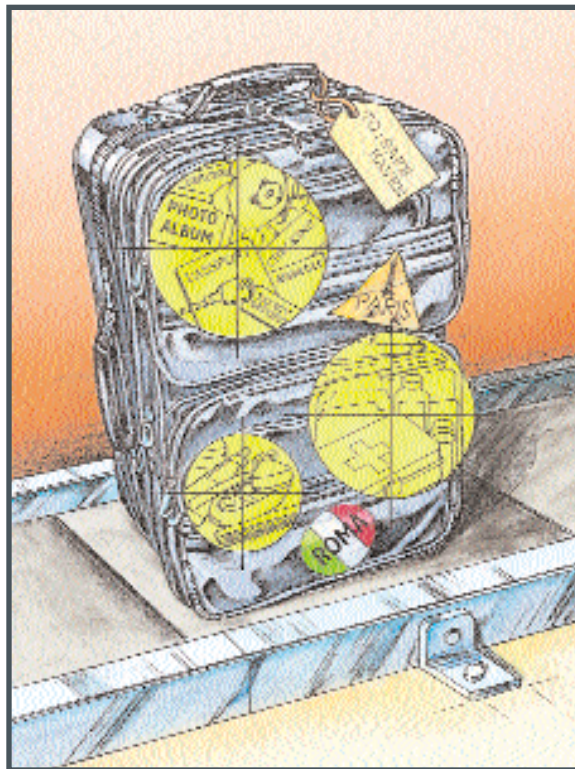


OPS: STATE'S NERVE CENTER FOR CRISIS RESPONSE



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IN THE OPERATIONS CENTER, THE WATCH AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT SUPPORT UNITS WORK IN TANDEM TO PLAY THE CENTRAL ROLE IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT FOR STATE.

By SUSAN MAITRA

n the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, the Watch in the Executive Secretariat's Operations Center beat everyone in the U.S. — including CNN — to the facts of what was occurring at the World Trade Center. Even before the major media began publicly speculating about crop dusters and unusual wind currents, the Watch knew that a commercial jet had deliberately flown into the tower. A former Ops Center employee, who happened to be working in the second tower, saw that first plane hit. He immediately called the Ops Center, identified himself, and reported exactly what he had seen: a commercial jet drove into the tower, and there was no question of the plane being out of control.

Then he hung up the phone and ran down more than 50 flights of stairs to safety.

The Watch alerted Executive Secretary Maura Harty and Secretary Powell's party in Lima immediately, and followed up when the second attack made it clear to all that it was terrorism. Harty convened the initial task force, the first of what would be five separate task forces set up over the next month to manage the State Department's response to the terrorist attack.

This bit of recent history points to the importance of the otherwise little-known and often underestimated Operations Center in the State Department.

Command and Control

The Operations Center, consisting of the Watch and the Crisis Management Support unit, is the nerve center of the Executive Secretariat, which was established in 1947 by Secretary of State George C. Marshall. The former general sorely missed the tightly coordinated conduct of affairs that characterized his military command experiences. The secretariat proved critical to organizing decision-making at State as the U.S. emerged as a superpower and principal guarantor of the peace following World War II. At that time, the amount of time secretaries of State spent abroad rose dramatically and the department workforce expanded from 1,128 in 1940 to 9,000 by 1950.

The Watch and CMS work in tandem to play the central role in crisis management for the department. They constitute a command-and-control system for the secretary of State and his or her principals: tracking breaking international developments with an eye for events of immediate concern to the U.S. or potential crises, and then organizing and supporting the response at the appropriate level, coordinating both within the department and with the inter-agency community.

Staffed 24-7 by a team of five to seven individuals, the Watch is a small group with a large responsibility. Part of the Watch's work is fulfilling the mandate of Presidential Directive 27, which charges the Department of State with "coordinating the government-wide decision-making process for all non-military incidents with foreign affairs implications." The Watch alerts and briefs department principals on relevant immediate, breaking developments. Twice a day (at 0530 and 1530, local time wherever the secretary is, so not exactly on 12-hour cycles), and more often when a crisis erupts, the Watch produces a one-page

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brief of up-to-the-minute happenings around the world. Watch officers are in touch with embassy personnel around the world to keep abreast of breaking events.

The Watch also arranges telephone calls for the secretary and deputy secretary and other department principals with senior U.S. officials and foreign leaders — including setting up the calls, and then monitoring and accurately transcribing those made to foreign leaders for the historical record — and maintains communications support for department principals when they are traveling. The Watch processes and distributes highly sensitive cables (the computerized AMADS system distributes routine precedence cables with no intervention needed by the Watch) between Washington and the overseas posts. It helps establish task forces and monitoring groups, and prepares briefing documents, logs and memoranda for the secretary and his or her deputies.

Crisis Advisor

The Crisis Management Support office is the "crisis advisor" for State's senior officials. CMS officers, who work regular hours but are on call round the clock to launch task forces or undertake other crisis management tasks, focus on crisis monitoring, contingency planning, task force support, evacuation coordination, and training.

By contrast with the Watch, which gathers and relays information to department principals on breaking events of potential consequence, CMS looks ahead and forecasts potential trouble spots, bringing them to the attention of the policy-making audience. CMS reviews broadcast media, Internet news sources and LiveWire as well as the Watch products, e-mail and incoming cable traffic. To determine whether a tenuous situation constitutes a crisis, CMS seeks out the relevant department experts — the post management officer, a country desk officer, an officer in the Overseas Citizens Services office in the Bureau of Consular Affairs, the Bureau of Intelligence and Research or, perhaps, the Bureau of Diplomatic Security's Office of Intelligence and Threat Analysis. CMS produces weekly reports and spot reports on significant developments.

