

Background

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The Local Role in Disaster Response: Lessons from Katrina and the California Wildfires

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The increasing tendency since 9/11 to look to Washington for every answer regarding disaster response is troubling. The insistence that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) play an ever-expanding role in addressing day-to-day emergency responses is hindering, not strengthening, the agency's ability to prepare for the next national catastrophic disaster. Even worse, as the federal government pledges to improve its response, state and local governments are getting a false sense of security, relying on Washington rather than preparing proper emergency responses themselves.

The October 2007 wildfires in California provide a revealing glimpse into the continued federalization of disasters. Trumpeted as proof that Washington is ready for the next Hurricane Katrina, California's response really demonstrates that well-organized state and local efforts are far more critical than federal ones. Rather than encourage more Washington-centric solutions, Congress and the White House should focus on lessening the federal role in day-to-day state-level emergencies and emphasize a greater responsibility among state and local communities for preparing and developing response plans for local disasters.

Federalization of Disasters Continues

This year alone, FEMA has issued 35 disaster declarations: 15 major disaster declarations, three emergency declarations, and 17 fire management assistance declarations.¹ FEMA is on pace to issue about 144 disaster declarations in 2008, which would

Talking Points

- As the federal government pledges to improve its response capabilities and to participate more actively in responding to disasters, state and local governments are being lulled into a false sense of security, depending on Washington rather than preparing proper emergency response plans themselves.
- While the number of disaster declarations by FEMA has tripled, staff and resources have not increased with them. Given these trends and resource limitations, FEMA, despite its best efforts, will be ill-prepared for the next catastrophic disaster.
- The California wildfires show that well-prepared state and local governments are critical to the efficacy of a response. Congress and the Administration should focus on lessening the role of the federal government in day-to-day state-level emergencies and emphasize greater responsibility among state and local communities for preparing and developing response plans for local disasters.

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be the third-highest number of disaster declarations since 1953.

The record of 157 declarations achieved in the 1996 election year under President Bill Clinton's FEMA Director James Lee Witt still stands despite the best efforts of all levels of government to get Washington to foot the bill for as many disaster responses as possible. Even more troubling, President George W. Bush's yearly average of disaster declarations will hit 130 by the end of his Administration—an almost 50 percent increase over President Clinton's yearly average.

As Chart 1 demonstrates, other than during the presidencies of Lyndon Johnson (1965–1968) and Ronald Reagan (1981–1988), every President starting with Dwight Eisenhower has federalized more and more of the disasters that occur in America. President Reagan, a strong opponent of a large federal government, averaged only 28 disaster declarations per year, thereby reversing the trend of greater federal control over disasters that started under Richard Nixon and continued again with George H. W. Bush's Administration.

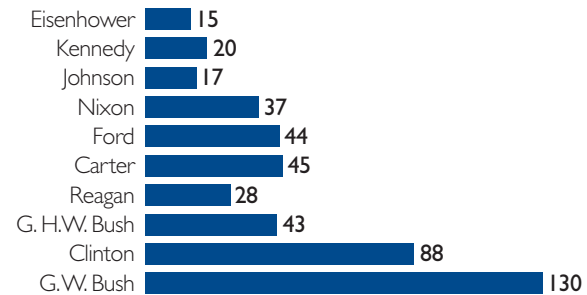
This federalization of disasters accelerated dramatically during the Clinton presidency as the number of disaster declarations doubled from the first President Bush's 43 a year to more than 88 a year under Clinton.

Another disturbing trend is the increase in the yearly average of disaster declarations between the first and second terms of the Clinton and George W. Bush presidencies:

- Clinton's first term averaged 77 declarations a year, while his second term jumped by over 20 declarations a year to 99 per year.
- Bush's first term averaged 115 declarations a year, while his second term jumped by almost 30 declarations a year to 144 per year.

