

## “This ‘Who Shot John Thing’” Disaster Relief as an Entitlement in the 20th Century

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On August 28, 1992, four days after Hurricane Andrew slammed into southern Florida and continued its path of damage into Louisiana, President George H.W. Bush stood before journalists in the White House Rose Garden. The press wanted to know whom to blame for the slow response in addressing people’s needs after the natural disaster. Bush became agitated by the audience’s fixation on culpability. “There is no point getting into blame and this ‘who shot John’ thing that I know everybody’s fascinated with,” interjected the President. “I don’t want that, and I don’t want one single Federal official trying to be in the blame-assigning business.... The important thing is to help the people.”<sup>1</sup>



President George H.W. Bush visits victims of Hurricane Andrew in Lafayette, LA, on August 26, 1992.

Initially, the media’s blame game and finger pointing were aimed at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the primary disaster relief provider, because, simply put, it was not helping the people.<sup>2</sup> While Bush contended that the press badgering was unproductive because the federal government was at least trying to deal with the catastrophe, media criticism signaled something much more important about the American state in general: public demand for immediate federal solutions to natural

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States* (Washington, DC: Office of the Federal Register, National Archives and Records Service, 1993), George H.W. Bush, 1992–1993, 1449. This article examines only the federal-level reaction to environmental disasters.

<sup>2</sup> For scholarship on FEMA, see C. V. Anderson, ed., *The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc, 2002). For works that place FEMA in the larger context of federal disaster relief policy, see Peter J. May, *Recovering from Catastrophes: Federal Disaster Relief Policy and Politics* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1985), and Rutherford H. Platt, *Disaster and Democracy: The Politics of Extreme Natural Events* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1999). While these works are useful, the scholarship to date is preliminary, and a definitive treatment of the topic is still needed.

disasters. The federal government during the Bush administration took responsibility for disaster relief recovery within a larger political environment that favored limited government. This revealed that the American people, despite their general antistatism, believed that they were entitled to federal disaster relief. Growth in the activity of government along with continued doubts about “big government” made for a paradox. The modern state—the White House, Congress, and a bureaucratic agency—undertook disaster response initiatives during a political era that stressed downsized government.<sup>3</sup>

The paradox in 1992 had a longer historical trajectory. The development of disaster relief as an entitlement of the American welfare state took place over the course of the 20th century, gaining momentum in the 1920s, solidifying during the birth of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s welfare state, strengthening during the presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson, legitimized during the creation of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and surviving the conservative resurgence of the late 20th century. The development of disaster relief as an entitlement included a slow buildup of government involvement through legislative initiatives over the 20th century to a higher degree than was seen during the 19th century. This article surveys disaster relief as a component of the welfare state over time. Its staying power as a government service despite conservative expansion underscores a paradox of American political culture. In the last two decades of the 20th century, the Republican Party controlled the presidency for 12 years, the Senate for 12 years, and the House of Representatives for 6 years. Yet the edifices of a welfare state remained strong while the federal government grew larger than ever before.

The politics of disaster relief changed during the early 20th century because of rapid transformations in American society and government. The origins of the American welfare state are debatable, but the development of disaster relief as an entitlement proves to be a useful historical lens for scholars wishing to contemplate the beginnings of the modern welfare state. Both the Populist and Progressive movements advocated far-reaching legislation and programs for a more responsible federal government attuned to the needs of its citizens in times of rapid social and

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<sup>3</sup> Steven M. Gillon’s *“That’s Not What We Meant to Do”: Reform and Its Unintended Consequences in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2000) examines more broadly the paradox of public attitudes against growth of the federal government with reliance on the federal government to provide solutions to complex problems. Also, see Hugh Heclo, *On Thinking Institutionally* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2008); R. Shep Melnick, *Between the Lines: Interpreting Welfare Rights* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1994); Morton Keller and R. Shep Melnick, eds. *Taking Stock: American Government in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

technological change, and dislocation. Those progressive values gradually altered concepts of federal government responsibilities and translated into government expansion and a more active administrative state. Those beliefs prompted the American people to anticipate a strong federal presence during moments of calamity, including natural disasters that threatened their security. That became acutely true during the New Deal era and the Dust Bowl disaster, when Roosevelt harnessed the already expanding federal state to tackle a radical change in the economic and agricultural system that coincided with a multistate natural calamity. The New Deal's formalization of relief offices to deal with the Great Depression was the major reason why disaster relief became engrained into the American welfare state. Roosevelt used those existing programs—most notably the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA)—to provide disaster aid. The New Deal provided an avenue by which centralized disaster relief for the Dust Bowl could be integrated into the growing welfare state. Some scholars argue the reverse, that earlier disaster relief efforts provided a precedent for the expansion of the federal welfare state.<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, the New Deal welfare state provided a dramatic precedent for the expansion and institutionalization of disaster relief.

