



**Thomas D. Beamish.** *Community at Risk: Biodefense and the Collective Search for Security.* High Reliability and Crisis Management Series. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015. 280 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-8442-9.



**Reviewed by** Kymberly MacNeal (University of Southern California)

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**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

Thomas D. Beamish's *Community at Risk: Biodefense and the Collective Search for Security* examines local civic responses to siting proposals by universities for National Biocontainment Laboratories (NBLs). These biosafety level 4 laboratories are tasked with studying Category A agents, such as Ebola and anthrax, in an effort to safeguard the United States against bioterrorism and naturally occurring disease epidemics. These agents pose the highest risk to national security, can be easily transmitted, and have high mortality rates. In *Community at Risk*, Beamish is primarily interested in answering two questions: do local communities embrace the proposed building of NBLs within their neighborhoods and how do they express their support or opposition?

Utilizing extensive media coverage and personal interviews collected during intensive field studies, Beamish investigates and compares the local response to NBL siting in Roxbury, Massachusetts; Davis, California; and Galveston, Texas. He finds that local variation in response to a proposed NBL facility by these communities is not rooted in the communication and risk management strategies utilized by the sponsoring universities. Instead, the different responses by local communities can be attributed to the different civic conventions regarding authority and its exercise; ongoing civic rela-

tions and local political rivalries; and the distinctive civic virtues and associated value-commitments that resonate in each community (p. 10).

*Community at Risk* fills a somewhat overlooked niche in the risk management literature. Instead of discussing risk management from a macro- or micro-level perspective, Beamish chose to examine local communities and regional politics and how they interact with trustee institutions, such as universities and the federal government. This meso-level approach eschews the typical psychological analysis of micro-level risk management studies while it avoids creating a society level explanation for why Davis and Roxbury residents were wildly opposed to proposed NBL facilities. This unique approach strengthens Beamish's argument; he is able to demonstrate that each locality's response to the proposed facilities was consistent with past approaches to neighborhood change. Beamish accomplishes this masterfully via thorough descriptions of each city's history and enduring political concerns, major political players, and preferred method of political expression.

While Beamish weaves an extremely convincing tale of why the citizens of Roxbury, Davis, and Galveston responded to NBL siting the way they did, minor problems

pose some risk to the validity of his narrative. One particularly thorny problem is that while Beamish obliquely mentions that certain trustee institutions were distrusted by the local citizenry, he fails to identify this as an enduring feature of his narrative. Because of this, the reader is left to wonder whether the NBL proposals were turned down by locals due to an incongruence between local values/mores and the goals of the local university (as claimed) or whether any proposal put forth by a distrusted trustee institution is doomed to failure.

In the two cities Beamish studied that rejected NBL construction, the relationship between the community and local trustee institutions was extremely strained. In both Davis and Roxbury, there was a historical, deep-seated distrust of "authority figures," particularly those of the government variety. Davis was characterized as a town suspicious of progress, the university, and the military while Roxbury was described as extremely critical of the local planning board, the white political elite of Boston, and other suburb-based nonprofit groups. Galveston, while critical of foreign companies and the oil industry in general, trusted the local university, as it had been historically entrusted with the entirety of the island's health care and had successfully managed epidemics in the past. A thorough exploration of instances in which proposals put forth by distrusted trustee institutions (such as the biosafety level 3 laboratory in Davis) would help elucidate the role of institutional trust played in the NBL decisions.

Another question that haunts me is relevant on a

more basic political level. Was neighborhood acceptance of the NBL considered by the universities as a determining factor of whether or not to build the facilities? Did community response actually matter to the administrators and planning boards? If a positive community response was required to build the NBL, then Beamish's book offers an excellent starting point for meso-level political analysis of the federal facility siting process. An understanding of how and why local community politics can determine the fate of multimillion dollar federal installations would prove helpful to future planning boards interested in proposing such community changes. If a positive community response is not required for NBL siting, however, then what Beamish chronicles in this book is in fact a series of false democratic moments. If NBL siting is not in fact contingent on local community buy-in, this could have devastating implications for local political participation. If members of local communities know that regardless of their activism the real decisions for their communities are made elsewhere, there is little incentive to be politically involved. This could be a contributing factor to the rather disinterested American take on democracy and civic involvement that has been prominently noted by scholars of American politics.

Overall, *Communities at Risk* is a very well-researched and persuasive book. It fills a niche in the study of risk management that is underexplored, and provides a nuanced accounting of how and why communities view and respond to university proposals to build NBL facilities.

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