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The Quest for High-Performance Federalism

Mega-Disasters and Federalism

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Measured in dollar terms, Hurricane Katrina was the worst natural disaster in American history. Mega-disaster response recovery and mitigation put federalism to an especially difficult test because they require speed, efficiency, decisiveness, and effective coordination. This essay focuses on the response to and recovery from Katrina in order to probe the implications of mega-disasters for federalism. It understands federalism as being composed of four dimensions: the three levels of government and the civic realm. It tests key defenses of federalism against civic and government performance during Katrina. It offers examples of successes and failures involving all four dimensions and provides specific recommendations for improving mega-disaster mitigation, response, and recovery while maintaining an appropriate constitutional balance among the three levels of government and between the civilian government and the military.

Disaster response and recovery put federalism to an especially difficult test because they require speed, efficiency, and effective coordination. These are not the strong suits of a federal system involving three separate levels of government, each of which contains a variety of individual agencies and governing structures with interest in and responsibility for some aspect of the problem. Such difficulties are greatly amplified when the disaster's effects are of the unprecedented size and scope of Hurricane Katrina.

Three Meanings of Federalism

To examine the implications of mega-disasters for federalism, it is first necessary to clarify what I mean by "federalism." The term can be used in at least three ways. In a formal constitutional sense, federalism is confined to a consideration of the relationship between the states and the federal government. They are the only two governments that the document constitutes and whose powers it describes. The U.S. Constitution ignores the myriad forms of substate government—counties, municipalities, special districts, and so on. And yet, all these governments exist and must receive due consideration in order to understand how federalism actually works. Understanding federalism as the study of intergovernmental relations is indeed the conventional understanding among political scientists and students of public administration, and the term "intergovernmental relations" substitutes for "federalism" in the titles of textbooks that examine the interactions among different layers of government.

My discussion of federalism adopts a third way. It includes the civic realm, that is, the civically relevant activities of ordinary citizens and private associations—churches, charities, and civic organizations. The Constitution does not define or describe the obligations and duties of citizens, just as it ignores the role of substate government. In neither case should this omission be interpreted as slighting their importance. They are both integral to the spirit, if not the letter, of the Constitution, and to the spirit of limited government. Limiting the intrusion of powerful and distant governments is only possible because of the ability to rely on citizens to take care of themselves and to look first to their friends and neighbors, their church congregants, and their local governments for help when they need it.

Mega-Disasters: The Case for Federalism

In the face of a terrible emergency, the saving grace of federalism is supposed to be its greater flexibility, responsiveness, and capacity to mobilize mutual aid. It presumably benefits from the unique virtues that each level of government and that the citizen himself of herself possesses. These virtues compensate for its inherent complexity and redundancy. The exercise of personal responsibility and neighborly concern is a

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superior substitute for government intervention. As Alexis de Tocqueville recognized, government cannot hope to match the energy and resourcefulness of citizens cooperating informally or through voluntary associations. If people build their houses to withstand storms and floods, respond promptly to evacuation orders, and offer rides to elderly or disabled neighbors, they eliminate the need for response assistance and enable scarce governmental and philanthropic resources to be expended elsewhere.

Mayors and chiefs of police and fire know their cities. They should be able to use this local knowledge to ensure that disaster response plans reflect actual circumstances. They know which roads and bridges are best suited for escaping a densely populated island under attack, how best to coordinate police and fire activities, where disabled and elderly people live, and how to work with neighborhoods and church groups to establish buddy systems linking those with cars to those without.

The national government has resources and technical capacity that hardly any locality can afford. It has the fleets of helicopters and transport planes and the corps of technicians needed to respond to massive natural or man-made disasters. The national government is also best suited to perform the ongoing research and training functions necessary to improve response and recovery techniques and capabilities.

As always, the states fit somewhere in between. Their role is less clearly defined than that of the federal or local government, but it is no less essential. Mega-disasters do not respect local boundaries. As the next-highest level of constituted authority, the states need to provide leadership for response and planning efforts that cross municipal boundaries, coordinate those efforts with other states when problems cross state lines, and work with their congresspersons to represent the concerns of all affected regions and communities in Washington. Because both the Constitution and federal statutes limit the law enforcement powers of the national government, states also have primarily responsibility for backing up the law enforcement efforts of beleaguered city and county police departments.

This analysis tests the defenses of federalism against the civic and government performance regarding Hurricane Katrina. It identifies both the key successes and the most significant failures. Measured in dollar terms, Katrina was the worst natural disaster in American history; its $96 billion price tag is more than three times greater than the second most expensive disaster, Hurricane Andrew (White House 2006, E153). The increasing proclivity of Americans to build and dwell along hurricane-ravaged coasts, in fire-prone semi-deserts, and bestride earthquake faults ensures that catastrophes of a similar magnitude are likely to occur in the not-too-distant future. Therefore, this article translates its findings into specific recommendations about how to reform the federal system in order to develop greater capacity to prevent, respond to, and recover from future natural disasters wherever they might take place.

Civic Life

The direst example of civic failure as well as an especially edifying example of civic capacity both occurred in the city of New Orleans. Most of the deaths attributable to Katrina took place in New Orleans Parish, which is coterminous with the city but contains less than half the population of the New Orleans metropolitan area. The population of New Orleans Parish is only about 25 percent greater than the combined populations of the three Mississippi counties that bore the brunt of the storm, but its death toll was more than three times higher (MSNBC 2006). Is a flood inherently more of a killer than a windstorm that rips whole houses off their foundations? In the absence of clear evidence, the best surmise is that the disparity was caused by the incomplete evacuation of the city of New Orleans. Although approximately 90 percent of the population of southeast Louisiana was successfully evacuated, an estimated 70,000 people remained in New Orleans during the flood (U.S. House 2006, 115).