This article demonstrates that while Roosevelt set the stage for the extension of disaster relief through the edifices of America's welfare state, permanently enlarging the federal role, the ideology of limited government lingered over Capitol Hill and 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue and endured in the minds of much of the general public. Despite a popular resistance to using the national treasury for public aid, a welfare state existed. What is more, the American people during times of calamity demanded federal direction and disaster aid. During the course of the 20th century, then, the administration of federal disaster relief intensified as the state enlarged, the welfare state expanded, and the power of the presidency increased. Federal relief work in the 1920s set the stage for increased government responsibility for public welfare. Roosevelt then initiated a far more extensive and organized disaster relief program in order to alleviate suffering and stabilize and repair a broken economy. Later, Lyndon Johnson broadened disaster relief to expanded levels and approved unprecedented disaster relief to individuals as he led America into the Great Society. Johnson

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<sup>4</sup> Michele Landis Dauber, "The Sympathetic State," *Law and History Review*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 2005, 387–442; Michele Landis, "'Let Me Next Time Be Tried By Fire': Disaster Relief and the Origins of the American Welfare State, 1789–1874," *Northwestern University Law Review*, Vol. 92, 1998, 967–1034; Michele Landis, "Fate, Responsibility, and Natural Disaster Relief: Narrating the American Welfare State," *Law and Society Review*, Vol. 33, 1999, 257–318; Michele Landis, "Helping Ourselves: Disaster Relief and the Origins of the American Welfare State" (Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 2003).

unequivocally centralized federal disaster relief duty at the executive level. Future Presidents, despite their penchant for conservative politics, continued the trend of executive authority over the politics of disaster relief and took command during national, natural disasters, as demanded by the American people. By the second half of the 20th century, federal disaster relief had indeed become an ongoing entitlement of the American state.<sup>5</sup>

### **The 1927 Mississippi Flood as a National Problem**

To understand the emergence of this paradox of entitlements versus limited government, we must first go back to 1927. The Mississippi River flood of 1927 caused 246 deaths, contributed to over \$400 million in property damage, and marked a fundamental shift in the politics of disaster relief; the flood indicated a move toward large-scale federal involvement in disaster relief not seen in earlier times. Responding to calls from the American people demanding that the leaders in Washington do something to protect them from more damage, Congressman Frank R. Reid (R-IL) and Senator Wesley R. Jones (R-WA), with the vocal support of Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, sponsored the Flood Control Act of 1928. Enacted on May 15, 1928, the law authorized the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to construct levees to prevent future flooding on the Mississippi River. This significant public works appropriation provided \$318 million for levee construction and was the largest sum dedicated to flood prevention to that date. It also inaugurated a dramatically increased role at the federal level and set a precedent for future federal involvement in natural disasters.<sup>6</sup>

Republican President Calvin Coolidge, however, remained aloof from the flood and repeatedly declined to visit the disaster area. According to Coolidge, disaster relief was never the responsibility of the federal government, but rather an emergency to be handled by local and state governments along with the American Red Cross. Besides, noted Coolidge, the U.S. Congress had not a single dollar to spare for relief.<sup>7</sup> And, even if Congress did have extra funds to appropriate for flood relief, Coolidge

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<sup>5</sup> This article ends with an examination of the George H.W. Bush administration for a couple of reasons. First, preliminary study of federal responses to major natural disasters during Bill Clinton's administration reveals that they generally mirrored those of the previous administration. Second, federal sources remain limited for the early 21st century.

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of the 1927 flood, see John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> “Cabinet Members Ask for \$5,000,000 for Flood Relief, April 23, 1927”; “Mississippi Valley Flood-Relief Work, Miscellaneous, 1927 April”; Secretary of Commerce Period Papers, Hoover Papers; Herbert Hoover Library, West Branch, Iowa (hereinafter SCPP; HHL).

discouraged such active government involvement, believing that Congress would become “too liberal” in the matter of making appropriations.<sup>8</sup>

Congress demonstrated its will by passing the Flood Control Act despite the President’s apprehensions. The act marked a dramatic shift in the government’s perception of its role in natural disasters, even if it did not garner the support of the President.<sup>9</sup> In the late 1920s, Coolidge’s concern regarding federal control over disaster recovery and the use of federal money mirrored the dominant popular view at the time. Coolidge’s action was consistent with a political culture that stressed individualism, self-sufficiency, and state-level responses during emergencies, even if the flood victims, who were primarily tenant farmers and farm owners, wanted direction and assistance from the federal government.

While disaster sufferers in the late 1920s sought government help, they were at the same time resistant to accepting charity. The mentality of farmers in the early 20th century was uniquely American in the sense that they prized values of independence, self-sufficiency, individualism, and a small government that did not intrude into their lives. Farmers considered the acceptance of charity as an embarrassment, synonymous with failure, and federal welfare (or charity) was synonymous with utmost failure. In a postcard to Secretary Hoover, one flood victim emphasized that the displaced did not want “charity.” And, although the writer admitted to needing “help” to recover from the flood, his personal “golden rule” remained the same: he would never accept charity.<sup>10</sup>

But when their chips were down, so it seemed, disaster victims realized the necessity for some type of disaster relief, and looked to the federal government for help and leadership. The most perceptive assessments of the circumstance were those that hinted at a much larger issue: the incompatibility between limited government with a penchant for states rights and disaster relief administered by the federal government. Lehman Johnson, a chemist who specialized in cottonseed, viewed flood conditions as a national disgrace because the federal government did not “do its duty” to relieve suffering and undue flooding. For the sake of America’s agricultural economy, argued Johnson, an overhaul of values had to take place. “It may require a revolution in our thoughts to make the Mississippi River safe, an asset instead of a liability to

