

# **The Emergence of Critical Incident Analysis as a Field of Study**

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This Handbook of Critical Incident Analysis gathers scholars from remarkably different disciplines who share a common quest. We recognize that certain newsworthy events explode into public awareness, dominate discourse, challenge our sense of equanimity and have the potential to live on as icons of an era. We seek a better understanding of these episodes so that we can define their elements, recognize their antecedents, anticipate their consequences, and gather evidence for scholars and interveners who will confront future incidents. Our work follows other organized efforts to analyze incidents, but emphasizes the creation of an academic enterprise, rather than the critique of crisis management from the perspective of public officials. Our quest, therefore, is the field of critical incident analysis itself. To create this interdisciplinary discipline we need a compendium of cases, an archive of data, an approach to analysis that includes science, history and other tools of the academic trades, and a common language. Along the way, we must set boundaries and limits, but understand relevant issues that abut on those perimeter walls. We need to recognize and respect differences among scholars who represent conflicting perspectives. For example, one of our founders, a natural scientist who designed and taught a course in critical incident analysis to honors undergraduates, limits his purview to destructive episodes, whether natural disasters (the San Francisco earthquake), colossal mistakes (the Exxon Valdez oil spill) or intentional acts (the Oklahoma City bombing). This distinguished professor argues forcefully and persuasively for a model of community disruption that reflects, in the aggregate, what PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) defines in the individual: a diagnosable disorder of thought, feeling and function that can be studied and ameliorated. But other scholars, including several chapter authors of this Handbook, contend that positive occurrences, such as the first manned mission to the moon, (those

memorable steps on lunar soil and the view of Earth as a beautiful but vulnerable celestial orb), fit the definition of “critical incident” and should be included in our list of cases for contemplation. Good or bad, these advocates argue, an incident is critical when it attracts widespread attention, changes the way we think or act, and lives on in the collective consciousness.

Since we began this journey, in the early 1990s, such lively debate has engaged and motivated our participants. My role has varied from instigator to facilitator to avuncular occupant of a seat at the table, as others ably lead. I am very, very grateful to all who have contributed, particularly the W.A. Dart family, who saw fit to fund this new field from its inception at Michigan State University, through incarnations at the University of Virginia (where it endures as the Critical Incident Analysis Group) and at the National Defense University (where it is called the National Center for Critical Incident Analysis) to our home as the Academy for Critical Incident Analysis at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Thank you. And no more commercials.

My plan for this chapter is a walk through the past two decades of direct involvement in critical incident activity, focusing on the issues rather than on the actors or the institutions that received Dart Foundation grants. Much has emerged, but the shape of this field remains inchoate. This Handbook is the first attempt to define the academic science of Critical Incident Analysis. My chapter, the first chapter, initiates discussion, but does not resolve the fundamental questions:

- What is a critical incident?
- How do we best analyze such incidents?
- What do we hope to achieve through critical incident analysis?

Let us return to 1991 and begin the journey.

### **Saddam Hussein Calls a Meeting**

Remember the term “human shields”? It was during the first Bush presidency that Iraq invaded Kuwait and we prepared to retaliate in a Desert Storm. To make us think twice about an air attack, Saddam captured Americans and other westerners who worked in the oil industry and held them at various locations so that we would not bomb those locations. Many of these men were married to Islamic women who were natives of Kuwait and Iraq. The women evacuated to the United States, congregating on the East Coast. I received a call from a journalist-friend who described the hardship of these women, filled with fear, alien and alone, needing psychological and social support.

I also heard from a mental health colleague who wanted to mobilize PTSD experts to provide pro bono therapy for these wives of human shields. We formed a unit of volunteers and did just that, calling ourselves “USA-GIVE.” Most of us were founders of the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies. This activity caused us to reconvene in weekly phone calls, managing the new charity, a decade after we first defined PTSD as a medical diagnosis.

The work went well, but then an extraordinary event arose. One of the wives decided, on her own, to seek an audience with Saddam Hussein to implore him to release her husband. Another wife learned of this and asked to join. A movement began, with prominent Americans (Andrew Young, John Connelly), interested in co-leading the mission. I found an advisor in the Administration who agreed to provide anonymous guidance to me and the group about the timing of the visit. She was of high rank in the State Department and she said, “If my husband were a hostage I would do this. But we cannot appear to be involved.” The very first donation

from Dart that I secured as Foundation representative supported this mission, once Saddam Hussein agreed to meet with the wives of his human shields. I made sure that the journalist who alerted me to the plight of the wives had a place on the plane to Baghdad.

It worked.

The husbands of these wives were released as a gesture of humanity and the other human shields were granted freedom several weeks later during the Christmas holiday season.

This “incident” was never critical as a diplomatic, political or historic occurrence. Other events dominated the public agenda and shaped the flow of history. But it mattered to a small circle of therapists, journalists and unofficial interveners. We helped Saddam Hussein call a meeting and we celebrated a significant victory.