The impression given by the media was that those who did not get out of New Orleans could not, either because they had no car or were disabled. This impression stuck even though the visuals accompanying those media reports showed streets crowded with abandoned cars. A congressional report confirmed that the pictures were more reliable than the words. It stated that more than 250,000 cars remained in the city during the storm and that cars were found parked in the driveways of many of the dead (U.S. House 2006, 116). The report chastised the governor of Louisiana and the mayor of New Orleans for being slow to issue mandatory evacuation orders, and those individuals "share the blame" for incomplete evacuation (U.S. House 2006). Resorting to the verb "share" shows just how reluctant the report writers were to concede that not all bad things that happen are the fault of the government. Those car owners who failed to evacuate in the face of mandatory evacuation orders that, however tardy, still left them plenty of time to leave, do not *share* in the blame, they *are* to blame. If indeed a major, or perhaps even the major, cause of death from Katrina was the failure to obey a mandatory evacuation order, this puts the whole Katrina problem in a different light. It shifts the blame from errors made by the various levels of government to the actions of the populace itself.

Undoubtedly, individuals who could have left had strong reasons not to obey the order. They feared looting. They treated the evacuation order as just another case of the government crying wolf. Nonetheless, the evacuation was mandatory. The presence of so many people in the flooded area was the reason so many people died. This act of civil disobedience, far more than any failures on the part of emergency responders, led to the high death toll. Although inadequate evacuation planning by local and state government led to the woeful conditions at the Superdome and the Convention Center, only six people died at the Dome and four at the center, and none of those deaths could directly be blamed on government negligence (Thevenot and Russell 2005).

Because so many people remained stranded in the city, emergency responders had to concentrate on saving lives rather than on minimizing damage and restoring vital services. The entire focus of the National Guard for the first two days after the flooding was on search and rescue. Helicopters and boats crews were diverted from other urgent tasks such as restoring communications and other vital infrastructure, transporting food, and delivering other vital equipment. In order to save more stranded people, the crews had to dump survivors and hasten back into the fray without providing those whom they had just rescued with food and water (Thevenot and Russell 2005).

Contrast this citywide civic failure with what took place in a predominantly Vietnamese and Vietnamese American neighborhood in eastern New Orleans. At Saturday night mass, two days before the storm hit, Father Vien Nguyen "skipped the homily and told people to get out" (Cooper and Block 2006, 250). Of the 4,000 parishioners living in the neighborhood, approximately 3,500 obeyed the priest's warning. However, 50 parishioners came to Sunday mass, a sure sign that some congregants had remained in the city. At that point, Nguyen established a shelter in a parochial school, assembled a full stock of supplies, including a battery-operated radio, and sent the parish van out to find others in distress. As the water rose, the van was abandoned in favor of a rowboat and then a powerboat. The shelter ended up as a refuge for 150 people, all of whom received adequate food and shelter. To prevent looting, Father Nguyen organized a powerboat squad to patrol and secure the neighborhood. He drove to Baton Rouge, Houston, Atlanta, and the other cities that had received evacuees and arranged for his parishioners to move back to shelters set up at Vietnamese churches on the unflooded West Bank. When the floodwaters receded, the parishioners organized work crews and began to remove rubble and debris from their neighborhood. Days later, 800 people celebrated mass in the ravaged church.

Local Government

The successes and failures of local government vis-a-vis Katrina display the full gamut of strengths and weaknesses that champions and critics have ascribed to it. One finds petty turf battles, demagoguery, and poor planning, as well as bravery, probity, skillful public management, and far-sightedness.

The most damaging of all local government failures occurred long before the storm. Three canals run from Lake Pontchartrain to downtown New Orleans. They were originally built to drain the adjacent swampland, creating developable land. These narrow waterways posed grave flood risk because, in the event of a storm surge along the lake, they would serve as funnels, intensifying the surge and carrying the water right into the heart of the city. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had long recommended that floodgates be built at the lake end of the canals, thus sealing them off from such a surge. But feuding between two local agencies, the New Orleans Levee Board, which oversees the city's levees, and the New Orleans Water and Sewerage Board, which is responsible for pumping excess water away from the city, kept the levees from being built.

Because the storm gates were aimed at flood protection, they would have been controlled by the Levee Board. Because most of the city is below sea level, there is no natural drainage. All rainwater has to be pumped out. The Sewerage Board feared that the Levee Board would err on the side of caution in deciding when to close the gates, preventing the pumping of sufficient rainwater through the drainage canals and out into the lake.

The Sewerage Board successfully lobbied Congress to refuse to fund the floodgate plan. Instead, Congress ordered the Corps of Engineers to construct levees along the canals (Seed et al. 2006). Katrina confirmed the wisdom of the floodgate plan. The very worst sources of flooding in the central city of New Orleans were the breaches in two of the three canal levees caused by the funneling of the Lake Pontchartrain storm surge into those narrow confines.

The New Orleans local government failed to make provision for those who were unable to evacuate on their own—those who did not own cars, the disabled, the elderly, and tourists left stranded when the supply of rental cars ran out. School buses were unavailable because they had not been moved to high ground. Mayor Ray Nagin resisted issuing a mandatory evacuation order until a mere 19 hours before the storm. The U.S. House of Representatives' report on Hurricane Katrina offers the following biting critique of Nagin's leadership: "Failure of complete evacuation resulted in hundreds of deaths and severe suffering for thousands…thousands of dangerous rescues, and horrible conditions for those who remained" (2006, 114).

The inability to evacuate such a large number of people was the direct cause of the deplorable crowding and poor sanitation conditions at the Superdome and the Convention Center. Recognizing that the vulnerability of so much of the city to flooding made the creation of neighborhood flood shelters a bad idea, New Orleans did not establish them, relying on a full-fledged evacuation instead.

