Homeland Security Behind the Redwood Curtain

Judy Boyd

Humboldt County, California, is about as far removed from Washington, D.C., as a person can get in the continental United States. Located 200 miles north of San Francisco, Humboldt County is literally and figuratively separated from the rest of the country by thousands of acres of giant redwood trees that the locals call "the Redwood Curtain." I traveled to this remote part of America shortly after the five-year anniversary of September 11th to seek perspective on my life and profession as a homeland security official. Walking at the feet of these giants, I was humbled by their sense of grace, majesty, and timelessness. The front-page newspaper stories from yesterday, last year, or even the past decade seemed somehow less urgent when surrounded by living creatures that measure time not in days and years, but rather in centuries. The mid-day sun barely penetrated the leafy canopy, creating a surreal twilight that played tricks with the eye and the mind.

This sense of timelessness and remoteness penetrated my psyche and made me wonder about the mind and spirit of other humans who pass through the forest on a daily basis. If the rays of the sun struggle unsuccessfully, for the most part, to penetrate to the forest floor in this part of America, how can politicians and policymakers 2,000 miles away expect their words and actions to connect? After my discussions with the locals, I soon realized that homeland security behind the Redwood Curtain has a different connotation than it does to those within the Washington beltway. Six years after the September 11th attacks, I believe it is time to refocus national homeland security policy on the premise that, like politics, "all homeland security is local." Citizens of this country, for the most part, are focused on local issues and bond through local connections – what has been referred to as "social capital." It is this capital that homeland security professionals must draw on to link citizens to the external assets provided by the federal government. The importance of local connections was evident in the conversations I had that weekend with a few of the residents of Humboldt County.

"I remember on 9/11 hearing that the Twin Towers had been hit and I had no idea where they [the towers] were," admitted John as we shared drinks on the front porch of the Riverwood Inn, one of the last highway taverns on old Highway 101. [1]

"When I found out they weren't anywhere around here, I didn't care that much any more because I knew I was safe here. Ain't no terrorist coming here to Humboldt County. If they did, they would get the s#!t beat out of them."

I had noticed John and his sister Lori earlier that evening while I was sitting on the porch talking to William, a man in his late fifties with shoulder length bleached blond hair and a deeply lined and weathered face. At the time, I didn't know they were brother and sister. They caught my eye because every fifteen minutes or so, they jumped into a shiny black Jeep Wrangler that had no top on it and were gone for about ten minutes. Each time they returned to the same parking spot in front of the Inn, hopped out and grabbed the Coors Light bottles they had left on the porch railing. I hoped to talk to

them at some point that evening but at the moment, I was in the middle of a conversation with William about homeland security.

Riverwood Inn, Phillipsville, CA

William was struggling to answer my question: "What do you expect of your government regarding homeland security?" He admitted that no one from the government had ever asked him for his opinion and he really wanted to give me an answer. He went to the bar to buy us another round of drinks and give himself time to think. While he was inside, I watched John and Lori leave again.

"It might take me all night to find the right words," he said when he came back with our drinks, "but I'll have something for you. This is tough because I don't usually expect anything from government."

William explained that after he had served his obligatory tour in the Army during the Vietnam War, he had wandered around America, trying to find a place to fit in. He loved America, which is why he voluntarily enlisted, rather than waiting to be drafted or moving to Canada, as many of his friends did. He repeated several times that night that he was thankful he never had to actually go to Vietnam or fire a shot at anyone in combat. He was trained as a field artillery soldier and it always bothered him how impersonal his job was—he would pull a lever to fire a rocket that would hit a target twelve miles away. When he left the Army, William wandered around the country, completely disengaged from society. He didn't pay taxes, vote, or have a permanent address. Eventually he reached Humboldt County and stayed put. He began to reconnect with society again, albeit at arms length.

"My momma will turn ninety next month," William said. "She wishes I was near her in New Jersey but she realizes that this is where I fit in best." William then admitted what bothered him the most at this point in his wandering lifestyle.

"I just wish I could do better by my grandkids."

He looked out into the darkness as he took a long sip from his drink, then put it firmly down on the porch railing and turned toward me.

"You wouldn't believe how they talk to their mama," he said angrily. "They have no manners! How are they going to be when they get older and out on their own?"

We discussed some of the burdens on our hearts and minds and eventually developed a plan of action. Despite the very different worlds we live in, William and I each have a circle of people that we can influence to bring about change. We called it our "circle of influence" and dreamt aloud about the change we sought—my goal of developing and implementing effective homeland security policy and William's desire to see his grandchildren grow up to be good citizens.

