



NATIONAL EMERGENCY RESPONSE: THE BENS REPORT

By Joseph Votel and Jacqueline E. Whitt, March 03, 2021
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Jacqueline Whitt: Hello and welcome to A Better Peace, the War Room podcast. Thanks for joining us today. I'm **Jacqueline Whitt**, Associate Professor of Strategy at the U.S. Army War College and the Editor-in-Chief for War Room. So all told, it's been a very long year. As we approach and surpass, soon, the one year mark since the COVID-19 pandemic hit the shores of the United States and we look at a mounting death toll, widespread economic impact at individual and collective levels, logistical challenges related to testing and now vaccine distribution, the reliance that we have all come to realize that we have on functioning schools and supply chains and it seems like we've learned a lot in this last year. But even before we're fully through the crisis, there is still a lot to learn and a lot to do as we think about our national response to future crisis situations. So here to discuss a new [report](#) on national emergency response, I am pleased to have retired U.S. Army General **Joseph Votel** in the studio today. General Votel, after retiring from a long and distinguished Army career where he commanded and led at every level with his last assignment as the Commander of U.S. Central Command, and he was there responsible for U.S. and coalition military operations in the Middle East, the Levant and Central and South Asia, he has now joined the nonprofit organization Business Executives for National Security (BENS) as the President and CEO. And I should also note that General Votel is a graduate of the U.S. Army War College, so he has a connection to Carlisle as well. So General Votel, welcome to A Better Peace. It's really great to have you here today.

Joseph Votel: Jackie, thanks for the invitation. It's great to be with all of you and with the War College listening audience. Thanks for the invitation.

JW: Absolutely. So, I'd like to start off with a pretty simple question which is about the organization that you are representing – Business Executives for National Security. Could you tell us a little bit about its mission and then also the Commission on the National Response Enterprise which it commissioned in July of 2020?

JV: Sure, so BENS is, as you noted, is a national nonprofit. It's been around for almost 40 years. It was formed back in 1982. It consists of about 415 members. It's a membership organization

and our members are business executives really from across the country, East to West, North to South and they represent all sectors of business, in particular the sectors of business that are really outside of the defense and space industry. So about 95% of our people, our members really come from business sectors. They're all at very senior levels. We have a lot of CEOs, a lot of people that serve as members of chairs and as members of boards. And again, managing directors, a lot of leadership positions in this. They all come with a great amount of expertise, not only in their business areas but in business leadership and in business systems and processes. So that directly feeds into the mission of our organization, which is essentially to bring best business practices, observations, advice to national security problems. So in BENS, our currency is the expertise of our members and so we really try to leverage that. The commission that we're going to talk a little bit about today really grew out of the pandemic. As BENS like all organizations and businesses across the country and our citizens watched what was taking place throughout the spring of 2020, we knew that as an organization that is focused on trying to help with national security challenges that there had to be a role that we could play in this. And initially we did some stuff that was relatively short term, very responsive, with some of our government partners. But we knew there was more to it. And so what we tried to do was try to understand how we could bring our expertise, the expertise of our members to really bear on the problem that we were facing. And so what we tried to do is just try to study what was happening. What we ultimately concluded was that the challenge that we were seeing, that the pandemic was presenting to us was it was really stressing our response system. Our response system is normally geared for shorter duration, much more localized, regionalized emergencies—a hurricane, a flood, tornadoes, that type of stuff. We're very, very good at doing those types of responses, but the sustained nature and the nationwide aspect of this really presented us with a new challenge and it began to stress a lot of things. We saw impacts on commerce, on the economy, on education, on social fabrics, on politics, on communication, all kinds of things. So we knew we needed to look for a better model of how we leverage the public, private, and civil sectors in this and so that's what kind of gave way to the to the Commission. And in informing it, what we tried to do was reach out to some really prominent people, former government officials, leaders in the business community and leaders in the civic community to kind of come together to help us address this problem. And ultimately, we recruited 33 commissioners, brought on nearly 60 BENS members to help look at this problem and the commissioners kind of formed this steering group and our BENS members really did a lot of the work behind the scenes on this. And we looked at things like supply and we looked at surge capacity and we looked at how we manage human capital and emergencies like this, and we looked at infrastructure aspects and particularly the digital infrastructure and how that was impacted. And then we looked at roles and responsibilities not only between different levels of government but also between the different sectors, the public, private and civil sectors, and that's kind of how we went about our work here with the with the Commission.