### **Waco Burns - and So Do Those Who Expected Better From the FBI**

Fast forward a few years to the spring of 1993 and the Branch Davidian stand-off at Waco, Texas. A cult leader named David Koresh created a bizarre community of followers -- men, women and children -- who revered him as a prophet, permitted him sexual access to married women and under-age girls, and lived as a collective in an armed compound. Because their weapons were illegal, an ATF field office team (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms) attempted an assault and arrest. In retrospect, this was a badly botched job. Agents were killed, the compound became a barricaded fortress, and the FBI was deployed to intervene. Like the 444 day American embassy siege in Tehran, this 51 day televised incident became popular theater, national conversation, and a deadly encounter for all participants.

I had a minor role. An ABC Nightline producer asked me to participate in a Ted Koppel interview on the question of whether the FBI was trying to influence David Koresh through its

press conferences. To better prepare for that interview, I called the former chief of the Behavioral Science Unit of the FBI who put me in touch with the incident commander, the Deputy Assistant Director of the FBI. I was told that the FBI did not use media to influence Koresh, but I was asked to mention a few things in my Nightline interview that might advance a theme in the current negotiation. Interesting paradox! We do not send signals through television interviews, but we will try this time.

The interview was taped but it never ran. The FBI attacked that very night and Waco burned. The losses were terrible. Insiders knew about conflict between advocates for prolonged negotiation and advocates for an aggressive end to a national spectacle. The Attorney General was new on the job and, in the opinion of all those I knew and trusted as insiders, was misled into believing that Koresh posed a sexual threat to underage girls when he actually was injured and only able to focus attention on his idiosyncratic analysis of the Book of Revelation -- which was central to his terms for surrender to authorities.

Possibly because of this limited personal involvement, possibly because of my optimism from the mission to free human shields, I was delighted to receive separate requests from a retired FBI leader and an investigative journalist to help each analyze the tragedy at Waco. One wanted to prepare a "white paper" for the FBI director, constructively criticizing the erroneous use of force. The other was tasked by a prestigious journalism review to criticize the reporting of Waco. I decided to invite both to Michigan State University, to ask the Dart Foundation to donate a small amount to cover costs, and to invite an eclectic group of faculty to attend a private discussion of emerging ideas.

Both individuals eventually wrote their critiques. Our faculty group never made a public report, but we did conduct a conversation at a television studio that resulted in a training tape for

the FBI Academy. And we generated several ideas for seminars, research papers and college courses.

Waco became a major national incident, with a national commission charged to investigate and report to the government and the people. A dissent was authored by a Harvard professor who is a psychiatrist and a lawyer. He came to Michigan State to address a large audience. The sponsor was our new Critical Incident Analysis Group and the host was the Dean of the College of Natural Science. The audience was very interesting: students, faculty, and members of the Michigan Militia.

Waco was a critical incident because children were burned to death as a large television audience watched in horror. Waco was critical because the FBI was the crisis management arm of the Administration, and the Attorney General and the President were clearly responsible for approving the “terms of engagement.” But Waco was also critical because the nation was experiencing a strange phenomenon called “the patriot movement” or the “citizen militia.” This was not entirely new, but it took shape in that era with military uniforms, insignia of rank, training camps in rural counties, and leaders who were preachers and gun store owners and frequent guests on Nightline. My state, Michigan, had one of the largest militias in the nation. They were incensed by the slaughter at Waco and they wanted government agents held accountable.

I found myself more concerned about the rise of the militia than about radical cults like the Davidians. Would the movement grow into a powerful political force? Could it undermine legitimate law enforcement as a rural vigilante operation? And would the FBI find itself drawn into a series of battles with this new adversary, further wounding its agents and its reputation?

The losses at Waco were profound, but something was growing out of the disaster that could be even more disastrous: a breach of trust between government and governed.

### **Domestic Diplomacy**

To address this dire consequence of a bungled federal operation, my ex-FBI colleague and I decided to search for allies in the militia movement. We reasoned that men who cared about the Constitution and who claimed to abhor violence would appreciate respect and recognition from an odd-couple of retired federal employees.

I asked a rural Michigan newspaper editor about approachable militia leaders and he arranged a meeting with one in his office. The man who agreed to talk with me was, from 9 to 5 on work days, a sanitary engineer with the county health department. After hours, he trained with the Wolverine Militia. We eyed each other warily, but gradually found common ground, deploring the tactics at Waco and regretting the shooting of Vicki Weaver at Ruby Ridge in Idaho (that was a previous incident involving a family of white separatists and an FBI marksman who shot and killed a woman during a tense negotiation). Ultimately we agreed that no harm could come from arranging a larger pow wow. The next meeting would involve my friend from the FBI, a professor from MSU, and leaders of the militia.

We had that summit at a back room in a lodge near Lake Michigan. All we did was introduce ourselves in long, personal biographies. We talked about parents and values and ways we felt called-upon to help others. We ate a meal. And we recognized that we all wanted the FBI to succeed without bloodshed when future incidents arose.

At the same time that this link was forming, the FBI reorganized, in part due to its analysis of Waco. They established a unit based at the Quantico training academy called the



Critical Incident Response Group. No longer would a regional office run an operation that had national implications, a national audience, and a complicated set of diplomatic and tactical options. The CIRG would take charge.