Over the past four terms, the average number of declarations has been increasing at a pace of over 25

Average Annual Disaster Declarations by Presidential Administration



Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency, "2008 Federal Disaster Declarations," at <http://www.fema.gov/news/disasters.fema> (April 7, 2008).

Chart 1 • B 2141 heritage.org

additional declarations per term despite the reduction in hurricanes over the past two years. At this rate, by 2016, FEMA will be issuing almost 200 declarations in a single year, which should cover every flood, snowstorm, tornado, and fire that happens in the United States.

These trends are bad for emergency management and bad for federalism.² As the federal government participates more in disaster response, states will rely more heavily on that federal presence and, as an inevitable result, will be less prepared and less equipped to deal with both contained calamities and truly catastrophic events like Hurricane Katrina. The key to successful emergency management is a quick and effective response from state and local communities, which can react in a timely manner and are much more prepared and trained for the particular disasters that often occur in their specific regions.

New FEMA Fuels the Federalization Fire

Following Hurricane Katrina, the federal government came to new conclusions about how to im-

1. See U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency, "2008 Federal Disaster Declarations," at <http://www.fema.gov/news/disasters.fema> (April 7, 2008).

2. For a discussion of this issue, see James Jay Carafano and Matt A. Mayer, "FEMA and Federalism: Washington Is Moving in the Wrong Direction," Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 2032, May 8, 2007, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandDefense/bg2032.cfm>.

prove disaster response. FEMA stated that part of the reason that the wildfire response was such an effective “team effort” was that people now “don’t wait to be asked” to offer help in a crisis.³ The Administration seems to have learned from its slow response to Hurricane Katrina and “doesn’t want to be bitten again,” according to former FEMA Director Joe Allbaugh.⁴ For example, President Bush called California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger to offer help before Schwarzenegger had even asked for federal assistance. President Bush subsequently anticipated the state’s request to declare a state of emergency and approved it just one hour after the request had been filed.⁵

Pentagon officials say that Hurricane Katrina taught them to be more “forward leaning” as well. In the words of Paul McHale, Assistant Secretary for Homeland Defense, “One of the lessons that we, as a nation, learned is that in a crisis, you don’t wait to be asked; you lean forward, you prepare your capabilities and you ask, very pointedly, ‘How can I help?’”⁶ Even before California authorities requested help, the National Guard Bureau deployed military aircraft to California on a training mission, placing them in a better position to help fight the fires.

In addition to offering federal assistance to state and local governments, FEMA has provided \$4,571,714 to rebuild homes destroyed by the fires.⁷ FEMA also has provided California with a substantial amount in homeland security grants to equip the state with fire-fighting equipment: Between 2001 and 2007, California fire departments received \$147 million under the Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program.⁸

The “forward leaning” approach may have been beneficial for California, but it will leave the nation less prepared to deal with catastrophes the size of Hurricane Katrina. It requires a greater increase in responsibility for the already overwhelmed FEMA, leaving the agency even more thinly spread and ill-prepared for a catastrophe affecting thousands of American lives. An over-eager federal government also creates a false mindset in state and local governments—the expectation that they can rely on the federal government for help—that will leave them less prepared to respond effectively in the critical first 72 hours.

With this federalization of disaster management, FEMA has bitten off more than it can chew. As noted above, between 1993 and 2007, FEMA tripled the number of declarations issued each year. As a result, it is responding to a new declaration every three days. As more resources are devoted to this increased response, local preparedness withers on the vine. In contrast to the increase in declarations, FEMA’s budget and employees have not grown by proportional amounts.⁹ In 2006, FEMA had 2,000 employees, 500 fewer than in 1992. In addition to a smaller workforce, the budget increase was barely perceptible—from \$4,834,065,000 to \$4,834,744,000.

Given these trends and resource limitations, FEMA, despite its best efforts, will likely prove inadequately prepared for the next catastrophe.