JW: That's a really thorough answer and I feel like I have a lot more context as well. It reminds me of an early podcast that we did last year with a couple of National Guard professionals and one of the points that they made about National Guard response in relation to the pandemic was its national character. It wasn't natural disaster relief or something that was only affecting a small region or state and that really affected National Guard capabilities in ways that hadn't necessarily been tested before. And I think so much of what we have learned are about things that hadn't been stress tested in the past. When we think about the report, let's start at the top. So what role does the report envision for the federal government in leading, coordinating, and managing a national response in the face of emergencies and crisis situations?

JV: Yeah. It's a great place to start the discussion here. We spent an awful lot of time in the Commission and in our working group activities talking about this. We have a federated system here. We have a federal government, but the states also have responsibilities in terms of doing this and there is a bit of a tradition of the federal government trying not to stomp on the rights of the states and the authorities of the states to respond to these kinds of things. So the real challenge in this is how do we address this in this federal system we have. And I think where we kind of came out on this is that all levels of government and all sectors of our society really have the expertise and the resources to address problems like this. So the key, I think, is how do we leverage it? How do we bring that together? How we bring the best of government with the best of the private sector and the civil sector to really serve the American people the best? And I would say that the federal government, of course, plays not only a key, but the leading role in this. It is the federal government that outlines the national response framework. This framework of activities, of organizations, of approaches that really provide the left and right limits, that provide a structure around the response. The federal government has to play a key role in communicating from the top down. It has to play a key role in priorities. It has to play a key role in developing the relationships between not just different levels of government, but also outreach to the private and civil sectors as well. In essence, one of the most important ingredients in a response like this is how do you build trust between the different levels and the different sectors here, and the federal government has to play a key role in this. One of the really important recommendations that we made in this report was what we need, we think from a Department of Homeland Security standpoint, is something similar to what we have with the Department of Defense. In the Department of Defense, we have a national military strategy that is written in support of the national security strategy. And what we really need is a national strategy for emergency response here, and that is clearly something that the federal government can do in terms of this and through the Department of Homeland Security under which a variety of other plans and other things can fit too. But I think the real key role of the federal government is to really provide that architecture that allows everybody else to bring their very best to the problem and help solve it for the American people.

JW: As a historian, I remember remarking early on that this kind of crisis was going to test the limits of the federal system and the sort of federalist idea that we have a shared responsibility between the national government and state governments, and I think I was probably right about that. Could you talk a little more about state and local government and how they can bring their resources to bear in a national response?

JV: Yeah. Thanks. This is an important aspect as well. Of course, in a federal system, said another way, we have fifty different approaches out there. I'm not saying that in any critical way. Every state has to have an approach that fits the threats that they are dealing with, that is most helpful to their people. So I think one of the key things with the states and local governments here is really figuring out great ways to be connected. One of the challenges we identified in this as we talked to local and state responders is that the ability to connect, share information, share data and have a common operating picture, that's a bit of a military phrase there, but this idea of people being able to look at a situation and being able to understand it the same way based on the data that is being fed into it, I think is a really, really important aspect into this. And so I think one of the key pieces for the state and the local authorities is the willingness to have this kind of connection and be able to share information back and forth to kind of create this common picture. And I would also say that the same thing kind of goes with the private sector. We have got to incentivize. We have got to get policy and relationships in place that really promotes public private partnerships and working in tandem to be at our best in these emergencies. We've got businesses that are ready to produce things, but they've got proprietary information they're trying to protect. They want to do the right thing for the nation, so we have to have ways that we make it easy for not only the states and local governments to connect into the bigger framework, but we've also got to make it easier for the private sector and the civil sector to do the same thing. There's a lot of work to be done and a lot of it comes down to the ability to share information and share data and to be able to communicate between different levels. And these are the areas I think where we need to be focusing here and into the future so that we can address challenges like we've dealt with in the pandemic.