William stood up to leave.

"About your question on what do I expect from my government, I'll get an answer to you tomorrow morning." I said I would be at the Inn until about lunch time. He shook my hand and then leaned over and kissed me on the top of my head.

"Good-bye," he said quietly and then he left the porch.

I watched him walk across the street to his beat-up red compact car and drive off into the forest.

I propped my feet up on the log in front of the porch and reflected on my conversation with William as I sipped my margarita. Once again, the shiny black Jeep Wrangler whipped into the open parking spot in front of the Inn.

"Hey," I shouted to the guy in the passenger seat, "What's going on around here that's so exciting that you keep leaving and coming back?"

The guy laughed and walked over to the porch railing to chat.

"My sister just bought this Jeep today and she's looking for any excuse she can to drive it. First we went to Myer's Flat [a small hamlet a few miles to the north], and then we went to the store, and this last time we went to Aunt Lucy's. You know Aunt Lucy, right?"

He was joking; in a community as small as this, it was obvious that I was not from around there. His sister wandered over to join us. I asked her what life was like here in Humboldt County. I pointed to her sweatshirt, which said, "Humboldt" in tattoo script letters, and commented "this must be a great place if people around here advertise it on their clothes" Then I nodded my head toward another girl in her early twenties, leaning against the railing and wearing a fleece pullover that also said "Humboldt."

"I suppose so," she replied slowly and then leaned forward as if to confide a secret. "My mother gave it to me and so I have to wear it."

She leaned against the railing and grabbed one of the open beer bottles.

"It is sort of a cool place," she acknowledged. "You've heard of Humboldt County, right?"

I shook my head no. My destination was Humboldt State Park and I hadn't realized there was a county by the same name. "You don't know about Humboldt County?" she said incredulously. "You know, pot capital of America? It's in stories and songs…"

I shook my head to indicate that I was clueless.

"I'll be right back—let me get a fresh beer." A few moments later, she settled into the chair next to where William had been sitting.

"Where are *you* from that you don't know about this place?" she asked, her tone indicating that I must be from the sticks.

I explained that I was from Washington, D.C., worked for the Department of Homeland Security, and had come to California to study homeland security.

"Then I better not tell you about the warrant out for my arrest!" John had come back on the porch and laughed at his own joke. I explained that my job was to help find terrorists, not catch bail jumpers. "I'm just kidding" he replied.

I turned the conversation back to our surroundings. "What's so special about Humboldt County?" I asked Lori again.

"Just about everyone in Humboldt County grows pot," Lori explained. "It's about the only thing that you can do, other than logging, to make money."

"See that bright new Ford 350 truck parked here in front of the Inn?" John asked, pointing at a huge gray truck that was just twenty feet away. "That's a $40,000 truck, easy. You have to pull down some serious cash to able to afford a tricked out rig like that. Now, I'm not saying that the guy who owns it is into drugs. But just walk through the parking lot of the high school and compare the cars the teachers drive and what the students are driving. You'll see a lot of the kids with trucks like that and you gotta ask yourself, 'How can those kids afford a truck like that?' I'll tell you—only by growing pot."

"I was in the forest today and even with the sun shining, it was pretty dark in there—it hardly seems like there would be enough light to grown pot outside," I asked, naively.

"They grow it inside," John said, matter-of-factly. A big truck went by and there was a huge fifty gallon tank in the back with a hose attached. John pointed to it and said, "I work in construction and the boss' trucks have those gas cans in the back. Around here, you'll see lots of the kid's trucks with those in the back but it isn't because they're working in no construction. They fill those canisters with gasoline to power the generators that provide light for their pot to grow."

Two ATVs pulled up in front of the Inn. A young guy jumped off of one with a beer can in his hand and shoes on his feet. He tried to walk onto the porch but was intercepted by Kathy, the bartender. "If you want to stay here you need to get rid of that can," Kathy ordered from the doorway, hands on her hips. It was clear who the law was around here.

"Matt is only twenty years old," John whispered to me.

Matt grumbled but poured out the beer. He soon left because he preferred drinking to conversation and Kathy was keeping an eye on him. Kathy was considered the best bartender around—a friendly ear for those who wanted to ramble, a wise sage for those in need of advice, and a good judge of the human condition. As William had put it earlier that evening, "She's the best because she knows when I'm too drunk to drive and then just gives me orange juice to drink, knowing I won't know the difference at that point!"

As the chatter continued, I was surprised to see a familiar beat-up red car pull up in front and William jump out. He came onto the porch where I was sitting and handed me a battered case containing a compact disk, the kind you can burn songs onto using your home computer.