This failure of local government leadership does not contradict the earlier discussion of civic failure. Nineteen hours elapsed between the issuance of the mandatory order and the outbreak of the storm. This was ample time for those who could leave to do so. Had the number of those stranded been limited to those truly unable to leave, emergency responders would have had to spend far less time saving stranded individuals. The crowding at the Superdome and the Convention Center would have been significantly reduced, placing far less strain on its food and sanitation resources. New Orleans city government simply exacerbated what the civic failure had wrought.

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After the storm abated, Nagin worsened the situation by making hysterical and false statements about how the city was faring. Interviewed by Oprah Winfrey, he reported "hundreds of armed gang members" raping and pillaging inside the Dome (Thevenot and Russell 2005). His police chief, Eddie Compass, recounted tales of the rape of "babies," shootouts at the Dome and the Convention Center, and snipers firing at doctors and soldiers from downtown high-rises (Thevenot and Russell 2005).

By contrast, local governments along the Mississippi Gulf coast largely took control of their own destiny. They issued and carried out evacuation orders in a timely and effective manner (U.S. House 2006). In New Orleans, many policemen failed to show up for work in the aftermath of the storm. In the town of Waveland, Mississippi, many policemen were trapped in the police station as the floodwaters rose. Then they were swept away. They clung desperately to a bush located in the front yard of the station for five hours. When the surge subsided, the men returned to their duties, not having yet returned to their homes or, in some cases, not knowing whether they even a home to return to (Arnold 2005; White House 2006, 127).

Once the immediate crisis had passed, the problem facing local government shifted from one of emergency deployment of life-saving services to one of debris removal and infrastructure repair. The titanic struggles with nature morphed into prosaic problems of public finance and service contracting. These efforts were greatly complicated by the voluminous and often mutually contradictory requirements and limitations that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) placed on the use of its aid funds. These difficulties greatly slowed the ability of cities and towns in Louisiana to remove the debris and restore surfaces. Although Mississippi localities were deeply resentful of the roadblocks that federal agencies, especially FEMA, placed in their way, they were able to progress far more rapidly. They had rainy day funds that they could tap to pay for their immediate needs. Although they devoutly hoped to recoup these expenditures from state and federal sources, they could and did initiate debris removal and infrastructure repair projects before they had those reimbursements in hand.

Describing her refusal to wait for FEMA's permission for response actions that she considered to be of immediate necessity, Pascagoula, Mississippi, city manager Kay Johnson Kell said, "If the ox is in the ditch you got to get him out." Because Pascagoula had a rainy day fund, she could indeed pull out the ox. Localities that were broke had to leave him in the ditch. Pascagoula also had the foresight to negotiate a predisaster contract, which stipulated what services the contractor was required to provide in the event of a disaster and the prices to be paid for each service. Thus, the city was spared having to negotiate to obtain services at a time when communications were difficult and when all the bargaining power belonged to the contractors, according to Kell.

The Federal Government

The most striking fact about the federal government's role in Katrina was its unprecedented generosity. Never has so much money been spent by the nation as a whole to assist a distressed region. In the aftermath of the storm, congressional leaders cut short their summer recess and returned to Washington to clear a $10.5 billion emergency supplemental bill to meet immediate needs. The measure gave $10 billion to FEMA, most of which went to the Public Assistance Program for recompensing state and local emergency services spending, as called for by the Stafford Act. The Stafford Act is the authoritative statute defining federal emergency response policy.[1] It is the basis for the functioning of FEMA and for the dispensation of federal aid to states and localities. President George W. Bush signed the supplemental appropriation into law on September 2. On September 8, he signed a $51.8 billion emergency spending bill—the largest nonwar supplemental spending package in U.S. history. In late December, $29 billion was appropriated as part of the 2006 Defense spending bill (H.R. 2863). It included $23.4 billion originally granted to FEMA but now made available to the states in a more desirable discretionary fashion, largely in the form of Community Development Block Grants (CDBGs) (Higa 2006).

The federal government also provided vital services and personnel. As of mid-September 2005, Navy Seabees had cleared more than 200 miles of roads, removed 3,500 tons of debris, delivered 170,000 gallons of water and fuel, repaired more than 90 schools, and brought food to more than 600 families a day (U.S. Navy 2005). The U.S. Coast Guard rescued or evacuated more than 33,500 people and received rave reviews from Gulf Coast residents (Ripley 2005). The much-maligned Army Corps of Engineers pumped out 224 billion gallons of water from New Orleans, installed 900 large generators, repaired 170,000 roofs, and removed a million cubic yards of debris. Like the city of Pascagoula, the Corps had pre-awarded competitively bid contracts for all of the various response functions to allow quick deployment of resources prior to and immediately after the event (U.S. House 2006, 217; White House 2006, 131). By mid-September, the U.S. military had contributed 22,439 active military personnel to build field hospitals, fly helicopter sorties to aid in both evacuation and security, to serve meals and transport supplies (American Forces Press Service 2005). As of August 2006, FEMA had provided 101,174 travel trailers and mobile homes as temporary housing for Hurricane Katrina victims, as well as motel rooms for 85,000 and cruise ship staterooms for an additional 7,000 households (FEMA 2006). If one assumes an average of only three people per household, FEMA was housing well over a half a million people.

The relentless barrage of criticism that the federal government endured seems churlish in the face of such an outpouring of aid, and to a great extent it was. But it also reflected the understandable cynicism that always accompanies the raising of false expectations and the inevitable resentment that occurs when promised help comes too slowly. President Bush raised those false expectations. His administration also chose to employ a particularly cumbersome statutory and administrative mechanism for distributing its aid and failed to signal to the grantor agencies that their job was not to adopt the narrowest and most obstructionist interpretations of spending and contracting guidelines but rather to be as flexible, speedy, and generous as the law allowed.

