

A GOVERNMENT DOOMSDAY PLAN

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Three months ago this morning, America discovered how horribly real the unthinkable could be. The day in which three hijacked airliners brought down the World Trade Center and damaged the Pentagon should have made us all realize that, if any act of terrorist destruction can be imagined, no one any longer can say with certainty that it cannot be accomplished.

That, with all its dreadful portent, is for now the reality of American life - especially in Washington D.C., the city and the symbol upon which those who would destroy us focus so much of their vitriol.

Investigators say the terrorists controlling the fourth airliner hijacked that day - United Flight 93, which crashed in the Pennsylvania countryside - may have been targeting the White House before the passengers stormed the cockpit.

And Newsweek magazine reports that an al-Qaida "sleeper" cell was about to launch yet another, post-Sept. 11 attack on a major Washington target, perhaps the Capitol, before the FBI sweep of visa violators blocked it.

In the light of these all-but-inconceivable events, some in Congress and academia are concerned that a well-placed, cataclysmic strike - say, a small nuclear device triggered in or near the Capitol building during next month's State of the Union address - could hurl the federal government into chaos.

The Constitution and the Presidential Succession Act of 1947 lay out the route of the presidency from the vice president through the 14 Cabinet secretaries. Since they are rational documents written by rational persons, neither anticipates the remote possibility that all of these individuals might be incapacitated at once.

Similarly, the Founders, in ensuring that the House be a body representative of the people, made no provision for emergency replacement of members. They are to be chosen only by election.

Suggestions that Congress think about the unthinkable and begin to prepare for such massive losses have been met in some leadership quarters by a refusal to consider doomsday. But, horrible as such a strike would be, it is no longer beyond contemplation. We have found our national planning lacking in many important regards. Continuity in governance, should the unimaginable happen, is one of those. It's time to prepare for this horror as well.