"I know that it's illegal to copy music and all that but I want you to have this CD. I can't find the right words to say what I want but listen to track eight. It's by this guy named Jack Johnson and he gets it right."

I was stunned. I took the CD he offered and said thank you. He kissed me on the top of my head again and as he walked away, held up his hand with his thumb and index finger touching to create a circle.

"Circles of influence!" he shouted with a smile. "Circles of influence!" He then got in his car and drove off into the dark of the forest.

"What was that about?" John asked, a bit confused by what had just happened. I explained how earlier that evening I had asked William what he expected from the government regarding homeland security and this was, apparently, William's response.

"I'll tell you what I want—no more corrupt cops," said John. "It's sickening how all this pot is being grown here in the county and the cops do nothing about it. It just isn't right. I had my problems for awhile, getting hooked on meth, arrested a couple of times for petty theft while on drugs…but I've been clean for eight months now and I'm working hard to pay my taxes and child support. But where's the incentive to work hard if you can make such easy money by growing drugs? And the growers just pay off the cops to look the other way."

John held up his beer bottle. "This used to be illegal in this country but now it isn't. How did that happen? Why isn't pot legal? If it was, it would put this whole county out of business."

As we talked, I learned that John was thirty-four years old and struggling to get his life back on track after a bad detour due to drugs. His sister was twenty-four and she planned to move to Sacramento in a few weeks. John mentioned that the new Jeep was actually Lori's second car, causing me to wonder how she could afford to own two cars at her age. Maybe the conversation about growing pot was based on more than just observations about the neighbors. John and Lori had eight other siblings of various ages, all from the same father but two different mothers. Seated behind us, occasionally joining in the conversation was their mother's cousin, Betty. It was hard to tell how old Betty was with her lined and weathered face and voice husky from smoking. She could have been anywhere between her late thirties and early fifties. Betty chain smoked cigarettes and drank Miller Genuine Draft from a bottle while we talked about life in Humboldt County.

"No terrorist would ever want to come up here—they wouldn't be welcome," said Betty after a long drag on her cigarette. "All people want to do around here is be able to hunt and fish and be left alone."

"Yeah!" exclaimed John, "Ain't no f&!#n' terrorist coming here to Humboldt County. If they did, they'd get the s#!t beat out of them."

The next day I had to drive back to San Francisco and catch a plane to Washington. I found the owner of the Riverwood Inn, Loreen, on the porch with her new puppy from the local animal rescue. I thanked her for her hospitality and told her how my conversations of the previous night had taught me that there was far more to Humboldt County than the towering redwoods all around us.

"Life is more rugged here behind the Redwood Curtain," said Loreen seriously, "It's tough to survive up here. There is a definite 'live-and-let-live' mentality. But I wouldn't trade it for anywhere else. Lots of people I know gave up high-paying, high-power jobs to come live here. Even though there may be less people than in the city, there is much more of a sense of connectedness.

"And they all seem to gravitate to your Inn," I observed.

Loreen nodded. "The Riverwood is sort of the pulse of this community. My place is used for weddings and funerals. Actually, whenever anything happens, everyone seems to wander to the Riverwood to be together somehow. Another part of our small communities up here are the local Volunteer Fire Departments. They are, in most cases, the link that holds everyone together, yet they are constantly struggling for funding for the barest of essentials. Our fire department used to be in a shed when I first came here in 1995. After years of flipping burgers at local events, cake sales and raffles, we finally built a great new firehouse, but we can't afford a generator or heat. They have to pay huge amounts for liability insurance so that's where all the money we raise goes. That means that the Riverwood remains the community center because I have a 30,000 kilowatt generator, a fireplace that provides heat all winter, food, and of course, booze."

I asked her if she agreed with John that the biggest problem in her community was drugs.

"Pot is certainly the backbone of the economy in Southern Humboldt, but not necessarily all over Humboldt. The really bad drug is meth because it's a problem everywhere in the county. I was born in Eureka and in the past ten years the drug problem has become epidemic. I think it's because of the decision to place the Pelican Bay State Prison north of us. Most of the main gang leaders are housed there and they run their operations from the prison. They have access to anything they want so their members are moving into our area to be near the leaders. They run from the Bay Area up to our county, back and forth, and bring their city crime and crap with them. It has become a problem to our south as well, in Mendocino County. Just last week they busted a pot grower with 150,000 plants up near Trinity County. This was the first grow discovered in our area that was from a Mexican cartel. The local [pot] growers don't like that competition and no one likes the gangs coming up and infiltrating our way of life. To us, those gangs are OUR terrorists."