President Bush was severely criticized for his slowness in responding to and acknowledging the full extent of the Katrina disaster. This charge is highly overblown, resulting as it does in large measure from the hysterical and false impressions of the number of deaths and the degree of lawlessness that was given by New Orleans local government and the national and international media. FEMA made many mistakes in the immediate aftermath of the storm, but a president is simply too far removed from the operational chain of command to correct such errors, even if he had been more aware that they were occurring.

President Bush's far more serious leadership failure came in the manner in which he responded to the charges of presidential inattentiveness. Two weeks after the storm, he went to New Orleans and gave a speech that misled both the residents of the storm-ravaged city and the world at large about how ambitious his administration intended to be in dealing with the catastrophe.

> Throughout the area hit by the hurricane, we will do what it takes, we will stay as long as it takes, to help citizens rebuild their communities and their lives. And all who question the future of the Crescent City need to know there is no way to imagine America without New Orleans, and this great city will rise again.
>
> When communities are rebuilt, they must be even better and stronger than before the storm. Within the Gulf region are some of the most beautiful and historic places in America. As all of us saw on television, there's also some deep, persistent poverty in this region, as well. That poverty has roots in a history of racial discrimination, which cut off generations from the opportunity of America. We have a duty to confront this poverty with bold action. So let us restore all that we have cherished from yesterday, and let us rise above the legacy of inequality. When the streets are rebuilt, there should be many new businesses, including minority-owned businesses, along those streets. When the houses are rebuilt, more families should own, not rent, those houses. When the regional economy revives, local people should be prepared for the jobs being created. (White House 2005)

Bush went from underestimating the storm's impact to articulating a vision for the Gulf Coast that was reminiscent of Lyndon B. Johnson's declaration of a War on Poverty and pledge to create a Great Society from the wreckage of America's urban and rural slums. As generous as the aid package for the Gulf Coast was, it simply was not of a scale or design capable of fulfilling the grandiose promises the president made.

In *Presidential Greatness*, Landy and Milkis (2000) argue that a president's civic education duties are second only to his responsibilities as commander and chief. Like Johnson, President Bush dressed a modest program in savior's garb, guaranteeing that people would become cynically disillusioned when salvation did not arrive. Unlike the Sisyphean promise of ending poverty, a full-scale resuscitation of New Orleans based on a vast reduction in flood risk was hardly impossible. The Dutch have done it.[2] But the immense cost of such an undertaking made it a most unlikely venture for a conservative president to embark upon in the face of a massive budget deficit and in the midst of a hugely expensive war.

If victory over nature, in the form of full-fledged flood protection, was too costly, then the only responsible alternative was to propose a strategic retreat by encouraging home and business owners in the least defensible places to move to higher ground. Abandoned flood-prone areas would then revert to wetlands or be used as parks, gardens, or ball fields. Emergency response professionals refer to this approach as "mitigation."

The federal government did some mitigation. FEMA issued elevation guidelines requiring homeowners in flood plains to raise their houses in order to be eligible for flood insurance. Its detailed maps specified the degree of elevation required based on its assessments of how high future floodwaters were likely to be in a particular locale (Nossiter 2006). But neither President Bush nor any congressional leaders addressed the most serious hindrance to mitigation: subsidized flood insurance. To protect homeowners in floodplains, the federal government began in 1968 to provide such insurance at below-market rates, thereby encouraging homeowners to build in flood-prone areas and to rebuild in place after their homes were damaged or destroyed (FEMA 2008).

The flood insurance issue never even surfaced during the congressional debate about Katrina, but a proposal that had significant mitigation potential did receive considerable attention. Known as the Baker bill in honor of its sponsor, Richard Baker, a conservative Louisiana Republican congressman from Baton Rouge, it enjoyed the enthusiastic support of all prominent Louisiana politicians, including Governor Kathleen Babineaux Blanco, Mayor Ray Nagin, Senator Mary Landrieu, and Senator David Vitter. As approved by the U.S. House Financial Services Committee, the proposal established a public corporation, the Louisiana Recovery Corporation, with the ability to issue $80 billion in bonds to pay off lenders, restore public works, and, most importantly, purchase destroyed properties. It would buy destroyed homes at a minimum of 60 percent of pre-Katrina equity. Although described as a recovery rather than a mitigation proposal, it contained great mitigation potential. Armed with this significant amount of equity, in addition to the payouts from flood and homeowners insurance, homeowners could afford to buy homes on higher ground. And, because of the corporation's capacity to acquire and assemble large parcels of destroyed land, whole neighborhoods could be recontoured and redeveloped on the basis of flood-resistant landscape design and architectural principles not applicable to the rehabilitation of single-family houses adhering to preexisting plot lines.

Donald Powell, the Bush administration's "Katrina czar," announced the White House's opposition to the bill, calling it a "needless layer of bureaucracy" (Bosworth 2006). The Baker bill died and federal housing aid came to take the form of CDBGs that were, in theory, neutral with regard to mitigation. But federal government neutrality was the death knell for meaningful mitigation. The political pressure exerted by flood victims on state and local officials to restore the pre-Katrina status quo was simply too strong to allow those officials to press for serious mitigation. Only the federal government enjoyed both the political distance from the victims and the economic leverage necessary to impose mitigation requirements on the localities. Ironically, many local officials would have welcomed such "strings" on the disbursement of aid because that would have given them sufficient political "cover" to make what they knew to be wise but politically unpalatable mitigation decisions.

