

PREFACE

People are worried, now, about terror and catastrophe in ways that a short time ago would have been merely fantastic. Not to say that horror and fear suffuse the culture but they are ascendant. For good reason. There are possibilities for accident and attack, disease and disaster that make September 11 seem like a mosquito bite. I think we are all now more alert to some of those possibilities and it is wise to face them down. The idea of worst cases isn't foreign to us. We have not, however, been given enough useful insight or guidance, either from academics or political leaders, for how to do that.

In this book I look at the worst full in the face. What I see is frightening, but enlightening. I believe that knowing a thing permits more comfort with that thing. Sometimes the comfort comes from greater control. Sometimes it comes from knowing the enemy, or the scary thing, which proffers a way forward, toward greater safety. There is horror in disaster. But there is much more, for we can use calamity to glean wisdom, find hope.

Tragedy is with us now as never before. But that does not mean we need be consumed with fear and loathing. We can learn a lot about how society works, and fails to work, by looking at the worst. We can learn about the imagination, about politics, and about the wielding of power. We can learn about people's capacities for despair and callousness, and for optimism and altruism. As we learn so do our possibilities for improvement increase. *Worst Cases* is about the human condition in the modern world.

Some say that September 11 changed everything. That's not true. But it did imprint in our imaginations scenes of horror that until then were the province of novels and movies. We now imagine ourselves in those images, and our wide-awake nightmares are worse than they used to be. We must name, analyze, and talk about the beast. That's our best hope, as a society, to come to terms with the evil, with nature, with human failings, and just plain chance that put us in harm's way.

Of course, talk about the worst can be a way to scare people into accepting programs that have other ends, and that they might not otherwise accept. The nightmarish image of a nuclear mushroom cloud, for example, can justify war because the possibility is so frightening that we would do almost anything to prevent it. The dark side of worst case thinking is apparent even at the level of personal relationships. Unleavened by evidence or careful thought it can lead to astonishingly poor policy and dumb decisions. No organizational culture can prevent or guard against it. The only response that will effectively mute such abuses is one that is organized, and possessed of courage and vision. So warnings that the worst is at hand should be inspected closely, particularly if they call for actions that would serve ends the speaker cannot or does not freely acknowledge. I acknowledge my ends, herein. For better or worse, I always have.

Worst Cases is a book full of stories about disasters. But it is not a disaster book. It is a book about the imagination. We look back and say that 9/11 was the worst terrorist attack ever in the US, the Spanish Flu of 1918, the Black Death, or AIDS was the worst epidemic ever, or that the 1906 San Francisco earthquake was the Great Earthquake. Nothing inheres in the events that requires we adorn them with superlatives. People's imaginations make that happen. Similarly, we construct possible futures of terror and calamity: what happens if the nation's power grid goes down for six months? what if smallpox sweeps the world? what if nuclear power has a

particularly bad day? what if a monster tsunami slams southern California? These too are feats of imagination.

There are those who say we shouldn't worry about things that are unlikely to happen. That's what your pilot means by saying, after a turbulent cross-country flight, "You've just completed the safest part of your trip." We hear the same thing when officials tell us that the probability of a nuclear power plant melting down is vanishingly small. Or that the likelihood of an asteroid striking the earth is one in a million, billion, or trillion. There is similar advice from academics who complain that people are unreasonable because their fears don't jibe with statistics. Chance, they reckon, is in our favor.

But chance is often against us. My view is that disasters and failures are normal, that, as a colleague of mine puts it, things that have never happened before happen all the time. A fair number of those things end up being events we call worst cases. When they happen we're given opportunities to learn things about society, and human nature, that are usually obscured.

Worst case thinking hasn't been given its due, either in academic writings or in social policy. We're not paying enough attention to the ways we organize society that make us vulnerable to worst cases. We're not demanding enough responsibility and transparency from leaders and policy makers. I am not an alarmist, but I am alarmed. That's why I wrote *Worst Cases*. It is also why my tone and language are not technical. I am a sociologist but I wrote *Worst Cases* so that non-sociologists can read it.

This is the right place to acknowledge others' help in producing *Worst Cases*. Thanks to Ann Martin for being a generous technological enabler. Thanks to Douglas Mitchell and Timothy McGovern for being interested and interesting. Personal disasters have been softened, or intellectual stimulation charitably given, by Caron Chess, Kai Erikson, William Freudenburg, John Gagnon, James Jasper, John Lang, Charles Perrow, Patricia Roos, Michael Schwartz, Joel Score, Judith Tanur, Kathleen Tierney, and Diane Vaughan. I owe a special debt to John Gagnon, who is directly responsible for putting wheels under the project.