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<sup>8</sup> “Local Contributions for Flood Relief Still Favored by President,” *U.S. Daily*, February 18, 1928; “Mississippi Valley Flood-Relief Work Calvin Coolidge, 1927–1928”; SSCP, HHL.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Postcard sent to Herbert Hoover, May 9, 1927; “Mississippi Valley Flood-Relief Work, Miscellaneous, 1927 May 6–10”; SSCP, HHL.

the people of the Valley,” he wrote. “It may require an amendment to the national Constitution, the waiver of some ‘states rights.’ This is a problem of both engineers and statesmen.”<sup>11</sup>

A full-scale revolution did not take place. However, critical moments in the evolution of the politics of federal disaster relief over the 20th century slowly drew the federal government into a more prominent position. What remained constant throughout the flood and in subsequent times of natural emergency was the American people’s desire that the national government contribute more to alleviate their plight. While Americans espoused values of individualism and self-reliance—values reflected in the preference for small-scale government—large-scale emergencies overshadowed those beliefs, and the American people looked toward their government for protection, often becoming very agitated when the government balked at those demands.

### **The Dust Bowl Crisis Leads to Expanded Relief**

The federal response to the Dust Bowl of the 1930s demonstrated the bureaucratic and legislative incorporation of disaster relief into the American welfare state. The long-term exploitation of land in the Southern Plains led to spectacular and disastrous dust storms from 1930 to 1936. Extensive farming and soil erosion worsened by a severe drought forced hundreds of thousands to leave their homes.<sup>12</sup> The Dust Bowl also revealed the contradiction between individualism and the expectation for federal-level assistance. Attitudes among farmers and leaders in the drought states surely conflicted with traditional American values of small government, self-sufficiency, and rugged individualism.

If any American lived by those core tenets, it was the American farmer. The image of the American farmer in the early 20th century was that of a hardworking, honest man (women were not included in this image) who labored on the land that he owned, cared for his livestock, and fed his family. But in the 1930s, the land dried up and threatened the lives of the farmers who sought to make a decent living from the land. The crisis was not devastating for the small farmer who kept a few livestock, a field or two, and a home garden, but did threaten agribusiness, or large-scale, mechanized farming. The decades-

<sup>11</sup> Lehman Johnson, April 27, 1927; “Mississippi Valley Flood-Relief Work, Miscellaneous, 1927 April”; SCPP, HHL.

<sup>12</sup> Donald Worster’s *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) arguably remains the best study of the Dust Bowl. There was greater difficulty attaining drought relief during the beginning of the Dust Bowl under Herbert Hoover. Eventually, Hoover asked the Red Cross to work with the Department of Agriculture to provide relief through local committees. See Nancy Beck Young, *Wright Patman: Populism, Liberalism, and the American Dream* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 2000), 37–38.



A large dust storm approaches Rolla, Kansas, on April 14, 1935.

long intensification of agriculture, with its overplowing in pursuit of greater profits, gradually eroded the topsoil. The drought of the mid-1930s then enabled the great dust storms that crippled farming and forced thousands from the land. Framers realized that they had passed beyond autarky in the countryside, beyond the traditional times of self-sustaining toil. They realized that they were part of a much larger capitalist system that now required more complex leadership and support from the nation's capital. And thus they now looked to Roosevelt and the New Deal for a solution to their dilemma and the dilemma facing all farmers in the Midwest Empire.<sup>13</sup>

By summer 1931 Americans across the nation were well aware of the drought that stretched over the Great Plains. Charles Franck wrote from his home in Brooklyn, New York, on June 17, 1931, regarding the situation. Franck believed he knew the solution to bring the United States out of the dust and back onto its feet. He sent his suggestion to President Hoover. His letter asked the President to equip a large number of airplanes with tanks. The tanks, wrote Franck, were to be filled to carrying capacity with water and "fitted up with [a] sprinkler apparatus."<sup>14</sup> Franck's aerial sprinkling devices, he trusted, could put an end to the misery caused by the natural calamity then underway. Many letters with similar or even grander ideas found their way to the White House during the dust storms in anticipation of aid from Washington, DC.

<sup>13</sup> Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964) focuses on the dilemma facing Americans as they longed for a simpler past as the country modernized.

<sup>14</sup> Lawrence Richey to Charles C. Franck, June 19, 1931; "Drought, 1931–1932 and Undated"; Secretary's File Series, Herbert Hoover Papers; Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, IA.



During the decade of the Great Depression, struggling men and women, decaying communities, aimless migration, and especially the need for relief for struggling farmers troubled Roosevelt the most. The drought, the dust, the grasshoppers had all happened; that could not be stopped. And the people and the federal government had no delusions that man rather than nature was at fault. They knew that overplowing in an attempt to capitalize on the land had caused the Dust Bowl. The shortage of rainfall simply exacerbated the manmade disaster. It was the effects of the drought, dust, and grasshoppers on agribusiness and the pockets of landowning farmers that Roosevelt had to deal with in order to bring the Midwest and indeed the entire country back to its feet. Thus, FDR had to figure out how he would provide federal disaster relief to the farmers of the Midwest.<sup>15</sup>

