

impossible to measure the calming influence that ascending firefighters had on descending civilians or whether but for the firefighters' presence the poor behavior of a very few civilians could have caused a dangerous and panicked mob flight. But the positive impact of the first responders on the evacuation came at a tremendous cost of first responder lives lost.²⁰¹

Civilian and Private-Sector Challenges

The "first" first responders on 9/11, as in most catastrophes, were private-sector civilians. Because 85 percent of our nation's critical infrastructure is controlled not by government but by the private sector, private-sector civilians are likely to be the first responders in any future catastrophes. For that reason, we have assessed the state of private sector and civilian preparedness in order to formulate recommendations to address this critical need. Our recommendations grow out of the experience of the civilians at the World Trade Center on 9/11.

Lack of Protocol for Rooftop Rescues. Civilians at or above the impact zone in the North Tower had the smallest hope of survival. Once the plane struck, they were prevented from descending because of damage to or impassable conditions in the building's three stairwells. The only hope for those on the upper floors of the North Tower would have been a swift and extensive air rescue. Several factors made this impossible. Doors leading to the roof were kept locked for security reasons, and damage to software in the security command station prevented a lock release order from taking effect. Even if the doors had not been locked, structural and radiation hazards made the rooftops unsuitable staging areas for a large number of civilians; and even if conditions permitted general helicopter evacuations—which was not the case—only several people could be lifted at a time.

The WTC lacked any plan for evacuation of civilians on upper floors of the WTC in the event that all stairwells were impassable below.

Lack of Comprehensive Evacuation of South Tower Immediately after the North Tower Impact. No decision has been criticized more than the decision of building personnel not to evacuate the South Tower immediately after the North Tower was hit. A firm and prompt evacuation order would likely have led many to safety. Even a strictly "advisory" announcement would not have dissuaded those who decided for themselves to evacuate. The advice to stay in place was understandable, however, when considered in its context. At that moment, no one appears to have thought a second plane could hit the South Tower. The evacuation of thousands of people was seen as inherently dangerous. Additionally, conditions were hazardous in some areas outside the towers.²⁰²

Less understandable, in our view, is the instruction given to some civilians