CMS identifies posts that may want to consider a mission drawdown because of a critical security and/or political situation, and sends heads-up cables providing guidance on steps to take before a crisis reaches the evacuation stage. If a mission drawdown is requested, CMS assists the

post and the bureau's post management officer with the paperwork needed to process an evacuation request and will review the document for clearance before it is submitted to the under secretary for management. The CMS also convenes meetings of the interagency Washington Liaison Group, works with the Bureau of Administration to coordinate evacuation and transportation assistance and also serves as the point of contact with the Department of Defense for any military-assisted evacuation operations.

CMS maintains the repository of up-to-date Emergency Action Plans and other crisis management materials, as well as the F-77 Report of Potential Evacuees from each post. These are the basic documents used in planning evacuations and preparing for other emergencies.

Enter the Task Force

Many evacuations are managed effectively at the bureau level, but when a crisis warrants round-the-clock attention from one or more bureaus and agencies, a crisis monitoring group or task force may be set up in the Ops Center. A monitoring group is set up for every shuttle launch, as a precaution should the rocket malfunction and send the payload spiraling off course — a potential diplomatic incident if not a disaster. Natural disasters may also prompt establishment of a task force.

The development of a tiered structure for the task forces has enhanced preparedness and flexibility. Depending on the nature and scope of the crisis and the level of impact on the resident official and private American communities, a smaller-scale monitoring group may be convened instead of a task force, which is generally reserved for a full-blown crisis necessitating the involvement of a number of different entities and requiring decision-making by department principals.

The Ops Center has three different task force rooms outfitted with computers and communications infrastructure, in addition to secure-area meeting rooms. Should a crisis warrant additional task force workspace, the executive secretary can activate additional rooms. CMS works closely with task force directors and coordinators before and during the actual convening of a task force to provide them with the resources and support required to carry out their work — including training on the various roles of the task

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force members, use of computer and audio/visual equipment, production of the log and situation reports, and providing resources such as the F-77 Reports, post emergency action plans, maps, etc.

The task force, which is led by the regional bureau at the deputy assistant secretary or principal deputy assistant secretary level, serves as the fulcrum of information-gathering, supporting both department principals and the overseas

mission, and providing regular situation reports to the secretary and department principals. Representatives from other bureaus and outside agencies are invited to participate — long-term task forces often rely also on the service of retirees. Consular Affairs always participates, for there is always an American citizen component. When the private American citizen component of a crisis exceeds the capacity of the CA representative on the primary task force to manage, CA forms a separate consular task force in a dedicated task force room in the Ops Center. This set-up allows all stakeholders in the department's response to a given crisis to communicate directly and continuously — a terrific enhancement to efficiency.

Depending on the crisis, the Diplomatic Security, Public Affairs, Counterterrorism, Political-Military, and Medical Bureaus, the Family Liaison Office, the Peace Corps, and USAID are also frequent participants, each with a dedicated computer workstation at the task force table. If there are many casualties in a given situation, Human Resources' Office of Overseas Casualty Assistance may also be at the table.

Boosting Preparedness

According to Valerie Crites, Deputy Director for Crisis Management, the 1985 Mexican earthquake was a turning point in the department's approach to crisis management. Given the number of Americans resident in the region, the earthquake required a tremendous response by the department. The task force did not have adequate phones or computers to handle the quantity of calls and information coming in. The communication equipment was upgraded, and is now kept current as technology evolves.

CMS puts great emphasis on training and the availability of information to enhance the department's crisis response. Circulation of the Watch's twice-daily products and CMS's weekly report of potential crises, "CMS Is

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Watching ...", has been expanded, and training for the geographic and functional bureaus, and other agencies, such as the Peace Corps, for task-force deployment has been stepped up, particularly since the events of Sept. 11.

In the 15 months since September 2001, CMS trained nearly 800 department personnel, compared to approximately 450 personnel trained in the 20 months between January 2000 and September 2001. Trainees become familiar with the role of the Executive Secretariat and the Ops Center, are walked through the different aspects of task force work, and get an overview of the roles and responsibilities of task force participants. CMS trains the appropriate personnel for specific roles on a task force, such as the logger, who keeps the official record of the task force, and the deputy coordinator, who writes the situation report. CMS also conducts regular training for bureau post management officers on how to draft evacuation documents and the procedures for clearing them. This training prepares individuals to jump into task force work, and spreads crisis-awareness more generally.

After a review of the August 1998 terrorist bombings of

Embassies Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, the Task Force Exercise program was revived in March 1999. This program, the domestic counterpart of the overseas Crisis Management Exercise program conducted at posts, is conducted by the Foreign Service Institute's Crisis Management Training Team in the School of Leadership and Management. The program is specifically designed to build department expertise in dealing with mass casualty/mass destruction incidents. TFX programs for each regional bureau are organized in coordination with CMS, and conducted in one of the Ops Center task force rooms, three to four times a year.

FSI and CMS are continually working to refine the learning goals, scenarios and methodologies of the TFX program. CMS also works closely with FSI's crisis management trainers in the development and implementation of the CME program for overseas posts. CMS program officers regularly participate in CMEs overseas, representing the Ops Center and bringing the department perspective to the table as posts consider their crisis response plans and procedures. ■

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