Since the 1927 Mississippi Flood, a precedent existed for an expanded federal role in providing disaster relief to certain classes and groups (i.e., landowning farmers, businessmen, and others). Occurring simultaneously with expanded government activity after 1932 was the expansion of government structures—more bureaus, departments, committees, and offices to organize and disperse disaster relief. Roosevelt and the New Deal Congress certainly encapsulated the essence of government growth in general throughout the Depression decade with the creation of at least 100 agencies to alleviate economic suffering and decline. Those alphabet agencies were not directly created to deal with natural disasters, but they proved invaluable during the Dust Bowl as mechanisms for providing disaster relief. As phrased in one newspaper article of the time, disaster relief was made possible by the “nation’s tremendous machinery for human relief” or, simply put, the New Deal state’s “relief machine.”<sup>16</sup>

Disaster relief was therefore an operational part of the welfare state in the 1930s because it was administered through the new welfare state agencies. Roosevelt’s style of disaster relief was not to provide handouts to anyone who stood in a line. He was adamant that there would be no dole. Instead, FDR used New Deal programs and laws such as the WPA and the AAA to organize and implement disaster relief initiatives in the drought states. To do so, the President effectively folded disaster relief into the welfare state, institutionalizing it as a feature of an expanded American state. From that point on, disaster relief existed officially within the realm of an administrative state.

On June 9, 1934, Roosevelt explained his programs for disaster relief in a message to Congress in which he requested an appropriation of \$525 million in disaster

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<sup>15</sup> Worster’s *Dust Bowl* arguably remains the best monograph detailing how agribusiness produced the man-made Dust Bowl.

<sup>16</sup> “Aid for 75,000 Families Drawn Up at St. Paul; Hopkins and State Officials Meet, Wallace to Inspect Area.” *Minneapolis Star*, June 30, 1936.





President Roosevelt talks with Steve Brown, a homesteader, during a visit to drought-stricken Jamestown, North Dakota, on August 29, 1936.

assistance. “Prompt and vigorous action to meet the emergency” had to be taken by the federal government, explained the President. “The situation has become grave as rainfall shortage has continued,” he finished. An especially serious problem, noted Roosevelt, was the shortage of animal feed. “Large scale assistance by the Federal Government is necessary,” he stated, “to move feed to livestock and livestock to feed, and to acquire and process surplus cattle to provide meat for relief distribution.” His plan, if approved by Congress, would pour additional millions of dollars into the AAA in order to purchase livestock, ship and process livestock, provide loans to farm owners to finance emergency feed purchases and shipments, and purchase seed for planting in the upcoming year.<sup>17</sup>

But, loans created another problem. As often happens, one government program leads to many more. Many jobless farmers had no way to repay the loans extended to them by the federal government and local agencies. They needed jobs. So, Roosevelt once again utilized existing New Deal programs, particularly the Works Progress

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<sup>17</sup> Relief of the Drought Area: Message from the President of the United States Transmitting A Recommendation for the Immediate Enactment of Legislation Providing for the Appropriation of \$525,000,000 for the Relief of the Drought Area, *Congressional Record*, 73rd Cong., 2nd Sess. (June 9, 1934).

Administration (WPA), to provide them with just that. The WPA was created on April 8, 1935, with the passage of the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1935, which allocated \$5 billion to provide a huge public works program for jobless Americans.<sup>18</sup>

Farmers hit with the drought—that is, landowning farmers with families—were put to work by the thousands. Roosevelt’s New Deal disaster program used the WPA to provide government jobs to needy farmers across the Great Plains. Farmers began constructing and improving infrastructure across the country, erecting government structures as they earned federal paychecks to pay off loans underwritten by the federal government. By summer 1935, the WPA compiled an impressive list of accomplishments: 2,161 miles of levees built, and 399 miles improved; 227 miles of riprap built, and 80 miles improved; 42 miles of retaining wall built, and 113 miles improved; 582 miles of bulkheads constructed, and 14 miles improved; and 452 miles of rivers dredged. Other men were put to work restoring bridges and roads, repairing water mains and sewers, burning dead animals, and dispersing chloride and lime for disinfection. Water conservation was a major objective of the WPA. By summer 1935, over 2,000 small dams were constructed on both public and private properties. Thousands and thousands of farm and garden ponds were dug—1,550 in Kansas alone. Completed WPA projects in water conservation alone made for a remarkable total: 3,118 dams built, and 184 improved; 4,927 wells built, and 1,159 improved; 116 lakes built, and 69 improved; 932 storage reservoirs built, and 200 improved; and 4,390 ponds and waterholes built. Erosion control made for a similarly lengthy list: 3,084 erosion control projects, 525 square miles of land protected, 1,528,500 acres of drought-area land plowed using improved techniques, 271,760 acres of land terraced, 5,707,000 trees planted, and 1,682,000 shrubs planted.<sup>19</sup> All in all, the federal government took a commanding role in disaster relief. It seemed as though the New Deal had touched nearly every inch of dry land.