JW: I've heard you say a couple of important things about information sharing about data sharing, transforming that information into analysis, and also about establishing and building trust, that a lot of this is going to rely on people working together, organizations working together and that requires a baseline level of trust that everyone is working towards the same goals, working toward the same objectives and operating in good faith. And I think right now we see, according to many measures, that trust, especially in institutions, is maybe at an all-time low given the state of partisan politics, given the role of media to trust in corporations. So trust seems at the center of this and yet it seems like maybe a missing element. Do you have some ideas about how institutions and organizations might go about rebuilding trust with the public and with each other?

JV: Yeah. Jackie, this is such an important point in this whole challenge right here. Of course, trust is not something that can be mandated or legislated here, this actually has to be developed person to person, organization to organization, institution to institution, and it has to be done very, very carefully. I'm a retired military officer so I have a tendency to look at it through that lens of how you build trust with allies, with partners on the ground, with your own forces here as you undertake inherently dangerous activities. And I think it comes down to a few key things here that you really have to focus on. First and foremost, I think you really have to be a relationship builder and you have to value the fact that you can communicate, and you have strong relationships between different levels of leadership in different organizations. When I was a CENTCOM commander, as I tried to remind my subordinate organizations and my staff, it wasn't enough that I had great relationships with my counterparts. We had to have thick relationships. My subordinate commanders had to have good relationships. My staff had to have good relationships with whatever particular entity we were dealing with. So you really have to focus on building strong relationships. A key component of building strong relationships I think is transparent communication and being willing to share information, being willing to risk a little bit to be flat and tell people what you know in the interest of informing them and in enticing them to share what they know. So this idea of flat and transparent communication I think is really important. I think the idea of responsiveness is an important aspect in this. Again, going back to my military experience, when you deal with a lot of international partners out there, they're always asking you for different things and they're looking for a responsiveness. They're looking for a yes or a no in many cases. And frankly, most people can handle no answers if you are transparent and you communicate in terms of that. So you've got to really focus, I think, first and foremost on relationship building, on being transparent communicators and being responsive to people who are trying to work through challenging situations. To me these are really, really important prerequisite characteristics and traits that leadership at different levels has to exhibit in this. The other component of this, I think, of building trust is this idea that I refer to as shared risk. And what it means is that we have to be willing to absorb risk at higher levels to allow leaders at lower levels to make the best decisions they can with the situations they're dealing with. Said another way, what we're going to try to do is we want to get decision making done at the lowest possible level and we want to hold the risk at the highest possible level. Again, going back to my experience as a military officer, I wanted my subordinate commanders operating in places like Iraq or Syria to have the freedom to make decisions as they needed to on the ground in accordance with the authorities, they had in the situation they were dealing with without worrying about whether their backs were covered by their higher headquarters. We wanted to remove that. We wanted to own that risk for them and allow them to do that. And in many regards, this is done by this idea of sharing risk and what that really implies is that there's got to be a constant flow of information up and down the chain, and subordinates need to understand that they engender trust by being transparent, by sharing information, by making sure that the headquarters or leadership above them understands exactly what's going on. And higher-level leaders have to push that back down. They have to recognize that people on the ground are going