I asked her the same question that I asked William the night before: "What do you expect of your government regarding homeland security?" She thought about it for a moment and then replied.

"Like I said, life is rugged up here so we have to take care of ourselves and each other. Most everyone here has a generator at home because we lose power all winter. No one comes home with less than a half empty gas tank during the winter; we always top off before coming up the hills. Our pantry is stocked with canned food. Next weekend we're putting on the annual celebration in downtown Phillipsville, all two blocks of it, to benefit our fire department. I'll do the auction, my bartenders will be working, we have a fireman's muster with other local fire departments, the bikers will be there with a poker run and bike games (we're bikers here you know – the fire chief and his wife both have Harley's) and there will be kid games and horseshoes. The point I am trying to make is that this is a small fabric of the larger community here. Every little town…Miranda, Myers Flat, Weott, Phillipsville, Briceland, Shelter Cove, Pepperwood, Whitethorn…they all have volunteer fire departments that struggle every day to keep operating. There is only so much we can do as a small community. Homeland Security could really help by providing them with radios, generators, equipment in case there is an attack. Cell phones don't work here but radios do."

"Hey, I've got to run," Loreen said, "I'm going up to Rio Dell to do a small benefit auction for a little boy who has cancer. Keep in touch!" she said with a friendly wave good-bye.

Rugged is an appropriate adjective to describe this county. It must be at least a hundred-mile round trip to visit the nearest Wal-Mart. Few people seemed connected to the outside world by electronic devices; no one was walking around talking on cell phones or emailing on Blackberry devices. There were no pagers going off. The federal and state government seemed light-years away when driving amongst the giant redwoods. Despite the Redwood Curtain that separates the people of Humboldt County from much of the nation and the "live and let live" mentality, I had seen ample evidence of the social connections between these rugged individualists. The challenge for homeland security officials at all levels of government therefore is to find an appropriate way to connect to these citizens.

William, John and Lisa, Betty and Loreen are part of the complex mosaic called American society. They demonstrate that a one-size-fits-all approach to homeland security is a short-sighted approach to policy-making. Consider William, the disillusioned Vietnam War veteran who, when asked what he expects from his government, responds with the words of Jack Johnson on track eight of the album, *In Between Dreams* (2005):

> It's such a tired game
> Will it ever stop?
> How will this all play out?
> Out of sight, out of mind
> By now we should know
> How to communicate
> Instead of coming to blows
> We're on a roll.
> By now we say it's a war for peace
> It's the same old game
> But do we really want to play?
> We could say it's us against them
> We can try but nobody wins
> Are we using what we've learned?
> In the true sense of the word
> Are we losing what we were?
> It's such a tired game
> Will it ever stop?
> Is not for me to say.

William lives on the fringes of American society and has essentially given up on expecting much from the government. The most pressing issue in his life is not the War on Terror; rather it is trying to influence the moral character of his grandchildren.

Another person who finds it comforting to live within the protection of the forest is Betty. Her sentiments about just wanting to be left alone by the government may resonate with a number of Americans who are more concerned with maintaining privacy in their homes than with homeland security. Betty sees no need for government protection because any threat to her will be taken care of locally, preferably by the

malfeasant "get[ting] the s#!t beaten out of them" by someone like John. John and Lori, the siblings, are more hopeful about the future than Betty or William and yet are jaded about the usefulness of government to help them; the flourishing drug industry in Humboldt County is what threatens their security. John has succumbed to the powerful addiction of drugs once and can hear the siren song of quick fortune that marijuana cultivation offers.

The general impression I was left with, after my conversations on the front porch of the Riverwood Inn, was that the locals do not expect much from their government; the biggest threat to their lives is drugs and not terrorists; and they want to maintain their frontier-like attitude of fierce independence. While it is unlikely that al-Qaeda will target the Avenue of Giants, there are other 21st century threats beyond drugs that, if realized, will make it difficult for the community to maintain its independence without government assistance or significant individual advance preparations.

For example, should an influenza pandemic occur again in the United States, an outlander like myself traveling through the forest could easily bring the virus into their midst and their remoteness from medical care will increase the lethality of the disease. A substantial earthquake anywhere on the West Coast could disrupt the power grid or transportation sector, cutting them off from energy and food re-supply for days or weeks. Or, a series of suicide bomber attacks on planes, public venues, or tourist attractions anywhere in America could significantly dampen the tourism industry and depress a regional economy that depends in part on visitors with money to spend on food and lodging. Therefore, it is critical that homeland security officials not only find ways to connect with all citizens of America, but also develop policies that are tailored to the way homeland security affects citizens at the local level.

