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978-0-521-84537-3 - The Politics of Crisis Management: Public Leadership Under Pressure

Arjen Boin, Paul 't Hart, Eric Stern and Bengt Sundelius

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The Politics of Crisis Management

Crisis management has become a defining feature of contemporary governance. In times of crisis, communities and members of organizations expect their leaders to minimize the impact of the crisis at hand, while critics and bureaucratic competitors try to seize the moment to blame incumbent rulers and their policies. In this extreme environment, policy makers must somehow establish a sense of normality, and foster collective learning from the crisis experience. In this uniquely comprehensive analysis, the authors examine how leaders deal with the strategic challenges they face, the political risks and opportunities they encounter, the errors they make, the pitfalls they need to avoid, and the paths away from crisis they may pursue. This book is grounded in over a decade of collaborative, cross-national case study research, and offers an invaluable multidisciplinary perspective. This is an original and important contribution from experts in public policy and international security.

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Acknowledgments

The writing of this book took place during the long aftermath of what is now simply known as “9/11.” In the very last stages of rewriting this book, the tsunami catastrophe occurred. Whilst proof-reading, “7/7” shocked London. These crises highlight many of the issues we discuss in this book. They illustrate the point we wish to make in this book: crises are political at heart.

When a society or one of its key institutions encounters a major crisis, the politics of public policy making do not – as official rhetoric frequently suggests – abate. On the contrary, political rivalries about the interpretation of fast-moving events and their effects are part of the drama that crisis management entails in modern society.

Crises make and break political careers, shake bureaucratic pecking orders and shape organizational destinies. Crises fix the spotlight on those who govern. Heroes and villains emerge with a speed and intensity quite unknown to “politics as usual.” Many seasoned policy makers understand this catalytic momentum in crises. They may talk about national unity and the need for consensus in the face of shared predicaments, but this reflects only part of their reasoning. Their other calculus, less visible to the public, concerns contested issues, dilemmas of responsibility and accountability, of avoiding blame and claiming credit.

This book captures our ideas about the political challenges and realities of public leadership in times of crisis. We formulate five core tasks of crisis leadership: sense making, decision making, meaning making, terminating, and learning. Rather than using this book to report and integrate the manifold research findings, we adopt an argumentative approach. In each chapter, we ask a key question and offer our central claim about the leadership task at hand.

This monograph is an exercise in theory building and policy reflection rather than in theory testing and policy design. It offers a newly integrated approach that social scientists may use to study crises. It also aims at practitioners in and beyond the public sector. We offer them – especially

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in the final chapter – a condensed exploration of perennial pitfalls and strategic considerations that we believe should inform crisis leadership.

This book is the result of a truly collaborative effort. Since 1993, we have worked together in research, teaching, and training on crisis management in the public sector. On the long road toward this publication we have incurred many debts. We take this opportunity to thank our mentors and colleagues; we also wish to pay our dues to those who have pioneered the various strands of crisis research upon which this book builds. Without their contributions, there would be no research-based knowledge to report upon in this book.

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Leiden, Utrecht, and Stockholm

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