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February 25, 2003

The Rhode Island Nightclub Disaster

The Rhode Island nightclub tragedy shows the collapse of a real world system. An article in the New York Times discusses this debacle and the role of the club owners, firefighters, and common citizens. In this story, pyrotechnics in the club ignited sound-insulating foam. The blaze started in the rear of the building and quickly spread, trapping many helpless victims within the burning building.

In light of this tragedy, it is important to examine the systems that were put in place to prevent a disaster, and it is of equal importance to identify the failures that occurred in the systems.

Currently, the media seems to be concerned with who authorized the use of pyrotechnics. Some people are of the belief that the club owners gave the performing band authorization to use the fireworks. Others are siding with the club owners, and they claim that the band used the effects without the permission of the club management. In either case, there was a definite breakdown in communication between the band and the club owners.

One could view the use of pyrotechnics as the main failure in the system involved with the Rhode Island disaster. There are, however, a few failures that should be of greater concern. The use of the flammable insulation may have been a significant factor in the club disaster. The pyrotechnics that were used were similar to sparklers that people carry around on New Year's Eve. If such sparks could ignite the insulation, what safeguards were in place to combat the destructive power of a cigarette? From the

evidence presented in the New York Times article, a cigarette seemed equally capable of setting the club on fire.

Another failure was the emergency escape routes. The lack of an efficient means of evacuation prevented people from properly exiting the club and surviving the blaze. The fire was spotted very quickly after it ignited; yet 97 people still died in the tragedy. According to many witnesses, there were not enough exits to get everyone out of the club, and people quickly found themselves trapped in the club with no means of escape. Ironically, the club was also cleared by the fire department for operation a week before the disaster.

In turn, a failure also occurred with the fire department. One can't entirely blame the club owners for the lack of suitable evacuation; they must also place some burden of responsibility on the people in charge of ensuring fire codes.

From the evidence presented by the media, it is clear that the use of pyrotechnics was not the only, or even main, failure in the nightclub disaster. There were multiple failures within a system that was supposed to protect the audience from a sudden fire. The use of extremely flammable insulation, the lack of emergency exits and the failure of the fire department in identifying potential hazards made the night club a disaster waiting to happen.