Red Tape

Federal mitigation strings were slack, but the chief cause for slowing down response and recovery was the many other strings that federal agencies wound too tightly.[3] Red tape streamed from FEMA and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the two agencies, along with the Corps of Engineers, most involved in disaster response and recovery. Neither was able to provide assistance without first requiring myriad application forms, layers of application review, complex and even mutually contradictory procedural requirements, and time-consuming audits. This was not done capriciously. Red tape was used to cope with a real problem: corruption. Louisiana state government and New Orleans municipal government are notoriously corrupt. Less than a year before Katrina, three top administrators in the Louisiana Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness were indicted for the alleged misuse of up to $60 million in FEMA mitigation planning money (Silverstein and Meyer 2005). Mississippi's reputation is not as bad, but a

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federal agency is hard put to devise one set of rules for giving money to one state and a more lax set of rules for another.

The issue of debris removal provides a good illustration of the difficulties created by FEMA's efforts to ensure accountability. FEMA did not reimburse local contractors simply on the basis of the quantity of debris removed. Rather, it established different categories of debris, including, stumps, leaners (broken branches leaning at more than a 30-degree angle), and hangers (branches broken off a tree that were entangled in other branches). Contractors were reimbursed differing amounts depending on the category of debris and the degree of danger involved in removing it.

To guard against inaccurate and false debris accounting, FEMA conducted ex post facto inspections of debris piles. After FEMA inspectors counted the tree trunks in a debris pile, they went back to the roads and counted stumps. They only reimbursed contractors for the number of stumps they found, concluding that the other stumps had been dumped to puff up the numbers. If the stump count was 75 percent less than the tree trunk count, FEMA would not reimburse at all. Contractors complained that the FEMA stump counts were inaccurate because the inspectors only counted along the main roads, failing to notice unmarked side roads from which contractors had removed trees (Womack 2008). The sight of FEMA inspectors stumbling through brush piles and cruising along gutted roads counting stumps may have provided locals with valuable comic relief amid the tragedy of the storm's aftermath, but it cannot have resulted in a credible assessment of the accuracy of contractors' debris invoices.

FEMA and/or the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Inspector General reserved the right to conduct inspections and audits of debris piles and contractor invoices months or even years after reimbursements were issued. If the federal officials found that correct competitive bidding procedures had not been followed or they deemed the profit margins enjoyed by contractors to be excessive, they demanded their money back. At present, two localities are appealing FEMA demands that they return substantial amounts of money that they received to pay for debris removal (McDonald 2008).

Another means for ensuring accountability was FEMA's insistence that prior to the disbursement of aid funds, localities provide matching funds equal to 10 percent of the monies FEMA was providing. In response to 9/11, FEMA had waived the local match requirement. In Mississippi, the 10 percent matching provision constituted an annoyance but did not materially affect the emergency response. Most of the localities in Mississippi had rainy day funds that they could dip into to provide the matching monies. The state of Mississippi was also very quick in disbursing emergency state funds to supplement what the locals had on hand. But in Louisiana, localities did not have rainy day funds. Those that were damaged worst had no shops open to generate sales tax revenue and no inhabitable property to produce real estate taxes. Unlike Mississippi, the state of Louisiana did not provide such sums. Instead, the 10 percent matching requirement was met by using other federal money that came without such strings. This was, in effect, a 10 percent tax on the total amount of federal money available for response and later for recovery. In May 2007, after the Democrats took control of Congress as a result of the 2006 congressional elections, the 10 percent matching requirement was finally waived (Flaherty 2007).

The red tape that stuck to CDBG monies had a different composition but proved equally sticky. The CDBG was chosen as the primary vehicle for aiding in Katrina recovery for two related reasons. It is the federal government's largest and most widely available source of financial assistance to support state and local government-directed neighborhood revitalization, housing rehabilitation, and economic development activities, precisely the set of activities that communities devastated by Katrina required to recover. The block grant nature of the program accorded local and state officials a great deal of discretion in determining which combination of the 25 categories of eligible activities to undertake when developing their community development plans. Eligible CDBG activities include historic preservation; real property acquisition, demolition, site preparation, and disposition; economic development and job creation, including assistance to for-profit entities and establishment of revolving loan funds; housing assistance, including rehabilitation loans and grants; public service activities, including job counseling and employment training; and assistance to not-for-profit entities, including community development corporations and faith-based institutions.

Under normal circumstances, in order for an activity to be eligible for CDBG funding, it has to principally benefit low- and moderate-income persons; aid in eliminating or preventing slums or blight; or meet particularly urgent community development needs because existing conditions pose a serious and immediate threat to the public. Helping storm ravaged communities recover clearly met the third objective. The program's authorizing statute requires each recipient community to allocate 70 percent of its CDBG funds to activities that primarily benefit low- and moderate-income persons. In response to previous disasters, HUD had waived this provision in order to allow a community to address an urgent threat to the safety of residents (Boyd 2006).

Thus, unlike FEMA money, CDBG money could be spent very freely, but the application process for obtaining the funds proved highly complex, slow, and burdensome. In the words of Andy Kopplin, former director of the Louisiana Recovery Authority, the CDBG application process is "a maze but there is cheese at the end. FEMA just tells you, 'You can't'" (Kopplin 2007). Among the obstacles created by the CDBG application process was the need to show compliance with the Davis Bacon Act, which requires contractors to pay prevailing wages, and to prove that there would be no duplication of benefits—that all forms of other assistance, including private insurance, would be deducted from the CDBG payout. This requirement was particularly onerous because of the lack of adequate databases for checking on the various forms of federal expenditures and the unwillingness of harried insurance companies to redeploy staff away from dealing with irate customers to gather the requisite data.

