

My Two Bits

This discussion session has been recorded for purposes of quality control. Orientation of Dennis I. Mitchell (DIM), scenario developer trainee, Department of Homeland Security, August 15, 2007, Arlington, VA, 1330 hours. Orientation by Associate Deputy Chief to the Assistant Adjutant Undersecretary for Scenario Development Pro Tem Donald U. Haffwitz (DUH).

DUH: Good to have you aboard, Mitchell.

DIM: Thank you sir. It's good to be here.

DUH: What exactly did you do before?

DIM: I was at the Pentagon, sir.

DUH: Scenario development?

DIM: More or less, sir. I was the acting assistant deputy to the associate chief liaison for media relations.

DUH: Impressive. But now you've become part of DHS. Where the action is.

DIM: Action, sir?

DUH: Action, Mitchell. Action. Hell, TSA alone confiscates 14,000 cigarette lighters a month.

DIM: That *is* impressive, sir.

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DUH: And don't forget the nail clippers, jack knives, and toothpaste.

DIM: You're right. They caught me with some *Crest*. So what's the drill here?

DUH: Well, in this department, we work under the assumption that to catch a terrorist, you have to think like a terrorist.

DIM: Makes sense to me.

DUH: Right. So what we do here is develop scenarios. What would you do if you were a terrorist? And for each scenario we develop, we try to create a preventative.

DIM: Well I know what I'd do.

DUH: What's that?

DIM: I'd probably try to smuggle in one of those dirty bombs...

DUH: And?

DIM: And have it go off in a West Coast city. Los Angeles, say.

DUH: That's not a really good scenario, Mitchell.

DIM: No?

DUH: No. The air in Los Angeles is so filthy, a dirty bomb would probably be an improvement.

DIM: Oh. Then I know. What's almost as important as air?

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DUH: What?

DIM: Water. And what I'd do if I were a terrorist, what I'd do is blow up our water systems, one city at a time. The cities would lose billions of gallons of water.

DUH: You mean like, say, a billion gallons a month?

DIM: Wow. That would be pretty ambitious.

DUH: Not really, Mitchell. That's what they lose in New York City. Houston loses twice as much.

DIM: Right. Then I know what. Let's blow up sewer systems. We'll scatter sepsis everywhere. People will get infected with E-coli. Thousands would die every year! What a mess that would be!

DUH: Tell me something, Mitchell. Have you been living under a rock?

DIM: What do you mean?

DUH: Don't you know that about three-and-a-half-million Americans get sick every year from the E. coli released by leaking sewer systems and who knows how many of them die? It's like having ten E. coli spinach attacks every day.

DIM: Okay, then we'll make the sewer problems spectacular, so everybody knows about them.

DUH: What do you mean?

DIM: In New York and Washington, D.C....

DUH: Two good cities. Nice choice.

DIM: Right. Thanks. Anyway, in New York and D.C., the manholes will just go flying through the air, and the streets will collapse. Waddaya think?

DUH: It's already happening.

DIM: Rats. Okay, then, try this: We'll blow up the electric utilities; dozens of them. America would be in the dark ages. We depend on electricity for everything.

DUH: Oh gimme a break, Mitchell. Don't you remember? Four years ago? The First Energy Corporation blackout shut down 508 generating units at 265 power plants across the Northeast. Fifty million people were without power. And the same thing could happen again at any minute.

DIM: Geez. How about the bridges? Why don't we destroy some bridges? At rush hour. With people on them. Mothers. Fathers. Little kids. That would be really horrible.

DUH: Old news, Mitchell. Just happened in Minnesota. It happened in Connecticut almost the same way. You'll need to come up with something bigger than that.

DIM: Okay. You want spectacular? Try this. A hurricane comes through New Orleans and almost destroys the entire city because the hurricane protection system just falls apart like straw. Think about it: One of America's favorite and oldest cities, almost totally destroyed. That's so diabolical, I get sick just thinking about it.

DUH: Don't you know, Mitchell? Been there, done that.

DIM: Then I have a thought. If I were a terrorist, I'd cast a spell on all of the engineers responsible for America's infrastructure.

DUH: Why?

DIM: Because they’re the only ones who really understand how all this stuff works.

DUH: So what kind of spell?

DIM: We’ll make them proper.

DUH: Well call me The Wicked Witch of the West and pass the teapot, Mitchell.

Engineers couldn’t be more proper if they tried. They issue statements, they issue report cards, they serve on advisory committees, they give testimony, and all that proper stuff, but that’s all they do, because proper people don’t rock the boat. And, obviously, all that propriety doesn’t work, but they just keep on doing it. What do you call people who do the same thing over and over again while expecting a different result? I don’t see engineers marching in the streets to bring attention to a situation they know to be deadly. I don’t see them committing acts of civil disobedience to get media attention when obviously that’s what needed. Hey, civil disobedience is what made this country great, from the Boston Tea Party right on through today. If all the patriots did was take proper, “responsible” action, we’d be singing “God Save the King” at home games in Fenway Park. Deed not words, Mitchell. Face it, the only way we’re gonna get out of this mess is to make some changes. If we keep electing the same kind of people, we’ll keep having the same kind of results. We need some enlightened leaders. We need to have some practicing engineers run for public office. And as I see it, that ain’t gonna happen.

DIM: Then I know what I’d do if I were a terrorist.

DUH: What’s that?

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DIM: Not a damn thing. There's no way I could do anything worse to America than what America is already doing to itself.

DUH: Good work, Mitchell. That *is* a frightening thought.