Success Depends on How You Define Disaster

As the wildfires in southern California were ablaze last October, the Bush Administration used

3. Laura Smith-Spark, “Have Lessons of Katrina Been Learnt?” BBC News, October 24, 2007, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/7060886.stm> (May 13, 2008).
4. Mimi Hall, “Federal Response More Sure-Footed in Calif. Than It Was After Katrina,” *USA Today*, October 25, 2007, at <http://www.mywire.com/pubs/USATODAY/2007/10/25/4797988?cl=false&pbl=261> (May 13, 2008).
5. “Wildfires Test Post-Katrina Emergency Response,” Spiegel Online International, October 24, 2007, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,513296,00.html>.
6. Jennifer Loven, “Katrina Lessons in Bush Response to Fires,” Associated Press, October 24, 2007, at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/21453908/> (May 13, 2008).
7. U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency, “FEMA Aid to Californians Tops \$5.6 Million,” press release, November 5, 2007, at <http://www.fema.gov/news/newsrelease.fema?id=41602> (May 13, 2008).
8. State of California, Office of Homeland Security, “Director Bettenhausen Encourages California Fire Departments to Apply for Federal 2008 Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program,” press release, February 29, 2008.
9. Carafano and Mayer, “FEMA and Federalism: Washington Is Moving in the Wrong Direction.”

FEMA's adequate response to argue that FEMA's overall performance had improved since Hurricane Katrina. FEMA claimed the response was a major achievement and proof of its improvement over the past two years.

This conclusion, however, seems a bit premature, largely because comparing FEMA's response to the California wildfires with its response to Katrina is like a heavyweight boxing champion comparing his knockout of a welterweight boxer to a heavyweight title fight. The comparison, like a turkey, doesn't fly. It just shows continued hubris.

Hurricane Katrina was a seminal event in American history. The sheer scope of the catastrophe was far beyond any other natural disaster that America had ever faced:

- "Hurricane Katrina, its 115–130 mph winds, and the accompanying storm surge it created as high as 27 feet along a stretch of the Northern Gulf Coast from Mobile, Alabama, to New Orleans, impacted nearly 93,000 square miles of our Nation—roughly an area the size of Great Britain."¹⁰ This area encompassed 138 parishes and counties across several states.¹¹
- "Hurricane Katrina devastated far more residential property than had any other recent hurricane, completely destroying or making uninhabitable an estimated 300,000 homes."¹²
- The estimated damage from Hurricane Katrina exceeded \$96 billion.¹³

- Approximately 1,330 people died during Hurricane Katrina.¹⁴
- "The storm destroyed so many homes, buildings, forests, and green spaces that an extraordinary amount of debris was left behind—118 million cubic yards all told."¹⁵
- More than 1.1 million people over the age of 16 were evacuated, resulting in roughly 770,000 people being displaced for an extended period of time from their homes—"the largest [number] since the Dust Bowl migration from the southern Great Plains region in the 1930s."¹⁶

Compared to Hurricane Katrina, the California wildfires in October 2007 were insignificant. The 2007 fires were even less severe than the October 2003 California wildfires that burned a greater area and destroyed more homes and commercial buildings:¹⁷

- The wildfires affected seven counties in southern California and burned just over 781 square miles.¹⁸
- Roughly 1,760 homes were destroyed and 338 commercial buildings lost.¹⁹
- The damage is estimated at \$2.5 billion.²⁰
- Nine people died as a result of the wildfires.²¹
- While public officials initially claimed that more than 1 million people had been evacuated as a result of the fires, the confirmed number of evacuees was closer to 500,000.²² At the peak,

10. The White House, "The Federal Response to Hurricane Katrina: Lessons Learned," February 2006, at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/reports/katrina-lessons-learned.pdf> (May 13, 2008).

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.

17. State of California, Employment Development Department, Labor Market Information Division, "The Economic Impact of the October 2007 Southern California Wildfires," December 2007.