Even though Roosevelt had effectively integrated disaster relief into the welfare state, he nevertheless disagreed with providing free aid to anyone and everyone. He feared the dole. When meeting with Governor E. W. Marland of Oklahoma, his concern became evermore clear. The governor had lost hope during the dry

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<sup>18</sup> For a well-researched monograph regarding the WPA, see Jason Scott Smith’s *Building New Deal Liberalism: The Political Economy of Public Works, 1933–1956* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Booklet, “The Emergency Work Relief Program of the FERA,” April 1934–July 1935; Folder: Report on Emergency Work Relief Program (Apr. 1, 1934–July 1, 1935) – Hopkins Papers; Papers of Harry L. Hopkins; Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

years. His people had no feed for their livestock and little food for their families. He reported that thousands of families in Oklahoma could not go on for more than a week or two at most. “I am not exaggerating, Mr. President, when I say these people are suffering and absolutely have nothing, they have no garden or fruit, they haven’t been able to put up anything.” Roosevelt, with little desire to help every individual in the drought zones with direct relief, responded to the plea, “You are up against this problem, Governor Marland[.] [I]f we once start to use Federal funds to meet the need of the individual farmer without first aiding the community altogether [i.e., through public works projects] we are going to get into an awful lot of trouble all around the country.” Roosevelt continued to state his warning, “And you take the next step it would mean in the case of trees that the Federal government would go and put the trees on the individual farm without contribution by the individual—it would mean in the case of terracing, the Federal Government to come in and terrace the individual farmer’s land free of charge. It is an awfully dangerous precedent to start.”<sup>20</sup>

Although Roosevelt did not provide direct disaster relief to individuals throughout the Great Plains during the Dust Bowl, his New Deal state nevertheless altered the politics of disaster relief by incorporating it into an administrative state. The Great Depression created a domestic emergency, and Roosevelt reacted with the creation of the New Deal welfare state. His New Deal programs, such as the WPA and the AAA, then allowed for the seamless integration of centralized disaster relief into the welfare state during the Dust Bowl. In the New Deal era, federal disaster relief came in the form of loans to landowning farmers and thousands of miles of new levees, dams, and wells built by loan-holding farmers. By providing those relief efforts, Roosevelt institutionalized federal disaster relief. He also generated the precedent for federally directed aid during times of natural calamity.

### **Executive Authority Directs Disaster Relief**

As America entered the 1950s, the President increasingly assumed control over the organization of disaster relief. That transfer of decision-making proved to further promote direct federal-level involvement in disaster recovery. Prior to the 1950s, no federal agency exercised specific disaster relief duties. Rather, Congress, with the pressure of the executive branch, enacted ad hoc legislation after each major catastrophe. So while the American people steadily felt more entitled to relief, no central agency and no formal legislation existed granting the President authority over assistance decisions; all decision-making was left to the legislative branch. The ad hoc

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

legislation authorized the President to determine when federal aid would be dispersed according to the type of assistance specified in the legislation.<sup>21</sup>

In 1950 Congress granted more power to the executive branch with the Disaster Relief Act of 1950, Public Law (PL) 81-875. This act marked another turning point in the politics of disaster relief and came about as an alternative to the piecemeal approaches of the past. It marked the first time that the President was granted the authority to coordinate with the legislative branch on disaster relief and established the process of presidential disaster declaration. Moreover, the act gave the executive the power to decide when assistance should be given.<sup>22</sup> This promoted the perception and reality of a more powerful, “imperial” presidency with broad powers in the arena of disaster response; authority flowed from the President as leader of the federal government.<sup>23</sup>

The Disaster Relief Act increased the responsibility of the federal government in providing extensive disaster relief, but did not entirely address relief to individual Americans—demonstrating the tension between conservatism and individual entitlement. The program did not provide for direct grants to individuals but rather furnished assistance to state and local governments to make “emergency repairs to essential public facilities.”<sup>24</sup> Thus the intent of PL 875 was to provide an avenue through which the executive branch could appropriate money to fix federal buildings and infrastructure such as roads, schools, airports, post offices, communication networks, and other federally owned structures—many of which were built as a result of FDR’s Dust Bowl disaster initiative by Dust Bowl victims.

In the 1960s, PL 875 expanded considerably under the Johnson administration. When Hurricane Betsy hit in 1965, Johnson had expended more money through PL

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<sup>21</sup> Keith Bea, “FEMA’s Mission: Policy Directives for the Federal Emergency Management Agency,” in Anderson, *The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)*, 47.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. See also Richard T. Sylvester and William L. Waugh, Jr., eds. *Disaster Management in the U.S. and Canada: The Politics, Policymaking, Administration and Analysis of Emergency Management* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1996), 5–25.

<sup>23</sup> For a study of the evolution of the power of the presidency and its relationship with the contemporary-era legislative branch, see Julian E. Zelizer, *On Capitol Hill: The Struggle to Reform Congress and Its Consequences, 1948–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). The term “imperial presidency” became popular in the 1960s and is used to describe the growth of power in the executive branch, particularly in comparison to the legislative branch of federal government. See Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Imperial Presidency* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1973; rpt. 2004).

<sup>24</sup> Office of Emergency Planning memorandum, 5/2/1965, DI 3 Earthquakes, Primary Subject Category, Disasters, White House Central Files, Lyndon Johnson Library (hereinafter PSCD, LJJL).

875 than in previous years under the law. From 1950 to 1960, PL 875 expenditures averaged approximately \$21.5 million annually. But, during the first year of Johnson's presidency, expenditures increased to \$30 million. In 1964, expenditures jumped to \$53 million. The increase was in part due to the exigencies of horrible natural disasters, most notably the Alaskan earthquake of 1964 that killed over one hundred people and caused over \$310 million in damages.