Our Michigan State Critical Incident Analysis Group testified in favor of the creation of the CIRG. The newly appointed director of the CIRG visited our classes at Michigan State. But more significantly, he agreed to establish a “secret hotline” with the militia leaders we identified up north.

This hotline was a form of “domestic diplomacy” and a direct outgrowth of critical incident analysis. We kept it “warm” rather than “hot” through phone calls and face-to-face meetings as various opportunities arose. For example, a militia leader’s wife was arrested at a demonstration, and one of us from the university was able to assure appropriate attention to her medical needs.

Soon afterward there were two dangerous episodes requiring FBI action. One was the Freemen standoff in Montana and the other involved a radical separatist group advocating a “Republic of Texas.” In both instances, the hotline was activated and the militia leaders helped with mediation. No lives were lost. The FBI operational commander told me, “That was the best thing that happened on my watch,” referring to the relationship we designed, thanks to critical incident analysis after Waco.

### **A Model Emerges**

During our academic conversations and our operational interventions, we came to realize that three very different aspects of any critical incident required attention. The first was the place and

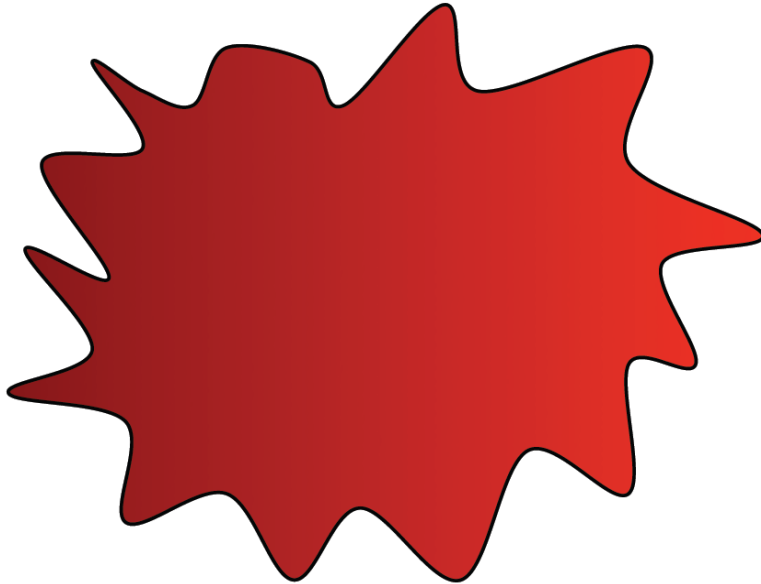
people directly involved in a dire or deadly event. We drew a circle and called this “The Event.”

Figure 1



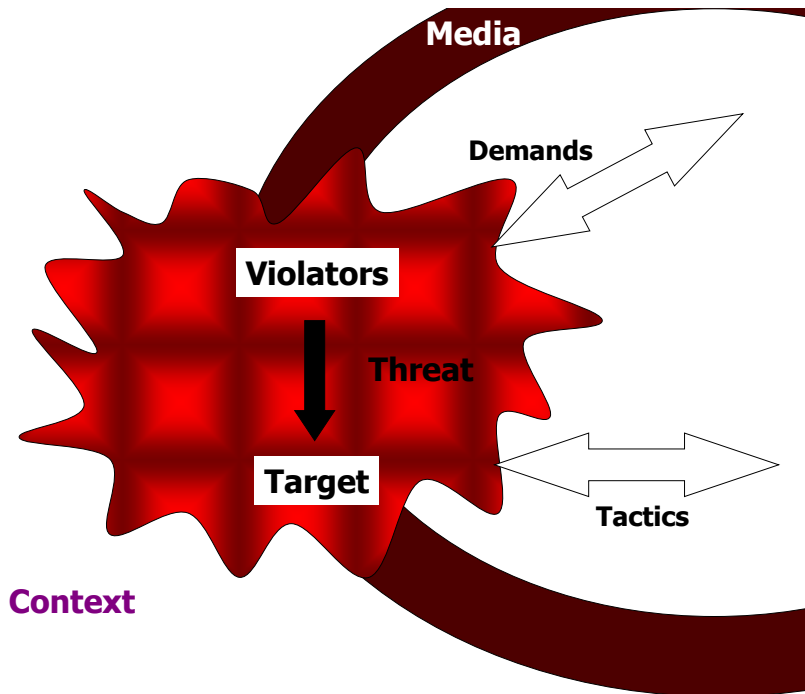
The event was bound by time and space and constituted a theater of action. In this event lives were threatened, demands were made, destructive forces were unleashed, oil was spilled, wildlife was destroyed, buildings collapsed. At some point, the damage was done and an aftermath of suffering began. We argued about the time that should be assigned to this circle, since the arena of action in which critical incidents occur can feel prolonged to those at the eye of the storm. A hurricane hits and a city is devastated. The incident doesn't end when the wind stops blowing, or when the floodwater recedes. When does an incident end? And how far does the boundary of an incident extend? Due to the unclear perimeter in time and place, we eventually changed this circle to an amoeba-shape and colored it red. The “Red Blob” symbolizes “The Event” in our model of critical incident analysis.