18. Peter J. Brennan, "California Fires Abate; Some San Diego Schools Reopen," Bloomberg.com, October 27, 2007, at <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601087&sid=aVnMMBTXSntE&refer=home> (April 7, 2008).

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

21. "Firestorm Claims 9th Victim," NBCSandiego.com, November 9, 2007.

27,000 people had registered at public shelters. Based on 2000 census data, the total number of people displaced for an extended period of time was about 3,000 people.²³

Unlike the evacuees at the Convention Center and the Super Dome in Louisiana during Hurricane Katrina, wildfire evacuees to Qualcomm Stadium in California experienced FEMA's new approach to caring for victims, which involves providing much more than the basics of food, water, shelter, and clothing. As *The New York Times* reported:

Over by Gate A you can get a free massage or acupuncture treatment. Up on the Plaza Level are group counseling sessions and medical checkups. There's yoga class in the morning and live music—roving mariachi bands, rock 'n' roll acts, singers with acoustic guitars—at night. Hungry? Go to Gate F for hot meals—Gate D if you want kosher or Gate N if you want Mexican. On the way, stop at a table for candy, lip balm or sunscreen. It's all for free. Is this a giant health fair or vacation theme park? No, it's San Diego's Qualcomm Stadium, the primary wildfire evacuation center.²⁴

When taxpayers are footing the bill, such extravagance is simply not right. Government should take the greatest care to manage resources as efficiently and effectively as possible. More fundamentally, such displays, when compared to what happened in New Orleans, feed into the false belief that the government's response to Hurricane Katrina was so feeble because the victims were poor and black.

In addition, critical infrastructure systems for transportation, electricity, or communication never collapsed in California as they did on the Gulf Coast. The local disaster response infrastructure remained intact in California; local elements were

destroyed during Katrina, with the hurricane knocking out cell phone towers and power lines and blocking nearly every major road in some areas. In California, disruptions of cell phone service, electricity, and major roadways remained isolated events.²⁵ The preservation of communications infrastructure allowed California residents to evacuate more effectively than would have been possible in the flooded Gulf Coast even with a perfect disaster response plan.

One other major difference between the two events is the nature of the population most affected by the two disasters. Most of the evacuees in the Gulf Coast were poor urban residents, while most Californian evacuees were more affluent citizens with access to cars and enough money for alternative housing. The ability of these evacuees to help themselves reduced the burden on first responders.

Until America faces another truly catastrophic event, we simply cannot know whether FEMA has made any structural improvements since Hurricane Katrina. After all, just one year before Katrina, many were lauding FEMA after the agency, in conjunction with the state of Florida, had dealt successfully with four successive hurricanes in September 2004. Lawmakers and the public must be careful not to be lulled into a false sense of security.

State and Local Response Key to California Wildfires

In general, the response to the California wildfires was mostly successful and a marked improvement from the response to the similar fires of October 2003. The most notable characteristic of the 2007 response, and a pivotal factor in its success, was the proactive nature of the state and local responses. Unlike after Hurricane Katrina, the response to the California wildfires was state- and

22. H. G. Reza, Sharon Bernstein, and Megan Garvey, "1 Million Fled Fires? As the Smoke Clears, the Numbers Shrink," *Los Angeles Times*, October 25, 2007, at www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-evacuation25oct25,0,6746893.story?coll=la-home-center (May 13, 2008).

23. *Ibid.*

24. Bob Keefe, "This Time, Refuge Isn't a Disaster, Too," *The Columbus Dispatch*, October 25, 2007, p. A5.

25. Kim Minugh, Todd Milbourn, Tony Bizjak, and Dorothy Kober, "No End in Sight for Southern California Fires," *Sacramento Bee*, October 24, 2007, at <http://www.sacbee.com/101/story/450644.html> (May 13, 2008).

locally driven, not federally driven. State and local leaders made a vigorous effort to take charge and avoid visible infighting. Governor Schwarzenegger took charge of the situation early instead of waiting for federal officials to address the problem.

