

Polk Laffoon IV. *Tornado*. New York: Harper & Row, 1975, 244 pp., \$ 8.95.

Written by a Cincinnati reporter, this book gives an account of the 1974 tornado which devastated Xenia and Wilberforce, Ohio, primarily from the perspective of the victims themselves. The narrative focuses on the disaster impact phase, as well as the immediate and longer-term recovery phases, with most attention being paid to the period just after the onset of the storm — those first few days when the community of Xenia and the providers of outside aid were faced with developing an organized response to the catastrophe.

The events of April 3, 1974 and subsequent days are recounted through the eyes of half-a-dozen persons who were directly affected by the tornado. Interviews with community officials, government representatives, and leaders of key organizations are used to provide a more comprehensive perspective on rescue, recovery, and redevelopment. The author discusses the role played by organizations such as the Red Cross, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and Small Business Administration and the Federal Disaster Assistance Administration in the Xenia relief effort and notes some of the conflicts and controversies surrounding these agencies. There is also a discussion of important emergent groups which aided in community response. The writing style is folksy and conversational; description, rather than analysis, is emphasized.

The major strength of the book is that the author succeeds in combining the perspective of the observer with that of the participant. Statements of community residents, local

leaders and government officials are quoted extensively, but an attempt is also made to go beyond the perspective of a single individual or group and to view events in their historical context.

Attention is paid to the social, psychological, and economic consequences of the disaster, and in these areas the author should, perhaps, have been less speculative. Regarding the psychological after-effects to residents, he equivocates. He notes that the anticipated increase in demands for mental health services did not come, then adds that, "despite the scarcity of people seeking psychological help, there were many greatly disturbed" (p. 151). Emphasis is repeatedly placed on the inevitability of psychological problems of various kinds following a disaster of this magnitude, but no evidence is given that these problems ever materialized. It is suggested that religion, especially fundamentalist religion, served as a functional alternative for psychotherapy, and this interesting hypothesis should have been followed up in greater detail. Some of Laffoon's findings — e.g., that widespread looting followed the Xenia tornado and that alcoholism increased markedly in its wake — are contradicted by Disaster Research Center survey data, obtained from a sample of the Xenia and Wilberforce populations, six months and twelve months after the disaster.

In some cases, it seems that the author's method of gathering data leads to biased conclusions. Use of word-of-mouth reports is likely to lead to an exaggeration of the incidence of deviant behavior, such as looting. At other times, statements are accepted too uncritically. Regarding alcohol consumption, Laffoon uses a statement indicating an increased caseload for an agency dealing with alcohol abuse as evidence of an increase in alcoholism. Mention is not made of the fact that such increases are often due to stepped-up casefinding efforts by the agencies involved. In fact, this was indeed what occurred in the Xenia case, according to interviews made with agency personnel by the Disaster Research Center. The fact that drink-

ing and alcoholism are not equivalent is also ignored.

Laffoon briefly discusses the manner in which the plan for rebuilding downtown Xenia emerged and elaborates some of the details of that plan. However, he is unable to convey, in such a small amount of space, the complexity and problematic nature of planning for the economic recovery of a community of 22,000 following a massive disaster in a period of staggering inflation. Moreover, his study concludes in December, 1974, too short a time after the tornado to permit generalizations or predictions on the eventual course of urban redevelopment.

This book should be of interest of those involved in studying the psychological and sociological aspects of disasters and could be useful to supplement more analytical treatments of the topic. Planners and members of organizations charged with the responsibility of aiding in disaster response will also find it useful.

In summary, this book is a creditable attempt by a journalist to convey through eyewitness accounts what is involved, on the individual and the community level, in responding to and recovering from a large-scale disaster. It is superior to many such accounts yet it is plagued by the same weaknesses, e.g., uncritical acceptance of hearsay and overgeneralization. However, while depth has sometimes been sacrificed for breadth of scope, this chronicle is extremely readable, very realistic, and mostly accurate.

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