Figure 2



Within this arena there are often perpetrators and victims. In an armed cult event, like Waco, the line between perpetrators and victims may be difficult to draw. The 20 children who died were victims in every sense of the word. But what about the men who fired at law enforcement officers and died as martyrs to their radical beliefs? They were not as clearly culpable as the Columbine killers who left a record of their contempt for fellow classmates. The fact that Waco was a long siege and received national television coverage contributed to the impact of the event, beyond Waco, beyond Texas, beyond America. And because those responsible for resolving the crisis needed to consider and possibly employ diplomacy, SWAT techniques, fire safety, cult awareness and public relations, the “Red Blob” was a complicated incident, indeed.

Figure 3



As we, the self-appointed critical incident analysts, thought about such complicated events, we realized that there was a second concept to contemplate and illustrate. This concept referred to the interveners who were responsible for crisis containment, crisis management, and many related functions. In the case of Waco, this group included ATF, FBI, local authorities, political leaders at several levels of government, intelligence gatherers, technical experts--an array of groups and individuals who were not necessarily organized into a coherent whole. We labeled this "The Bureaucracy and Adhocracy." Eventually, we turned this into a green triangle, symbolizing a hierarchy with supervisors and subordinates who deployed according to policy and procedure.

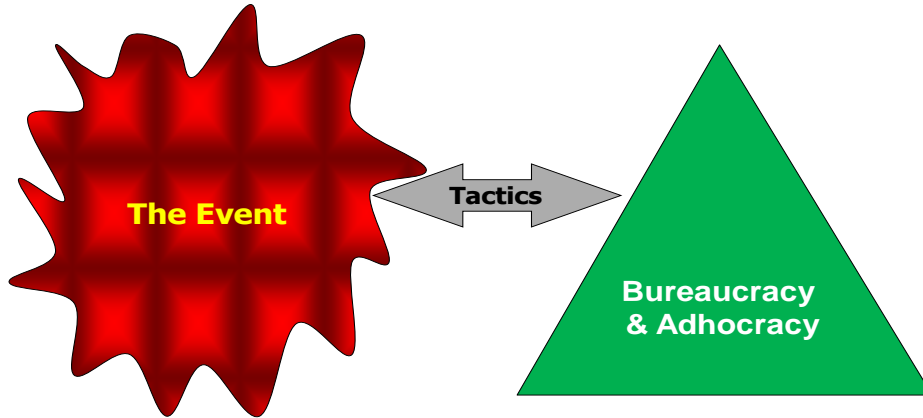
Figure 4



It is a vast oversimplification. There is no coordinated structure to manage a critical incident according to plan. In some cases, an incident is resolved in a way that meets with relative approval from the citizenry. More often, there is a “blame game” fueled by litigants, pundits and media. The public perception of competence on the part of those in the green triangle mitigates the larger impact of the tragedy in the red blob. This emerged as a very important conclusion and is a fundamental feature of the model.

To analyze a critical incident, we must consider not only the forces unleashed at ground zero (the red blob) but the behavior of those who we hold responsible for safety before during and after the event (the green triangle). The critical incident is more critical when the interveners bungle the job, and it is even more critical when those interveners are agents of the nation rather than a county or state.

Figure 5



There is a third arena and it is the most important of all. We eventually made this a blue box and called it “The Political Arena.” This box represents the government and the governed. It also contains the larger community that resonates to the events, identifies with the victims, and cares deeply about the competence of the responsible authorities. The Political Arena is riven with pre-existing social “fault lines.” These are the lines that divide race, class, partisan party-members, and other factions of humanity.

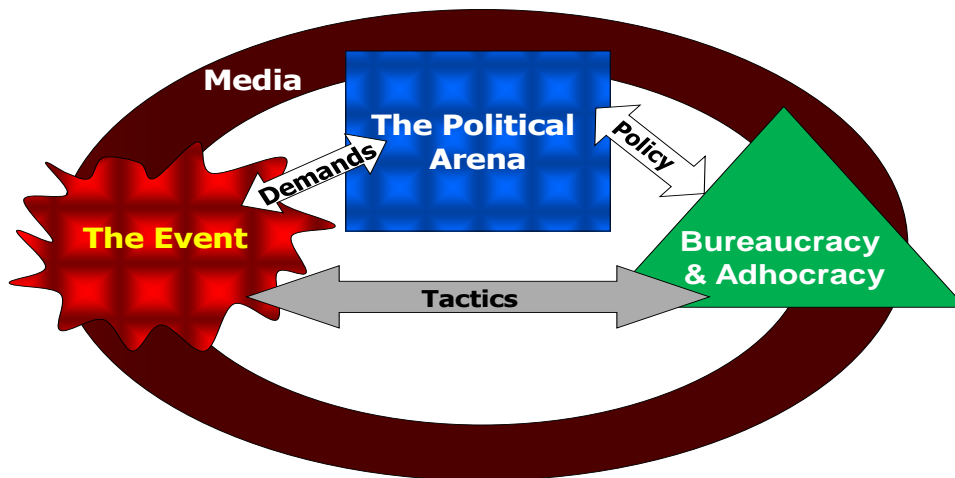
Figure 6



Some communities are cohesive and they withstand trauma and tragedy well. Some are brittle and vulnerable, easily moved to recrimination or regression or riot or, at the extreme, genocide, by a combination of combustible conditions, instigated by an incident.