California's governor flew by helicopter to each firefighting base, meeting with local officials and passing on their requests to the federal government, and followed up by returning frequently to these locations to verify that the assistance had arrived. The state's ability to assess quickly what type of assistance was needed enhanced its ability to work effectively with the federal government. Local leadership and initiative were particularly important considering that San Diego lacks an integrated fire department and relies on a "hodgepodge of local departments that are almost all serving areas where populations are growing faster than their tax bases."²⁶

California's take-charge stance toward firefighting was not the only factor in its successful response. Compared with other states and regions, southern California is a well-prepared area that possesses a formidable emergency response team.

In the October 2003 wildfires, the response was unorganized and chaotic. Local responders absorbed the many lessons learned from that disaster and applied them to the 2007 wildfires. Because of communication problems in 2003, 911 reverse calling, where operators contacted households advising them to evacuate, was used for the first time in 2007,²⁷ and the system worked well.

The federal government did play a role in the response, though it was not critical. Bush Administration officials, mindful of the criticisms they had received after Hurricane Katrina, adopted a

highly visible and proactive stance throughout the wildfire crisis.

After Katrina, FEMA made an important change in how quickly it engages in disasters. FEMA used to wait for a disaster to overwhelm state and local officials before it intervened. To ensure the timely arrival of assistance, FEMA now begins moving some hard-to-deploy assets into an affected area even before local authorities request federal assistance.²⁸ This approach works for a hurricane or wildfire, where most people have advance notice of the approaching danger, but may not be too useful for an earthquake or terrorist attack, near-instant disasters that usually catch people off-guard.

Finally, past U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) federal grants for first responders proved vital during the response to facilitate coordination and communication among city, county, state, and federal government personnel. DHS has provided \$1 billion to help states and cities improve communications interoperability.²⁹ This spending paid off on the ground during the 2007 wildfires as many of the first responders commented on the smoothness of communications and interoperability.

The Los Angeles County fire chief told *The Wall Street Journal* that good communication with other state and federal agencies had led to improved coordination among firefighters.³⁰ The improvements in interoperability led FEMA Director David Paulison to remark, "What we see now that we did not see during Hurricane Katrina is a very good team effort from the local, the state, and the federal government and across the federal agencies."³¹

If there was one important lesson to take away from the wildfires, it is that well-prepared state and local governments are crucial to the efficacy

26. Kirk Johnson and Jennifer Steinhauer, "Firefighters Get Control as Questions Rise," *The New York Times*, October 25, 2007, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/25/us/25calif.html?ref=us> (May 13, 2008).

27. Tim Harper, "Bush Applies the Lessons of Katrina," *The Toronto Star*, October 26, 2007, at <http://www.thestar.com/News/article/270748> (May 13, 2008).

28. Stephen Losey, "Calif. Fires Are Biggest Federal Response Since Katrina," *The Federal Times*, October 29, 2007.

29. U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "Remarks by Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff at the International Association of Fire Chiefs," October 26, 2007, at http://www.dhs.gov/xnews/speeches/sp_1193431068145.shtm (May 13, 2008).

30. "Wildfires Test Post-Katrina Emergency Response."

31. Smith-Spark, "Have Lessons of Katrina Been Learnt?"

of a response. Because state and local governments are always the first to respond to a disaster, they must be specifically prepared and should not depend on the federal government. As former Florida Governor Jeb Bush wrote a few weeks after Hurricane Katrina:

As the governor of a state that has been hit by seven hurricanes and two tropical storms in the past 13 months, I can say with certainty that federalizing emergency response to catastrophic events would be a disaster as bad as Hurricane Katrina.