Federal spending also increased because Johnson and Congress supported amendments to extend the reach of the federal government through PL 875. For example, during the 1964 earthquake recovery, Congress passed a bill to meet the unique conditions in Alaska, increasing the federal share for highway repair from 50 to 95 percent. Other changes included allowing the Secretary of Agriculture to forgive barrowers' indebtedness under Farm Credit Administration programs. The changes to PL 875 that pertained to the Alaskan earthquake were "not intended to serve as a precedent in other disasters."<sup>25</sup> But they did.

Yet at the same time, Johnson tempered the increased role of the government with a reminder that this federal relief did not constitute individual entitlements. All work authorized by PL 875 (debris clearance, road and street repair, restoration of public utilities, repairs of damaged essential public facilities and structures), reminded Johnson, would proceed immediately after a natural disaster, but "all other problems (how to handle the private-sector losses) [would] receive the sympathetic attention" of the federal government but not its direct involvement.<sup>26</sup>



President Johnson and his advisers inspect the devastation of Hurricane Betsy in Louisiana from the air.

<sup>25</sup> Memorandum for the President, 12/18/1964, DI 3 Earthquakes, PSCD, LJJL.

<sup>26</sup> Edward A. McDermott Memorandum to Johnson Regarding Meeting with Alaskan Governor William A. Egan, 4/4/1964, DI 3/ST 2; 4/11/64-5/10/64; PSCD, LJJL.

The public, however, desired a more prominent role for the government in direct and individual disaster relief. Max R. Medema of California, for example, wrote to Johnson that he was “shocked” and “disturbed” that the government did not provide “monetary assistance” to the “man on the street,” the “individual,” and the “un-insured.”<sup>27</sup> Cecil E. Jenks of Washington State angrily wrote Johnson that the government spent billions on “trying to land someone on the moon” but would then “debate, argue, and penny-pinch” about doing something for disaster victims. Jenks went on to criticize Johnson’s “penny-anting about” instead of providing the Red Cross—the major organization that provided disaster victims with food, water, and shelter—with money.<sup>28</sup> Thus there was a sense among citizens that they were entitled to direct federal disaster relief that went beyond the charity of the Red Cross.

In response, the Johnson administration broadened the role of the federal government significantly, using existing social programs to justify additional changes regarding disaster relief efforts.<sup>29</sup> Certain individuals were indeed helped after Hurricane Betsy. Veterans with loans through the Veterans Administration were extended “all possible forbearance” in the payment of debts, and a moratorium was put on payments. The Farmers Home Administration began extending emergency 3 percent loans repayable over 30 years to help finance the replacement of machinery, equipment, and livestock lost as a result of the hurricane.<sup>30</sup> Citizens already integrated into government programs received additional support through those existing programs during times of natural calamity. The federal government, therefore, used existing social programs to provide additional disaster relief to individuals—a convenient way to work around the original purpose of PL 875, which was to provide money only for the repair of public structures.

Johnson also used PL 875 to authorize substantial and unprecedented supplemental allocations of federal disaster funds in the immediate aftermath of Betsy and in the succeeding years. But not all leaders were happy with the increased role of the government and its grants of individual aid to disaster victims. On October 11, 1965, Buford Ellington, director of the Office of Emergency Planning, warned Johnson against providing relief that could be perceived as entitlements, cautioning that Washington was “opening up a door where the slightest loss from any person

<sup>27</sup> Max R. Medema letter to Johnson, 4/4/1964, DI 3 Earthquakes, PSCD, LJL.

<sup>28</sup> Cecil E. Jenks letter to Johnson, 4/23/1964, DI 3/ST 2, 4/16/64–5/20/64, PSCD, LJL.

<sup>29</sup> For an insightful monograph on the use of private charity and volunteers in providing relief, see Edwin Amenta, *Bold Relief: Institutional Politics and the Origins of Modern American Social Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

<sup>30</sup> Memorandum to Marvin Watson, 9/16/1965, DI 6/ST 18; 9/16/65–9/22/65, PSCD, LJL.

in the United States could bring a request to the Federal Government for direct assistance.”<sup>31</sup>

Johnson went beyond the original intent of PL 875 when he provided individual material assistance as well as millions of dollars in allocations of disaster relief funds. By October 15, the government exceeded its traditional role of assisting in debris clearance and restoration of public facilities and provided the Red Cross with 1,000 trailers costing between \$3,000 and \$3,500 each to families that had lost their homes.<sup>32</sup> In December 1965, Johnson handed over \$2.5 million to Florida.<sup>33</sup> In May 1966, Johnson allocated an impressive \$25 million in federal disaster relief—the largest single allocation of disaster funds since the enactment of PL 875 in 1950.<sup>34</sup> Federal assistance was supposed to expire one year after the declaration of the disaster on September 10, 1966, but Johnson extended the date and authorized another \$7 million in disaster funds in February 1967 and an additional \$2.75 million in July. That made for a total of \$39,750,000 in PL 875 funds allocated for Hurricane Betsy relief.<sup>35</sup>