My greatest fear is that a mismanaged event will alienate government and governed, and drive open the fault-lines that divide factions. Terrorists plot ways to accomplish this destruction of democracy. Demagogues smell such opportunities and rouse the rabble. Certain media outlets prefer to add fuel to these fires, while the best professional journalists (a diminishing breed) offer fact and fair discussion as a remedy for bloviation. The media is usually part of the incident, informing, connecting and influencing the Political Arena and the other arenas of action.

Figure 7



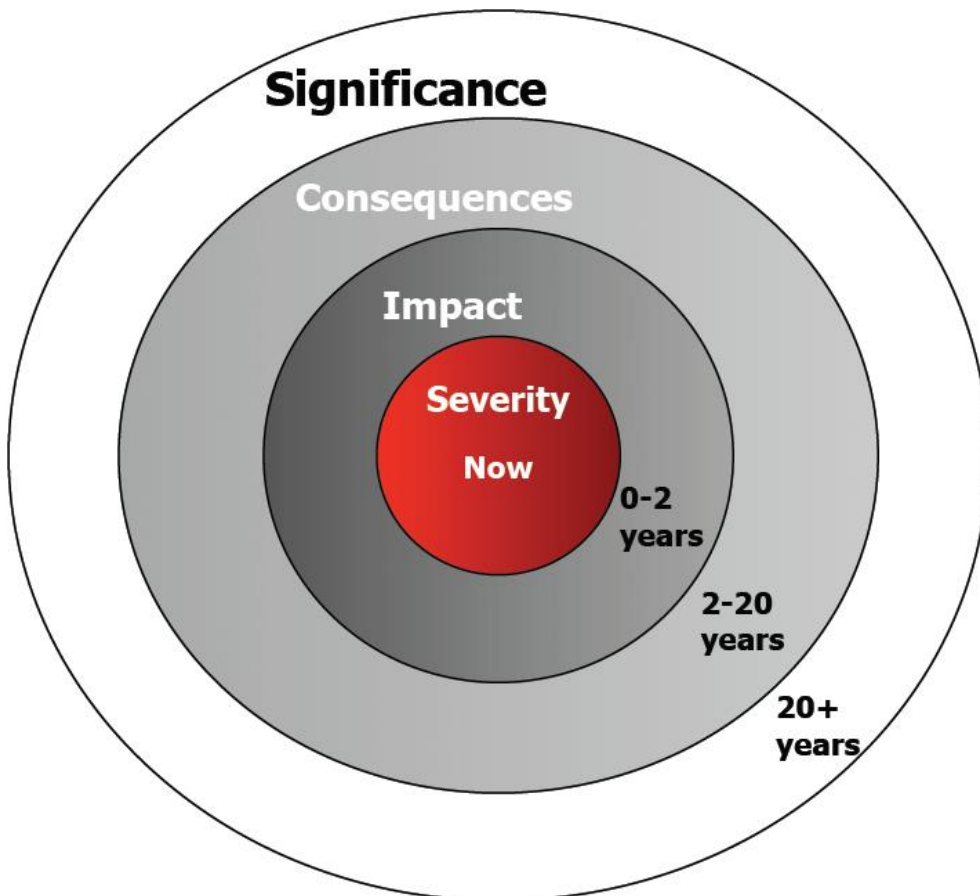
The model is elaborated in several Handbook chapters and is still evolving. Models should simplify complicated concepts, not add to complexity. But our model is currently a bit too cluttered, awaiting the Einstein among us who will discover a formula like  $E = MC$  squared. Perhaps the Intensity (I) of the Red Blob times the Efficacy (E) of the Green Triangle

equals the Quality (Q) of the polity in the Blue Box. An interdisciplinary science of incident analysis may, eventually, find appropriate metrics for elusive concepts.

The incident, then, is all of the above. It is the time and place in which a profound event occurs, including those directly impacted. It is the people and the agencies that rush to rescue, including those who are responsible for preventing and managing such matters. It is the body politic that is affected, for better or worse, as this event unfolds.

Other models portray the aftermath of an incident and speak to such concepts as impact, consequence and long-term meaning.

Figure 8





We are still struggling with these concepts. One of our number, a journalist and author, sees little use in predicting the historic significance of unfolding events. Larger events like a world war are significant, he says. But a local incident like Kent State made no lasting difference in the larger theater of human events. Others see the shooting of four students by the National Guard at Kent State as an enduring icon of an era, emblematic of American conflict about more than war policy in the “Age of Aquarius.” It was, they assert, about hawks and doves and innocence and arrogance. Had there been no press photographer to capture the grief and horror of a campus coed, I would not remember Kent State, viscerally, the way I do. I’m not the only one of my generation who feels that way. Critical incidents have significance when they elicit common intense recollection.