The capacity of the CDBG application to slow down recovery is illustrated by the onerous requirements it placed on The Road Home, Louisiana's program for aiding homeowners whose houses had been damaged our destroyed by Katrina. The Road Home required its grantees to rehabilitate their properties rather than simply take the grant money elsewhere. It put a lien on their property, to be removed only after the rehabilitation had fully taken place. The fact that this requirement had anti-mitigation implications did not trouble HUD. Rather, it insisted that the CDBG rules required each lien trigger a separate Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). Requiring every homeowner to go through the onerous and costly soil and water sampling that an EIS involves would have paralyzed the program. To avoid triggering the EIS, the Louisiana Recovery Authority abandoned the lien and substituted a promise from the grantee that he or she would occupy the property for three years.

After time-consuming negotiations, HUD agreed that such a promise would not require an EIS. Then it reversed itself and once more demanded grantee-by-grantee EISs. More time passed, and then the Louisiana Recovery Authority proposed another form of EIS evasion. The authority would not itself demand evidence that rehabilitation was progressing. Rather, it would create a separate entity that would issue the grant and would hold Road Home grant money in escrow, doling it to the homeowner as the repair proceeded. HUD finally accepted this proposal, removing a critical obstacle to the commencement of what was supposed to be a crash program enabling homeowners to escape their cramped FEMA-provided trailers and move back into their homes (Leger 2007).

The CDBG was never intended to be an emergency program. Its myriad requirements may make sense when applied to the deliberate and lengthy planning process that normally accompanies a CDBG grant application. In adopting the CDBG as the central modality for distributing federal aid, Congress and the White House underestimated the extent to which these requirements would slow down the delivery of emergency aid.

The States

The states performed two critical functions during Katrina. They mobilized their own emergency response units—the state police and the National Guard—and they served as the key decision-making bodies for allocating CDBG funds. In this latter capacity, they were the only level of government to engage in substantial planning. As we have seen, the federal government chose not to impose goals and objectives regarding how its money was spent, focusing instead on making sure that proper procedures were followed and corruption was avoided. Local government was too cash poor and preoccupied with immediate crises to think beyond the short run.[4]

In terms of emergency response, the single greatest asset available to Mississippi and Louisiana was the National Guard. In each state, the Guard performed with distinction. In all, 7,500 troops from four states were on the ground within 24 hours of when Katrina made landfall (Robbins 2005). As of August 27, the Louisiana National Guard had called up almost 3,500 of its members to active duty. By September 9, more than 50,000 Guardsmen had been deployed. They performed a variety of missions, ranging from assisting law enforcement agencies with traffic control and security; transporting and distributing food, water, and ice; conducting searches and rescues; providing generator support; and carrying out other missions to protect life and property. On August 28, Louisiana Guardsmen conducted security and screening at the emergency shelter setup at the New Orleans Superdome, where 9,000 to 10,000 local residents reported after heeding the city's mandatory evacuation order issued earlier in the day. As Katrina threatened to flood the low-lying city with water from the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain, Louisiana Guardsmen set up other shelters and helped state police with evacuations and preparing to support relief operations in the hurricane's aftermath (Miles 2005, 202).

Its excellent performance notwithstanding, the Guard also provoked a very serious controversy between state and federal authorities. President Bush asked Governor Blanco to federalize the Louisiana Guard, thereby turning authority over it to the U.S. military. She refused. Governor Haley Barbour also refused, but the issue was far less contentious in Mississippi, where mayors and police commissioners were not reporting the rape of babies and shootouts in stadiums housing thousands of people. Blanco viewed the request as a blatantly partisan gesture by the Republican president geared toward making her look inept. This may well have been the case. Or, it may have been a genuine effort to centralize the military command structure in the face of what was being depicted by the media and by New Orleans public officials as a massive and deadly breakdown of civil authority. President Bush later retaliated by obtaining from Congress the authority to take control of the National Guard during a disaster without receiving any request to do so from the governor of the affected state (Peterson 2007). After the Democrats gained control of Congress in 2006, that authority was rescinded (*New York Times* 2007).

Mississippi versus Louisiana

Crucial differences between Mississippi and Louisiana emerged in the postemergency phase of the response, the clearing of debris, and the restoration of infrastructure. The fiscal soundness of most Mississippi cities and counties gave them a great advantage in initiating cleanup, but these funds were soon exhausted, with no reimbursement from FEMA in sight. Prompt action by the state of Mississippi enabled the localities to continue their cleanup efforts unabated. By late September, the state had created a mechanism to enable localities to borrow money based on the state's moral obligation to repay. Two-year notes were issued with ballooning interest repayment schedules. Deferring interest payments into the future was a recognition that the localities would only be able to make such payments after they began to receive federal reimbursements. Thus, the state established a type of bridge financing to give the localities breathing space until federal money became available (Reeves 2008).

Louisiana and Mississippi adopted very different postures toward the federal government regarding their efforts to obtain federal aid. Louisiana alternated between aggressive demands and defiant hostility. Mississippi adopted the role of grateful and worthy supplicant, publicly praising the president and avoiding the incessant criticisms of FEMA and HUD issuing from Louisiana. To a considerable extent, this difference was rooted in partisan politics. Like the mayor of New Orleans, the governor of Louisiana was a Democrat. Haley Barbour, governor of Mississippi, was a Republican and former Republican Party national chairman. But it is impossible to tease out this strand of partisan bias from the other more substantial and defensible reasons the that Bush administration had for giving Mississippi more aid relative to the number of victims and amount of destruction it suffered in comparison to Louisiana.

Louisiana lost considerable political credibility when its congressional delegation submitted an initial aid request for $250 billion, which, as the *Washington Post* waggishly remarked, was a sum greater than the inflation-adjusted cost of the entire Louisiana Purchase. In addition to many obviously necessary items related to flood control and restoration of vital services, the proposal included a 50-year-old plan for a $750 million lock for the New Orleans Industrial Canal, a project rated the fifth-worst Corps boondoggle in the country by an alliance of taxpayer advocates and environmentalists. It called for deepening the Port of Iberia to permit the docking of supertankers—an endeavor that the Army Corps determined would yield benefits of only 30 cents for every dollar spent. The 440-page legislative request also included $8 million for alligator farms, $35 million for seafood industry marketing, and $25 million for a sugarcane research laboratory that was not yet built (Grunwald and Glasser 2005).

