The Three R’s of Real Security

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Security – protection from natural and accidental disasters as well as from deliberate efforts to inflict harm – is a basic human need. To a large extent it is a public good: when provided to one it is provided to all. Security is one reason for the existence of governments.

Those who want to play the role of daddy in a daddy state peddle the illusion that security can be entrusted to government alone. But real security requires more than government agencies. On the economic front, it requires infrastructure built for resilience. On the political front, it requires citizens to shoulder responsibilities. And on the moral front, it requires respect for others.

Resilience means minimizing vulnerability. Metaphorically speaking, it is the ability to bounce without breaking. Disasters, natural and manmade, cannot be eliminated altogether. Speaking last month to security professionals in London, Jonathan Evans, director-general of Britain’s internal security agency MI5, decried the “nonsensical” assumption that terrorism is 100% preventable. “Risk can be managed and reduced,” he observed, “but it cannot realistically be abolished, and if we delude ourselves that it can we are setting ourselves up for a nasty disappointment.”

Recognizing that disasters sometimes strike despite our best efforts to prevent them, we can build resilience into the infrastructure of our economies by incorporating the principles of dispersion, diversity, and redundancy.

Electric power is a case in point. As Amory and Hunter Lovins write in their book “Brittle Power,” a grid fueled by a few huge generating plants is more vulnerable than a decentralized system fueled by many small generators. If the mega-plants rely on nuclear energy, blackout risks are compounded by the threat of radioactive releases.

Conventional economics is ill-suited to designing for resilience. In celebrating “economies of scale,” it mistakes bigger for better and fails to grasp the logic of decentralization. In its relentless quest for “optimization,” it disparages diversity and redundancy as lapses from “efficiency.” In cost-benefit analysis, it melts away the future with the magic of discounting, and downplays catastrophic risks if not zeroing them out altogether. This economic ideology is convenient for élites bent on concentrating power, but it is antipathetic to economic resilience.

Responsibility means accepting the costs that accompany benefits, rather than displacing them onto others.
In the United States today, conservatives have hijacked the word “responsibility.” Social security, unemployment insurance and health care from the “nanny state,” they declare, undermine personal responsibility for the consequences of one’s actions. Tell it to the elderly, the jobless and the sick children.

Meanwhile irresponsibility is alive and well on America’s political right. It is irresponsible, for example, to pretend that governments can provide roads, schools, or security if citizens don’t pay taxes. Draped in the anti-tax flag, big money cynically pursues its self-interest in the name of curbing “big government.” The real way to tame government is not to “starve the beast” but to exercise the democratic rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

Likewise it is irresponsible to consume the fruits of polluting activities while dumping hazardous wastes on others and inflicting ecological disruption on future generations. And it is irresponsible to hide these basic fiscal and environmental realities behind a cloak of denial – to enjoy, as John F. Kennedy once put it, “the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought."

Respect means observing the golden rule enjoined by the world’s great religions: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. This means rejecting bigotry. It means, for example, not blaming all Muslims for the actions of the 9/11 terrorists whose victims included three times as many Muslims as there were hijackers.

Respect means not torturing prisoners, not mutilating bodies, not circulating images of humiliation and abuse. It means not terrorizing others in the name of combating terror. Any force that does these things ceases to be a security force: it becomes an insecurity force.

Brittleness, irresponsibility, and disrespect are hallmarks of false security. These leave ordinary people exposed to real dangers, or worse, exacerbate those dangers. If fresh disasters bring more sham security, we will find ourselves trapped in a vicious circle.

There is an alternative: real security built on the three R’s of resilience, responsibility, and respect.