So we struggle to define and describe how these incidents endure through time and what they mean, long after the dust of destruction has settled.

### **A college course in critical incident analysis**

Three professors agreed to teach a seminar for two dozen honor students, all undergraduates. One was a paleobotanist, but a Renaissance man who could teach any science subject and humanities as well. One was a journalist and a lawyer. I was the third. Our scientist led the team, organized the syllabus, and set a high standard, using every session to demand critical thinking and conclusion based on evidence.

Studies began with earthquakes, floods and fires. Students learned fundamental facts about tectonic plates, hydraulics and combustion. They read historic cases and came to understand why some communities were far more vulnerable than others to natural disaster. They compared the journalism of early America to modern times and saw similarities

and differences in the style of telling trauma stories. They knew the difference between traumatic stress and grief. Later they learned the concept of human error and the meaning of tort and criminal negligence. Chernobyl, the Challenger, and Exxon Valdez were contrasted in terms of destructive force, numbers affected, and meaning as markers along a trail of technological advance, marked with pitfalls of carelessness and hubris. During a later phase of study, when incidents of deliberate human design were examined, the Oklahoma City bombing occurred. There were reckless media reports that Middle-Eastern terrorists were responsible, but this class of college students knew better. First, they knew not to rush to rash conclusions. But they also knew from previous case analysis that a truck bomb made of fertilizer was far more likely the work of a home-grown dissident. As facts emerged, the students followed closely and found themselves to be knowledgeable participants in a national conversation.

This class and subsequent classes are described in detail in other chapters. We all learned as we literally charted a new course. We learned that the case study method engages a college class. We learned that students eagerly compare current events to headline episodes from a century ago. We found that organizing incidents into three categories, natural disaster, human error and deliberate design, works well for contrast and comparison. The teachers enjoyed the work as much as the students, but it was hard work for the lead professor. He thought about making it a survey course for hundreds of students, but decided that the intimate interaction in a seminar room was ideal. He loved the chance to think out loud with gifted students.

### **Oklahoma City and Columbine**

The Murrah Building bombing by Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols was a notable and terrible tragedy. Hundreds were killed, more were maimed, thousands were directly and deeply

affected as witnesses and next-of-kin. The building stood for days with its face ripped off, staring at us from the television screen and the covers of news magazines. If “they” could strike at a public building in the heartland, “they” could strike anywhere. It took a while to learn who “they” were, and longer to sort out mentality and motives. A criminal trial helped with critical incident analysis, and a death penalty closed the legal case.

Our group found itself involved again. That same reporter who traveled to Baghdad with wives of human shields called me from Oklahoma. He was assigned to the story and he said, “This is different, Frank. I’ve seen troubled reporters before, but not like this. Maybe it’s all the dead children.” So I found funds to send our journalism professor down to live with the media on the scene, and report back to the class. This stimulated some other initiatives related to incident analysis: training reporters about PTSD; helping reporters maintain their own mental health when covering prolonged, intense tragedy; teaching news managers the importance of anticipating and treating stress in the workforce.

The local newspaper, *The Oklahoman*, won an award for sensitive reporting on the victims of the bombing and the editor became a member of our critical incident analysis group.

Because the trials of the bombers, McVeigh and Nichols, occurred in Denver, there were many reporters who followed the story from Oklahoma to Colorado. The massacre at Columbine occurred less than two years after the trials in Denver concluded. Soon Columbine and Oklahoma were linked in people’s minds and we “incident analysts” found ourselves comparing the two events.

Harris and Klebold killed a much smaller number at Columbine than McVeigh and Nichols killed in Oklahoma. There were many more children murdered and maimed in Oklahoma. But Columbine seemed to occupy at least as large a space in the nation’s attention

and it left a lingering stain and strain in the suburban community where it occurred. Some thought that the criminal trial of the perpetrators allowed better resolution for the Oklahoma incident. Some thought the venue of a high school horrified every parent while a federal building was somehow less sacred -more akin to a military target. No scientific study has addressed this question in a definitive way. Critical incident analysis, as a new field of research, may give us tools that will help us predict and prepare for the divided community, the lingering, unrequited outrage in some communities, and the methods that work best to ameliorate problems in the “Blue Box” of public repercussion.

### **Bombing the public building**

It struck me that both Columbine High School and the Murrah Federal Building were public buildings and, in a way, symbols of democracy. Was there something to be learned about the deliberate destruction of such structures? I thought with horror about an attack on the Capitol and what it would do to the morale of the nation. And I was not the only member of our growing Critical Incident Analysis Group who had this prophetic fear. It was the year 2000, after Columbine and before 9-11 that we gathered a group of scholars and public officials on the campus of the University of Virginia to tackle the topic. We included the Sergeant-at-Arms of the House of Representatives, the widow of a Secret Service agent killed in the Murrah Building bombing, administrators and investigators from Littleton, Colorado, and a wonderful architecture professor who gave us a history lesson from classical Greece, through modern times, including the forbidding fortress architecture of totalitarian states and the dignified columns of democratic legislatures. “It is all about openness,” declared the Columbine supervisor, as she realized, perhaps for the first time, how important it was to preserve the spirit of an open society, while

assuring the latest and best physical security for precious occupants. The Sergeant-at-Arms agreed.

