

Tristan Weir
11.941 – Reading Response
4/4/05

Kingdon, John – *Focusing Events, Crises, and Symbols* “Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies”

This section analyzes a survey conducted on politicians concerning focusing events in a disaster, especially as they served as a catalyst for policy change. Interviewers found that a statistically significant number of respondents mentioned major focusing events as part of the reasons for a policy shift. Interviewers also found a smaller than expected number of respondents who categorized personal experience as important.

I would like to see more on this section, including some introduction of the survey’s scope and methodology. I felt that earlier parts of the chapter would have been helpful in evaluating this resource. I also found it interesting that policy makers claimed strong focus on areas of interest before the focusing event, even though the evidence did not support their claims.

Birkland, Thomas – “In the Wake of the Exxon Valdez”

This article is a case study of the Exxon Valdez oil spill and its policy consequences, especially in the framework of a highly symbolic “focusing event”. It points out that a oil spill presents compelling images of natural destruction that motivates wider ranges of people than those that normally care about policy issues. It also points to a variety of policy failures, both on the part of the government for deadlocking regulation and on the part of the oil company for trying to divert blame and responsibility. It concludes by advocating less reliance on oil, since oil transportation inevitably leads to spills.

One of the more interesting points of this paper is the discussion of blame, or lack thereof on the part of the scapegoated drunk captain. A variety of failures in corporate and government policy, as well as several regulation exemptions were equally strong causal factors in this spill.

Birkland, Thomas – “Focusing events, Mobilization, and Agenda”

This paper provides a systematic analysis of the effects of focusing events on policy agendas. As expected, focusing events promote change of social agenda as public and advocacy group interest is directed to mitigating the effects of and preventing similar events. The increased actions of advocacy groups depend on the type of focusing event, although they are somewhat similar among “natural” and “technological” disasters.

One interesting distinction the author makes is that some technological disasters are inevitable results of highly complex systems, but advocacy groups may still use these as examples of corporate negligence. This can be especially true for those disasters which have terrible visual or psychological consequences, as these play well in the media.

Birkland, Thomas and Radhika Nath – “Business and Political Dimensions in Disaster Management”

This paper provides case studies of three corporate focusing events – the *Exxon Valdez* spill, the ValuJet crash, and the Jack in the Box *E. Coli* outbreak – and how each corporation and industry handled them. Causal stories are given significant weight in determining the companies ability to recover from a crisis. There is also evidence that a proactive strategy of repairing

damage while denying fault has much more positive impact than simple denial. The paper also provides a nine-point framework for classifying disaster manageability.

This paper was refreshing, because it approached disaster from a microeconomic, firm-based standpoint, as opposed to the more common community- and government-based standpoint which we have previously used in this class. One important point is that even though all three firms recovered, it was through somewhat extraordinary tactics (Exxon is huge, ValuJet changed its name, and Jack in the Box paid for the medical bills of anyone who got sick). Revolutionary strategy may often be necessary in similar business crises.