to make decisions about what they're doing, and they need to be backed up in terms and they need to be supported in terms so there's got to be a downward flow of information. And this idea of information flowing up and down, I think is really, really an important aspect of it. I always refer to them as feedback loops. We have to keep these feedback loops going all the time, up and down. They have to be constantly, constantly nurtured, constantly reinforced. And Jackie, what you're really trying to do by that is you're trying to make sure that people have a common appreciation for the system, they are aligned in terms of how we're going to approach the problem and they're kind of aligned in terms of action. So when people take action on something, there's an expectation that that's what they were going to do. That's a bit of a lengthy discussion on this idea of trust, but it's just so fundamental and so important to us. And as I've been reminded throughout my military career and as I remind people now, you cannot surge trust in times of crisis. This has to be done in advance. So the idea of creating a strategy for emergency response and engaging businesses and states and local authorities early on to rehearse and exercise and make sure that we have systems that can communicate and make sure that we've got policies in place that make it easy for businesses to share data and do it without concern that they're going to undermine their own bottom line in the long run here, these are really important things that have to be done up front. So we can't wait until the situation presents itself. It has to be done in advance. And it has to start from the top, but it has to eventually go both ways as we work through this.

JW: I think all of those are such important points and in many ways it's a back to basics, the things that we sort of know intuitively and from literature and experience about leadership, and about trust, but they have to be put into practice. The report also lays out 11 recommendations. We're not going to have time on our brief podcast today to talk about all of them, but the recommendations are very specifically and intentionally calls to action, things that need to be done. So I'd like to ask you to highlight maybe one or two that you think are particularly important or relevant to our podcast listeners.

JV: Yeah, thanks. So I've already touched on one of them and it's the importance of a strategy and visibility into the funding that we expend for emergency response. This year in the United States, in addition to the pandemic, I think we've declared emergencies in at least 93 or 94 other situations, which is a lot. It was actually higher in 2020 than it's been recently. So there's really two ideas there. The strategy is important because we really have to communicate what our overall approach to this is and how we look at managing emergencies like this. And I think it's a first important step bringing people together. And doing for emergency management and emergency response things like Goldwater Nichols did for the Defense Department in terms of breaking down barriers between services, or in this case sectors, to really make sure that we could be as effective and efficient as we can. So this idea of a strategy I think is a really, really important one, that has to be addressed up front. And as part of that, we need to make sure that we have an understanding of where all the funding is going to support this. This is an absolute

critical means by which we are going to respond to these things. So we've got to got to do that. Right now, today, we don't assess that's possible. That one entity, one person can look at where all the money has gone to respond to these emergencies and if our investments are actually paying off. So we have to tighten up on the strategy piece. The second point that I would highlight for you here is a recommendation that comes at the end of the report and it is the importance of connecting every American. By our estimates, somewhere between 19 and 40 million Americans really lack reliable access to reliable broadband coverage and in an emergency like this where most of your information is coming that way, where we're expecting people to work from home, where we're expecting children to go to school online, not having reliable broadband access is a real detriment. And in our current digital economy right now, it is an essential. And so Congress, the Administration, has really got to wrestle with this idea of how we make sure that we connect every American together so that we can not only address emergencies like this, but also help mitigate them in the very, very best way possible.

JW: Thank you. I think that is a tremendously important thing, and for some of us who live in highly dense cities and places where broadband is sort of taken for granted, it's easy to forget that that's not the state of affairs in a lot of places and we rely on it so heavily these days. I'm always amazed at how quickly 30 minutes can go by when I'm enjoying a conversation, but I think our time is probably up today, but I want to thank you for joining us on A Better Peace today for this podcast.

JV: Thanks Jackie, it's great to be with you and thanks for your great work with this podcast.

JW: We're thrilled to get it out there and for our listeners, I want to commend to you the full Commission [report](#), which is available online at <https://www.bens.org> and thank you all for listening in today. Please send us your comments on this episode or any episode for that matter. And send us your suggestions for future episodes that you'd like to hear. And please subscribe to A Better Peace if you've not done so already on the podcatcher of your choice and after you've subscribed, please rate and review this podcast so that others may find it as well and we can continue to grow this community for conversations like the one you just heard. Even though this conversation is over, our conversations on COVID-19, emergency response, homeland security and defense of course continue on War Room. Until next time, from the War Room, I'm Jackie Whitt.