We didn't belabor the model during that colloquium, but we understood that an informed conversation about an assault on the public building had as much to do with public trust as with target-hardening.

### **Critical incidents in classical literature**

As a diversion from the grim work of analyzing current catastrophes, a group of us met one evening to read passages of Shakespeare aloud and to consider history, historic fiction, fact, mythology, and the application of Elizabethan literature to modern traumatic events. We included a Shakespeare professor, the deans of the departments of Natural Science and of Communication Arts, a prominent political consultant and an actress who could elevate our amateur attempts to audition for the Royal Theatre. We read passages of Richard II and the assassination scene in Julius Caesar. And we read a few pages of Plutarch and an entry from the Encyclopedia Britannica.

The deans fell asleep, not from boredom, but from overwork. The rest of us carried on for a few hours, enjoying our self-entertainment, and noting how the Bard distilled historic episode into heroic action, accentuated elements of character, noble and evil, and left us both exhilarated and aggrieved.

A few of us wondered whether modern incidents have particular resonance when they appear to fit the form of ancient drama. Perhaps we, the news-reading audience, search for evidence of tragic flaws, of fall from grace, of confirmation of natural order. When we transform the news into Greek or Elizabethan tragedy, we feel not only entertained, but satisfied. So we

modify reality into myth. The myth may not be totally false, but it is remembered in collective memory, because it fits a mold that is shaped to the contours of our culture. This line of thought is not just of interest to the Joseph Campbell collector of universal myths, or to the literature professor who keeps the classics alive, but to the political analyst who recognizes Iago in modern dress -- the instigator of evil who knows how to manipulate the dark side of flawed character.

### **Biological incidents and the threat of mass destruction**

As our cadre and our funding moved to the University of Virginia and then to the National Defense University, we gathered experts and interest in bioterrorism. We had sessions on West Nile virus, SARS, avian flu, an episode of deliberate salmonella contamination, the sarin gas attack by the cult Aum Shinrikyo in the Tokyo subway (not a biological agent, but a related scenario) and an amazing lecture by a Soviet defector who ran a bio-weapons program and showed maps of existing storage sites in Russia with the capacity to kill a billion people. These were real, not mythical, WMDs.

We learned how microbial agents that kill too quickly, such as the Ebola virus, are not as destructive as agents that live longer in the host and therefore spread further (like the H5N1 influenza virus). We could see how the three-star Air Force general who convened our meetings at the National Defense University relished our interest in managing a bioterrorism attack, but had less concern about a pandemic instigated by mother nature. The Green Triangle is better funded and better organized when the threat is of human design; when the American military is mobilized, resources follow.

Because one of our leaders was a biological scientist and a military advisor, the Critical Incident Analysis enterprise found itself heavily invested in bioterrorism preparedness. This

enriched the discussion through inclusion of current and former leaders of military medicine, such as the Surgeon General of the Army.

Our model of incident analysis needed some adjustment when the threat was a germ and the location of impact was global. The Green Triangle of authorized and potential interveners included doctors, hospital staff, vaccine company executives, and administrators of schools where kids spread infection. We realized that avian flu was more likely and more lethal than bio-warfare and we debated quarantine policy and voluntary self-shielding at home and ways to keep vital services afloat while a plague or pandemic raged.

It was very tempting for incident analysts to become public sector preparedness consultants. In fact, much good work was done by these members of our group who facilitated meetings of state and federal officials to hammer out policies for addressing a biological catastrophe. The model did serve a purpose, reminding crisis managers that a crisis in confidence would probably accompany and augment a public health disaster.

## **9/11**

The infamous events of September 11, 2001 live on. Not since the assassination of President Kennedy had there been such national and international impact. Events of this magnitude cause something called “flashbulb memory.” We remember not only the profound action and imagery, but the mundane: where we were; to whom we spoke; in some instances, what we ate. Even now, people swap stories about the personal impact of 9/11. We older folks tell the same sort of stories about November 22nd. Because of “flashbulb memory” we have idiosyncratic and universal recollection. These extreme incidents are undoubtedly historic: they last, they affect many, they serve as milestones for individual and national life-lines.

Because so much attention was paid to the World Trade Center destruction, our group, then at the University of Virginia, focused attention on the trauma and tragedy at the Pentagon. We reviewed eye-witness accounts and heard from a former Secretary of the Army and a Congressman about contingency plans for continuity of government.

Our previous exploration of the attack on the public building helped us understand the impulse to isolate our leaders during a homeland threat, but also to value the need for openness and closeness when the citizenry is anxious.