The proposal was written by a group assembled by the staffs of the two Louisiana senators composed of lobbyists from oil, shipping, and construction who seemed to use it as an opportunity to obtain funding for benefits to their clients that had previously been rejected by Congress. The impression given by this grab bag was that the various political forces in Louisiana could not resolve their differences sufficiently to establish the clear priorities necessary to serve as the basis for a plausible recovery plan. As *CQ Weekly* reported, "the Louisiana delegation [was so] riven by divisions and a lack of seniority and clout" that it had to support the funding proposal devised by the Mississippi delegation, which, unsurprisingly, gave far more aid to Mississippi, in proportion to need, than it did to Louisiana (Schatz 2005).

Because the Barbour administration quickly established planning priorities and worked closely with both its own congressional delegation and HUD, Mississippi was able to begin recovery efforts far more rapidly than Louisiana. It had launched its Phase I Homeowners Assistance Program by April of 2006 (Mississippi Governor's Office of Recovery and Renewal 2006b). By November 2006, more than $357 million dollars had been paid to 5,701 homeowners (Mississippi Development Authority 2006). By the end of January 2007, 10,000 homeowners had received checks (Mississippi Governor's Office 2007a). As of July 31, 2007, more than $1 billion had been distributed to 13,944 homeowners (Mississippi Governor's Office 2007b).

By contrast, Louisiana's program did not become operational until October of 2006 (ICF International 2007). As of the end of 2006, only 92 homeowners had received financial assistance out of more than 80,000 applicants (Schleifstein 2006). Frustration with ICF International, the firm hired to administer The Road Home, had grown so

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great that the Louisiana House and Senate passed resolutions calling on Governor Blanco to fire the consulting company (Institute for Southern Studies 2006).

In both Mississippi and Louisiana, the bulk of the CDBG funds were devoted to homeowner assistance programs. Neither state was able to make use of those programs to promote significant mitigation planning. Louisiana's Road Home program entitled homeowners to a maximum of $150,000 to use either to rebuild their homes or to purchase homes elsewhere in the state. The percentage of the grant they received depended on the percentage of damage done to their home. All other forms of compensation—including other federal and state grants as well as flood and homeowners insurance—was deducted from the Road Home grant. If homeowners chose to use the money to purchase a home outside the state, they received 40 percent less than if they chose one of the two other options. In mitigation terms, the program was counterproductive. The fractional basis for calculating the grant combined with the other compulsory deductions meant that the actual sums homeowners received were too small to enable home purchases outside the floodplain. Instead, the grant served as an incentive for homeowners to refurbish their existing properties on their existing footprint.

Initially, Mississippi's CDBG-funded homeowner assistance program also provided a maximum of $150,000 but was only granted to owners of flooded properties outside the officially designated floodplain and who therefore had no reason to assume they were living in a risky location. These homes were not eligible for flood insurance. Later, the program was expanded to provide a maximum of $100,000 to homeowners within the floodplain whose income was no more than 20 percent above the median income in their area, regardless of whether they had flood insurance (Mississippi Governor's Office of Recovery and Renewal 2006a). Thus, the Mississippi program acquired the same anti-mitigation aspect as the one in Louisiana and for the same reasons.

Mississippi also used the CDBG funds to engage in planning that gave promise of providing significant flood mitigation improvement and substantial economic development. HUD approved $600 million for the redevelopment of the port facility at Gulfport, Mississippi, the third-busiest container port on the U.S. portion of the Gulf of Mexico. The aim was not simply to restore it but to significantly expand and improve it so as to make it a more important source of jobs and revenue than it had been before Katrina (Byrd 2006; Mississippi Port Authority 2005).

Interstate 10 runs east to west across southern Mississippi. The vast bulk of the flood damage caused by Katrina occurred on the more heavily populated south side of the highway. Land north of I-10 is far less flood prone, but it did not yet contain the infrastructure necessary for development to take place there. HUD granted Mississippi's request for $641,075,000 in CDBG monies to build water, wastewater, and storm water infrastructure in the six affected coastal counties, the bulk of which was to be spent north of I-10 (Mississippi Development Authority 2008, 114). This project was the single most important flood mitigation effort undertaken by any government in the aftermath of Katrina because it provided the incentive needed for development to take place on higher ground.

Recommendations

Many of the most important problems raised in this essay do not lend themselves to concrete changes in law, policy, or regulations but only to exhortations. Elect capable and knowledgeable mayors! Elect governors who have enough political clout at home to establish clear priorities and enough clout in Washington to obtain sufficient aid to follow-through on those priorities! Obey evacuation orders and help your neighbors to do so! These exhortations are another way of saying that no amount of tinkering with governmental apparatus can make up for civic and leadership failure. Nonetheless, some of the failures and successes enumerated in this article do demonstrate the need for specific statutory, regulatory, and administrative changes. I divide those recommendations into three categories: mitigation, response and recovery, and constitutional balance.

Mitigation

Remove the subsidies for flood insurance. The federal government encourages homeowners to live in floodplains by providing cheap flood insurance. Congress should repeal this perverse incentive, or at least gradually increase premiums until they approach market rates.