Just as all politics are local, so are all disasters. The most effective response is one that starts at the local level and grows with the support of surrounding communities, the state and then the federal government. The bottom-up approach yields the best and quickest results—saving lives, protecting property and getting life back to normal as soon as possible. Furthermore, when local and state governments understand and follow emergency plans appropriately, less taxpayer money is needed from the federal government for relief.... If the federal government removes control of preparation, relief and recovery from cities and states, those cities and states will lose the interest, innovation and zeal for emergency response that has made Florida's response system better than it was 10 years ago.... But for this federalist system to work, all must understand, accept and be willing to fulfill their responsibilities.³²

Yet, as noted above, over the past 16 years, Washington has federalized even the most routine of disasters, which means that the federal government pays the bill.

Building the Right Emergency Response System

In the event of a catastrophic disaster, whether natural or terrorist, the only feasible way for a response to be successful is for it to be a national

response. A national response does not mean a FEMA-centric response, but rather relies on a culture of preparedness that starts at the local level, moves to state government, and only in the direst of consequences triggers a federal response.

For the state and local response to be effective, those jurisdictions must not only build disaster response capabilities, but also use them for the multitude of disasters, large and small, that occur in America every year. Conversely, for FEMA to be ready for the biggest catastrophes, it must pull back from the routine disasters and spend its finite time and resources building catastrophic response capabilities.

Returning the focus of disaster preparedness and response to states and local communities will require that Congress take certain actions. Specifically, Congress should:

- **Demand that FEMA reduce the number of disaster declarations issued.** The increase in declarations has left FEMA stretched too thin and, therefore, unprepared for catastrophic disasters. In order for a state or local government to receive a declaration, the disaster must rise to a level that truly overwhelms state and local capabilities. By raising the bar on declarations (or adhering to current law), FEMA can be encouraged to focus its disaster preparedness efforts on responding to national catastrophes.
- **Highlight best state and local practices and demand that all levels of government adhere to baseline preparedness standards.** It is particularly important that state and local governments have up-to-date knowledge of their capabilities. State and local governments must conduct capabilities assessments based on the Target Capabilities List, and DHS must allocate grant funds only to reduce capability gaps in higher-risk jurisdictions. When disaster strikes, state and local response teams will quickly be aware of the level and specifics of aid needed before they are overwhelmed. At that time, the federal government must be ready to help.

32. Jeb Bush, "Think Locally on Relief," *The Washington Post*, September 30, 2005, p. A19, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/29/AR2005092901636.html> (May 13, 2008).

DHS should also develop a basic risk-assessment tool for state and local governments based on geographic-specific actuarial data and current threat intelligence. This tool will allow communities to evaluate relative risk realistically so that resources can be used to strengthen their communities and address the most likely risks. With this knowledge, states and localities can make informed decisions on how best to safeguard their communities.

- **Demand that state and local governments pay greater attention to mitigating disaster risks and bear the consequences of responding to disasters exacerbated by poor policies.** With more than 50 years' worth of actuarial data, state and local government can predict fairly well what natural disasters will occur within their jurisdictions each year. "Fires in southern California are a natural phenomenon, like tornadoes in Kansas and flooding in the Mississippi Delta."³³ After all, it is state and local governments that continue to let people build houses near forests, in flood plains, or on beaches. Taxpayers across America should not have to pay for poor decision making and management when history's lessons are routinely ignored.

Conclusion

As the California wildfires and the latest FEMA data show, the federalization of disaster responses

continues to accelerate. This practice must end. It stretches FEMA's already strained resources even thinner and encourages state and local governments to divert their disaster-response resources to more immediate needs like transportation, education, or health care.

While it is understandable that members of FEMA and the Bush Administration want us to believe that they have fixed what was so horribly broken, the politicians in those entities need to temper their public relations machines or risk deepening the false sense of security and apathy that already exists to a large degree across America. The risk of catastrophic terrorist attacks is real, and it is high. Much work remains to be done to prepare for these probabilities. It is time to get back to our federalist tradition and empower state and local governments to take the lead in managing disasters.

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33. "The Fires Next Time," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 27, 2007, p. A8, at <http://online.wsj.com/public/article/SB119344242263173488.html> (May 13, 2008).