During one of the unstructured evenings (unstructured time is vital for these gatherings when issues are intense and individuals are surfeited with formal presentations) the former governor of Virginia told me of his recent visit to New York City. It was early summer, a half year after the Al Qaeda attack. “Those people were still shaken. I’ve never seen a city so scared,” he told me. And he shook his head with sadness and concern. I thought, “a politician may know how to read a public mood better than a psychiatrist,” and took his observation to heart. He had been tasked by the President to lead a commission and recommend remedies. Our conversation went to the psychological impact of those closest to the carnage, whether or not they lost loved ones. Eventually, we and many others digested data that measured mental illness and trauma syndromes among various populations affected by the tragedy. My field, traumatic stress studies, noted how some experienced “post traumatic growth.” Others experienced “vicarious traumatization.” These terms are now reduced to acronyms (PTG and VT) and there are experts who write books on each.

We still lack consensus on measures of collective impact. For example, we know how many New Yorkers became depressed or met the markers for PTSD and we know where those with emotional damage were likely to have lived and worked. But we don’t know how to



validate the governor's perception that the people as a whole were frightened, and, if so, how that collective anxiety affected collective behavior.

The nation became patriotic. Flags flew from homes that never raised a flag before. Presidential popularity rose to near unanimous support. By any measure of cohesion or solidarity in the Blue Box of the Political Arena, we were a nation united. But from a perspective of critical incident analysis, we now have to question whether such cohesion is healthy. In a state of unusual solidarity, we made collective miscalculations which most, not all, regret. This paragraph is not meant as a rebuke of political decision-making after 9-11, but rather as a challenge to the model-builders in our emerging field: How do we map and measure the essential factors in the Blue Box so that we recognize when solidarity is a threat to critical thinking?

Nine eleven is the quintessential critical incident. It occurred on a day. It killed 3,000. It was a shot heard 'round the world. It was a *casus belli*. There were and are many agents, agencies and disciplines responsible for prevention, response and aftermath management. Lessons are still being learned. All contributors and readers of this Handbook were affected, deeply affected, by 9-11. We have a mammoth archive of data and will mine that data for years to come. We have personal stories of suffering and heroism. It makes good sense for the Academy of Critical Incident Analysis to live in the city that experienced this critical incident and has the most to gain from a dispassionate and a passionate analysis of its continuing aftermath.

**John Jay Academy strategy and vision**

The Academy for Critical Incident Analysis at John Jay College was created because the college president recognized a need, a fit, and a potential for scholarship that would make a difference in our lifetime, and because the faculty had the skills, experience, enthusiasm and diversity to make a hope into a reality.

The John Jay faculty senate approved a structure and a plan. Dozens of faculty participated in launching the Academy and more have found roles in teaching and research. At the outset, there was strenuous work to create an archive so that data about critical incidents could be assembled, organized and accessed by students and scholars. The archive of data is the foundation of the Academy. Until now, critical incident analysts have assembled sources for individual use, but never built a common repository. The ACIA vision stands on a library of source material.

This Handbook is a fundamental feature of the ACIA strategy, assembling in one place a compendium of chapters, illustrating the scope and the style of various participants. As a Handbook, it is meant to inform, explain, stimulate and teach. It is meant to start discussion in an emerging field, not to end debate with definitive conclusions.

There is a Journal of Critical Incident Analysis that precedes publication of the Handbook, and will afford scholars a dynamic forum for exchange of ideas. Controversy initiated by chapters of the Handbook, including this chapter, can find expression in the Journal and will inform future editions of the Handbook.

There is an on-line undergraduate course in Critical Incident Analysis, designed only a year ago and currently well attended with enthusiastic students. Section V of the Handbook explains the course at John Jay and the original course at Michigan State. As students learn from

professors, professors will learn from students. A strategy of ACIA is to encourage diverse opinion and “let many flowers bloom.” Succeeding generations will absorb incidents in different ways and re-define the meaning of critical incident analysis.

Case conferences digesting specific incidents have been traditional since we gathered to critique Waco in 1993. Occasionally, a conference has compared and contrasted several related incidents. Large incidents are too complicated for a brief conference, so under-researched aspects have been chosen for study, such as “Analyzing the Aftermath of the Virginia Tech Shootings” (July 2009 at the campus of Virginia Tech). Despite strong interest in the problems of prevention, in understanding the motives of the killer, the conferees limited attention to the aftermath.

Reports of case conferences have been written in several formats, usually in journalistic style with links to prepared papers and supporting evidence. There is no standard for an ACIA case study. Perhaps a template will be designed so that we can have a shelf of case reports, more or less uniform in style and topics covered. Perhaps there will never be a formula for critical incident analysis. There are books and articles that we have identified among ourselves, illustrating excellence in analyzing incidents. Examples include Kai Erickson’s “Everything in its Path,” treating the Buffalo Creek disaster and Dave Cullen’s “Columbine,” a New York times best-seller. ACIA will attend to the model mentioned here and, eventually, apply the science of computer modeling to incident analysis. We may never reach a formula that relates the quantities and qualities of Red Blobs, Green Triangles, and Blue Boxes. But we shall learn more about each and more about the dynamics of critical incidents--incidents that have the power to divide us as a people or to bring us closer in ways that preserve freedom and enhance democracy.