Attach mitigation strings to federal aid. In the aftermath of a mega-disaster, neither state nor local governments are able to press for mitigation. Barraged by demands for immediate assistance, they cannot afford to appear callous by imposing sensible but expensive mitigation requirements. Indeed, the most useful mitigation measure imposed after Katrina, the adoption of stringent elevation guidelines, was imposed by FEMA. The federal government should make its aid contingent on recipient governments taking actions to reducing future disaster risks. States and localities are insufficiently attentive to the dangers involved in building and living on or near earthquake faults, fire-prone grass and forest land, hills subject to mudslides, and seacoasts and riverbanks that are likely to flood. Local governments should be required to use their zoning authority to keep people from living in such places as a prerequisite for obtaining federal aid. Assistance to homeowners should likewise be contingent on adopting sufficient protective measures or moving to safer places.

Response and Recovery

Transform FEMA's administrative culture. The difficulties experienced by local governments in applying for and obtaining reimbursement for emergency response activities were less the result of statutory inhibitions than of FEMA's dysfunctional administrative culture. Rather than concentrating on changing the Stafford Act, the major reform goal at the federal level should be to make whatever changes in FEMA leadership and in the agency's training and promotion policies that are needed to alter that culture.

FEMA acts as if it has chosen the Internal Revenue Service for its role model and that local officials seeking reimbursement should be treated as the taxman treats a tax evader. It fails to recognize that local officials working around the clock to recover from a storm do not view themselves as "tax cheats" and deeply resent taking valuable time away from response efforts to prove themselves innocent of purported transgressions.

FEMA also apes the Internal Revenue Service in refusing to make authoritative decisions about the legality or illegality of a proposed course of action until *after* that action has been taken. In the midst of the emergency, a local official cannot go to the local FEMA representative and ask for a definitive determination as to whether a specific remedial course of action he or she wishes to take does or does not qualify for reimbursement. The official must commit to the action with no firm assurance that he will be compensated for it. Worse, no FEMA promise to pay is irrevocable. The agency and the Department of Homeland Security Inspector General both retain the right to revisit reimbursement decisions and reverse them.

The Stafford Act neither requires nor encourages this prosecutorial and uncooperative approach. FEMA has sufficient administrative discretion to change its oversight methods. Its leadership can and should insist that the purpose of oversight is to prevent serious fraud and corruption, and that a contract drawn up by a bone fide local official is presumed to be acceptable and legitimate. FEMA should empower its local representatives to review proposed contracts and make definitive declarations as to whether they qualify for reimbursement. Such decisions should only be subject to review under the most extraordinary circumstances. This lighter form of scrutiny might indeed result in some increase in waste, fraud, and abuse. However, the cost of such malfeasance would almost certainly be less than what is spent for the cumbersome and unproductive oversight practices—stump counting is merely my favorite—that the agency indulges in. More importantly, this change in FEMA's oversight approach would greatly improve working relationships between federal and local government, decrease the time and attention devoted to administrative niceties, and increase the time and energy devoted to response and recovery.

A mega-disaster version of CDBG. If the CDBG is to be retained as the principle source of discretionary mega-disaster aid to states and localities, then a separate set of procedures should be established to be invoked only in such cases. Specifically, EIS requirements should be eliminated and states should be permitted to begin to assist homeowners before the full process of tracking down whether those homeowners are receiving other government aid or insurance money has been completed. If homeowners fail to disclose such aid and are subsequently caught, they can be punished. But it is wrong to keep thousands homeowners from rehabilitating their property just because some of them might be trying to cheat the government.

Rainy day funds. The key advantage enjoyed by Mississippi localities in responding to the storm was the existence of their rainy day funds. States should either require all localities to have such funds or maintain such funds themselves to be used only for mega-disasters. In that case, disagreements with the federal or state governments about response priorities and practices could be dealt with after the fact and need not impede localities from "getting the ox out of the ditch." Likewise, states should require localities to follow the examples of Pascagoula and of the Corps of Engineers to enter into pre-storm contracts in order to ensure that debris removal and infrastructural repair commence right after the storm is over and that previously negotiated rates apply.

Constitutional Balance

Congress should continue to resist presidential efforts to usurp emergency response powers. There is no demonstrable evidence that lives would have been saved or property preserved if control over the Louisiana National Guard had been shifted from the governor to the U.S. military. But even if there were some such evidence, the cost to the future of republican government would still outweigh the benefits of more effective emergency response. A rights-loving people has every reason to fear an intrusive military. Those fears have attenuated because of the great success of our constitutional system in keeping the military in an appropriately subservient position. Success breeds complacency. The job of Congress is to look past current success to future dire possibilities and strive to maintain a proper civil military balance and a proper balance between state and federal power.

Notes

1. Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, as amended by P.L. 106-390, October 30, 2000, U.S.C. Title 42, Public Health And Welfare, § 5172, section 406, Repair, Restoration, and Replacement of Damaged Facilities, (a) Contributions.
2. In the aftermath of disastrous flooding in 1953, the Dutch decided to make flood protection their highest priority. In contrast to the United States, which attempts to protect against the hundred-year flood, the Dutch protect against a level of flooding that they anticipate to occur only once every 10,000 years. If, for the sake of arithmetic simplicity, we assume that a Dutchman lives a hundred years, then his government is protecting him against an event that he has only a 1 percent chance of experiencing during his lifetime. For a full discussion of flood control in the Netherlands, see Hoeksema (2006).
3. This point of view was consistently expressed in the various interviews with local officials that I conducted. In addition to Kay Johnson Kell, they were Connie Moran, mayor, Ocean Springs, Mississippi, March 6, 2007; Alan K. Sidduth, county administrator, Jackson County, Mississippi, March 6, 2007; and Connie Rockco, county supervisor, Harrison County, Mississippi, March 6, 2007.
4. The state of Mississippi did provoke a very ambitious and extensive planning process. It held planning charrettes in which localities made very serious attempts to think through their long-term futures and how they might best combine flood mitigation with restoration and community improvement. However, as of this writing, there is very little evidence that these impressive efforts have actually had much in the way of substantive impact on how recovery in those communities is actually proceeding.

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