John and Lori offer us insight into how to develop localized homeland security strategies. Both strongly identify with being a part of their local community and have a strong sense of what Robert Putnam, in *Bowling Alone*, describes as bonding social capital. The concept of social capital refers to the connections among individuals through social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from those networks.[2] There are two general types of social capital: bonding and bridging. Bonding social capital helps create solidarity and is often found in tight-knit communities like Humboldt County. Bridging social capital is useful for generating broader identities and linking the narrowly defined group with external assets. The implications of social capital theory for homeland security are simple: the more people feel connected, the more social capital exists that can be leveraged to link citizens to external assets, such as those maintained by governments.[3] While researchers may not entirely agree with Putnam's observations and findings, there is general agreement that the concept of social capital, especially bridging social capital, is a fundamental part of building a culture of preparedness. The key is the development of connections and trust. Once in place, this social capital can be mobilized for a number of community activities, including cross-hazards preparedness, prevention, and response activities. Homeland security officials need to know how to develop and leverage both bonding and bridging social capital.

In remote or small communities like those found in Humboldt County, people and places like Loreen and her Riverwood Inn are critical because they breed both bonding and bridging social capital. Assets like these should be tapped into using a relational organizing strategy. Relational organizational strategy has been successfully used across

the nation for more than six decades by the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) to encourage citizens of poor and neglected communities to organize and exert power on behalf of themselves.[4] Unlike the activist organization that develops an agenda and then tries to attract support, relational organizing is essentially about one-on-one conversations to build relationships in a community and then let the local concerns emerge. This strategy does not preclude working with existing organizational structures such as parent-teacher associations, town councils, or the federal Citizen Corps program. Rather, as described by an experienced IAF worker in the Washington area, "it adds a dimension that can transform the culture of bureaucracy. Instead of a bureaucratic culture dominated by fixed activities that endlessly repeat, a relational culture is flexible, dynamic, and responsive to growing or changing needs."[5]

The power of using the relational organizing strategy is illustrated by the case study of Valley Interfaith, discussed in the book, *Better Together*. Through a coalition of church and school groups, residents near Pharr, Texas, were able to make positive changes in their neighborhood, ranging from the installation of a stop sign at a dangerous intersection to obtaining basic services like paved streets. When a community's actions develop from the concerns of its member leaders, the people are strongly connected to the cause because it is *their* cause.[6] The most pressing local issue for the residents of Humboldt County appears to be drugs. Using a relational organizing strategy, natural leaders like Loreen should be encouraged to increase social capital in the local community and connect citizens with government resources to mitigate the effects of drugs on the county. As social capital increases, the theory holds that reciprocity and trustworthiness between the narrow community and broader community will likewise increase. The bottom line is about developing an effective national homeland security strategy and, in particular, trying to develop a culture of preparedness. Homeland security officials at all levels of government need to prepare citizens to trust the guidance of their government in a time of crisis. Without this trust, the efficacy of any homeland security plan of action will be greatly diminished.

I will never forget the image of a hopeful William raising his hand, with his fingers forming a circle, and shouting "circles of influence!" before he disappeared into the dark forest. William is not likely to directly contribute to the capture of Osama bin Laden in his lifetime. However, he may be able to instill in his grandchildren civic virtue and respect for others. John will probably never have to thrash an unsuspecting terrorist who wanders into Humboldt County, but he may be able to keep away from drugs and prevent others from doing so as well. To date, government policy related to homeland security has focused primarily on countering terrorism, with its most visible action being the fighting in Iraq. This is too abstract to cause many Americans to change anything about their lifestyles. On the whole, the current message about terrorists at our doorstep is not a compelling enough message to spur wide-scale citizen involvement in developing a culture of homeland security preparedness for those who live outside of major metropolitan areas like Washington or New York. To pierce through the Redwood Curtain, homeland security must become a local concern in order to start building the social capital that is required for a true culture of preparedness.

Avenue of the Giants, Humboldt Redwoods State Park

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[1] With the exception of Loreen, who provided consent to use her own name and that of her Inn, the names of the others have been changed to protect their privacy.

[2] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2000), 19.

[3] Ibid., 22.

[4] Robert G. Putnam and Lewis M. Feldstein, *Better Together* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2004), 14.

[5] Rev. Louise Green, "Planting Seeds," *Unitarian Universalist Association Online*, http://archive.uua.org/programs/justice/relationalorganizingplantingseeds.pdf.

[6] Putnam and Feldstein, *Better Together*, 25.