Institutional changes taking place after the Johnson administration further demonstrated the government’s central role in providing disaster relief to the people even while the public expected more from federal aid. By the late 1970s, Congress had become worried with the structure and inefficiency of federal emergency assistance programs and called for their re-organization. After a series of natural disasters—the Alaskan Earthquake in 1964, Hurricane Betsy in 1965, Hurricane Camille in 1969, the San Fernando Earthquake in 1971, and Hurricane Agnes in 1972—efforts to centralize, and thus promote efficient federal disaster relief, culminated in the Disaster Relief Act of 1974, which extended further the President’s ability to provide individual disaster aid.<sup>36</sup> All along the way, there were significant legislative responses to many disasters and many bills passed to provide extra relief for victims. Federal disaster relief, particularly to individuals, became an ongoing element of federal policy. The creation of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) during President Jimmy Carter’s administration in April 1979 effectively institutionalized a

<sup>31</sup> Letter, Buford Ellington to Johnson, 10/11/1965, DI 3/ST 2; 4/16/64-5/20/64, PSCD, LJL.

<sup>32</sup> Memorandum to the Director of the OEP, 10/15/1965, DI 6/ST 18; 9/23/65-, PSCD, LJL.

<sup>33</sup> Letter, Lyndon Johnson to Haydon Burns, 12/13/1965; DI6/ST 9, PSCD, LJL.

<sup>34</sup> Letter, Johnson to Haydon Burns, 5/21/1966, DI 6/ST 18; 9/23/65-, PSCD, LJL.

<sup>35</sup> Letter, George E. Hasting to John McKeithen, 5/21/1966, DI 6/ST 18; 9/23/65-; Johnson letter to John McKeithen, 2/27/1967, DI 6/ST 18; 9/23/65-; Johnson letter John McKeithen, 7/18/1967, DI 6/ST 18; 9/23/65-, all in PSCD, LJL.

<sup>36</sup> “Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act (Public Law 93-288) as Amended,” <http://www.fema.gov/about/stafact.shtml> (accessed Sept. 5, 2012).



sense of entitlement to a strong federal role in providing on-the-ground relief. FEMA was meant to help organize and centralize the nation’s disaster relief program in the administrative state.

But, FEMA failed to provide a solution to disaster relief. The problematic history of FEMA began with its hasty creation as an agency under Carter’s Presidential Reorganization Project, which, ironically, aimed at improving the efficiency and effectiveness of federal agencies. The new agency had many birth defects, giving it a “Mr. Bumble” image. FEMA was called the “federal turkey farm” because of its poor-quality appointees. It had a reputation for scandals and little skill or clout in its role in national security, and it was perceived by other federal agencies as less capable of coordinating with the rest of government than it aimed to be.<sup>37</sup>

Thus by the late 20th century, federal-level disaster relief efforts continued to be imperfect, evolving, and also larger than ever before. A trend of increasing federal involvement emerged during the 1927 Mississippi flood, greatly intensified during the FDR administration, and continued to develop throughout the 20th century. A slow build-up of the government’s role and an increase in the power of the President in disaster relief took place over the decades, and by the end of the 20th century it had become a basic government service. Yet, by the early 1980s, American political culture experienced resurgence in conservatism and the rhetoric of small government. But despite conservative criticism, the increased role of the presidency and the legislative branch during Hurricane Andrew in 1992 showed that in a time of crisis, Americans expected a strong federal presence. They did so even while conservative leaders portrayed the federal government as the problem and not the solution, as Ronald Reagan had put it a decade earlier.<sup>38</sup>

Emergencies highlighted the philosophical contradiction as Americans looked toward the federal government for solutions to their crises. They continually demanded more massive and improved disaster relief at the federal level. Former Dade County

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> For an impressive study illustrating patterns of executive leadership throughout U.S. history as well as providing a historical context for the modern presidency, see Stephen Skowronek, *Presidential Leadership in Political Time: Reprise and Reappraisal* (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 2008). For literature on Reagan, see Robert M. Collins, *Transforming America: Politics and Culture During the Reagan Years* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); John Ehrman, *The Eighties: America in the Age of Reagan* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006); Steven Hayward, *The Age of Reagan: The Fall of the Old Liberal Order, 1964–1980* (New York: Random House, 2001); Michael Schaller, *Reckoning with Reagan: America and Its President in the 1980s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974–2008* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).

manager Ray Goode explained the shock that many of his fellow Floridians felt after the 1992 storm. “We went almost a generation in the community without a major, major storm,” explained Goode. “The passage of time very likely caused us to drop our guard more than we should have.”<sup>39</sup> Meteorologists tracking the development of the tropical storm similarly felt surprised. In a period of only 36 hours, Hurricane Andrew intensified from a tropical storm to the threshold of a Category 5 hurricane on the Saffir/Simpson Hurricane Scale.<sup>40</sup> By August 22, 1992, meteorologists recognized this as a major storm barreling toward the Florida coast. In the predawn hours of August 24, Andrew made landfall on the southeast coast of the Sunshine State, smacking the area with 145-mph sustained winds, gusts of more than 175 mph, and a storm surge reaching 14–15 feet. Just four hours after landfall, Andrew became the most expensive natural disaster up to that point in U.S. history, costing Dade County alone more than \$20 billion in damages.<sup>41</sup> A 1993 FEMA report tallied the damages in Florida at 40 deaths, 75,000 destroyed homes, approximately 160,000 people left homeless, and an estimated federal assistance for just the state of Florida of more than \$1.8 billion.<sup>42</sup>

