, thereby limiting the ability of individual legislators to protect bases in their own districts (and enabling them to escape at least some of the blame from voters if their bases were indeed closed). Flynn proposes that Congress establish an Infrastructure Resiliency Commission along the same lines, which would identify investment priorities “regardless of which congressional district a project will reside in.” (p. 110) The Commission would solicit professional input from the Society of Civil Engineers and other professional associations, to add stature to its recommendations and further ensure that funding is targeted on the most urgent national needs. Flynn admits, however, that Congress will be less likely to create such a commission because infrastructure involves so much more large-scale pork than base closures. The Resiliency Commission “would be less appealing to members of Congress because it serves as a very public check on new government spending, thereby restricting their ability to work behind the scenes to negotiate pork-barrel projects to bring back to their home districts.” (p. 114)

How can we overcome these congressional impediments to change? Here, Flynn resorts to *deus ex machina*. He suggests that the president use “his bully pulpit to cajole Congress into embracing it.” (p. 114) There is no evidence that President Bush will do so. A future president might, especially if he – or she – reads *Edge of Disaster*. Based on the assessment of congressional behavior that Flynn provides us, however, even an infrastructure proposal as well-argued as his would seem doomed by the electoral imperatives of Capitol Hill.

Yet, it is precisely on Capitol Hill that the most unexpected changes are occurring in the homeland security budgeting process. Opportunities for members to “earmark” the DHS budget for pork projects have grown along with the department's budget, especially since 2004 when the House and Senate

established special appropriations subcommittees for homeland security to exercise sole jurisdiction over DHS spending. Subcommittee members have resisted those opportunities to an amazing, unprecedented degree. In fiscal year 2005, the most recent year in which the U.S. Office of Management and Budget has attempted to provide a comprehensive analysis of congressional earmarking, the DHS account had by far the *lowest number and dollar amount of earmarks of any federal department*. The Department of Defense, for example, had 2,636 earmarks totaling \$9.5 billion in spending. The DHS total: seven earmarks worth \$27 million (out of a DHS budget of \$34 billion)!⁶

Something strange and important is underway here. Members of the House and Senate subcommittees on homeland security not only argue that DHS requirements are too important to hold hostage to parochial interests, but behave that way. Of course, other committees will also have a say over infrastructure investment (especially the powerful House Committee on Infrastructure and Transportation). The prospects for broader reform of the congressional earmarking system are also far from clear.⁷ Even in the homeland security budget, constituent interests do play an important role in shaping voting behavior on issues such as grant funding, with legislators from rural districts tending to support very different allocation formulae than those representing “high threat” constituencies such as New York City.

Nevertheless, the homeland security committees have adopted a norm of self-restraint on earmarking that is not only shockingly different from that found in other appropriations accounts, but bodes well for the investment strategies Flynn proposes. *The Edge of Disaster* may even help reinforce those norms. Flynn provides such a clear description of the peril the nation faces and such a compelling set of proposals to address those dangers that legislators (and presidential candidates) now have a unique roadmap to help strengthen the United States. Let that process of change begin.

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¹ National Intelligence Estimate, “Trends in Global Terrorism: Implications for the United States,” *Declassified Key Judgments*, April 2006, accessed at www.dni.gov/press_releases/Declassified_NIE_Key_Judgements.pdf.

² Rep. John Murtha and Rep. David Obey, “United States Army Military Readiness,” September 13, 2006, accessed at http://www.house.gov/apps/list/press/pa12_murtha/PRmilreadiness0913.html. For a more recent analysis of U.S. Army recapitalization requirements, see James Kitfield, “Army Strained to Near Its Breaking Point,” *National Journal*, April 6, 2007.

³ On the downward spiral of security in Afghanistan, and the opportunities it presents for al Qaeda, See Bruce Riedel, “Al Qaeda Strikes Back,” *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 86, no. 3 (May/June 2007): 24-40.

⁴ Flynn cites “The National System of Interstate and Defense Highways” on p. 83. For a broader analysis of the framing of policy and organizational initiatives as security-related to garner political support for them, see Mariano-Florentino Cuellar, “Securing’ the Bureaucracy: The Federal Security Agency and the Political Design of Legal Mandates, 1939-1953,” *Stanford Public Law Working Paper No. 943084* (2006).

⁵ Jeff Tollefson, “New Committee Reviews Security Threats That May Be Posed by Climate Change,” *CQ Homeland Security*, April 18, 2007.

⁶ OMB Earmark Database, accessed at www.whitehouse.gov/omb/earmarks/index.html.

⁷ For a skeptical assessment of the prospects for earmark reform by the current Congress, see Robert D. Novak, “Earmarks As Usual,” *Washington Post*, April 19, 2007, A27.