Destruction was less severe in Louisiana, where Andrew weakened into a Category 3 storm and was later downgraded to a tropical storm when it made landfall on August 26, 1992. Nevertheless, Louisiana saw nearly 42,000 homes damaged or destroyed. Estimated federal assistance for Louisiana exceeded \$172 million.<sup>43</sup> While the winds weakened, Andrew still made an impressive showing in the state; Ann Collins, a graduate student at Louisiana State University at the time of the storm, remembered airborne squirrels being blown past her apartment window, propelled by Andrew’s force.<sup>44</sup> A hurricane of Andrew’s magnitude had not struck the two states for nearly a generation.<sup>45</sup> The people of Louisiana and Florida were taken aback by the power of nature.

When the recovery process began, so too did disappointment in Louisiana and Florida. Relief could not come fast enough; lives and homes were destroyed and

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<sup>39</sup> L.S. Tait, *Lessons of Hurricane Andrew: Excerpts from the 15th Annual National Hurricane Conference, April 13–16, 1993* (Washington, DC: Federal Emergency Management Agency, 1993), 31.

<sup>40</sup> Edward N. Rappaport and Robert C. Sheets, “A Meteorological Analysis of Hurricane Andrew,” in *Lessons of Hurricane Andrew*, 2.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>42</sup> “Andrew, Iniki, Omar: FEMA Evaluation of Federal Response and Recovery Efforts,” in *Lessons of Hurricane Andrew*, 56–58.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>44</sup> Ann V. Collins, personal email to author, Sept. 12, 2008.

<sup>45</sup> For a thorough analysis of Hurricane Andrew as well as past hurricanes affecting the region, see Howard Kleinberg, *The Florida Hurricane and Disaster, 1992* (Miami: Centennial Press, 1992).

people wanted immediate help from the federal government. Even though FEMA entered the disaster zones in Louisiana and Florida immediately, the disorganized agency worked slowly and ineffectively because of the size of the storm and extent of destruction. Rep. Wilbert Tauzin (D-LA), for instance, noted that FEMA’s efforts at setting up field offices in the disaster zone, where disaster victims went to fill out paperwork to receive aid, were lacking. Tauzin reported that leaders in Louisiana had to “coach” and “cajole” the agency to persuade them to open the offices faster.<sup>46</sup>

Many of FEMA’s problems stemmed from the fact that the agency lacked effective leadership and was unorganized and uncoordinated when dealing with local officials, exhibiting incongruence between capabilities and expectations. Moreover, the magnitude of the disaster overwhelmed the agency. While people in Florida experienced a similar situation, some expressed their frustration in good humor; within the first week, a few residents in South Dade sported t-shirts that read: “I survived Hurricane Andrew, but the rebuilding is killing me!”<sup>47</sup> To alleviate dissatisfaction, President Bush joined the scene and reminded people that it was a bad idea to play the “blame game,” but the game continued as government actions proved too slow for satisfaction.<sup>48</sup>

After Hurricane Andrew, FEMA became the focus of much frustration. Known as the “Rodney Dangerfield” of federal agencies, the agency experienced attacks for its inefficient efforts.<sup>49</sup> The FEMA that Bush inherited was poorly funded, poorly structured, and poorly integrated. Moreover, the agency focused on national security preparedness rather than natural disaster recovery, and political appointees with little emergency management experience led the agency.<sup>50</sup> The organization had been transformed during Ronald Reagan’s presidency. In the 1980s, the Reagan administration focused on reviving Cold War concerns about national preparedness for nuclear attacks, leaving FEMA unprepared to handle natural disasters like

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<sup>46</sup> Hurricane Andrew, *Congressional Record*, 102nd Cong., 2nd sess. (Sept. 9, 1992): J8179. Tauzin was a Democrat during the time of the hurricane, but by 1996 he had switched parties to become a Republican.

<sup>47</sup> Eugene F. Provenzo, Jr., and Asterie Baker Provenzo, *In the Eye of Hurricane Andrew* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2002), 73.

<sup>48</sup> Theodore Steinberg, “Do-It-Yourself Deathscape: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in South Florida,” *Environmental History* 2, no. 4 (Oct. 1997): 414.

<sup>49</sup> Gary L. Wamsley and Aaron D. Schroeder, “Escalating in a Quagmire: The Changing Dynamics of the Emergency Management Policy Subsystem,” *Public Administration Review* 56, no. 3 (May–June 1996): 238.

<sup>50</sup> R. Steven Daniels and Carolyn L. Clark-Daniels, “Transforming Government: The Renewal and Revitalization of the Federal Emergency Management Agency,” in Anderson, ed. *The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)*, 79.

hurricanes. Moreover, it is unlikely that even if FEMA had substantial funding and solid leadership, integration, or structure, the agency would have been able to cope with the fallout of Mutually Assured Destruction. Nor were these changes helpful for FEMA's natural disaster relief functions.<sup>51</sup> Thus, unsurprisingly, in the summer of 1992, FEMA's efforts in Florida and Louisiana disappointed the disaster victims.

Dade County Director of Emergency Preparedness Kate Hale witnessed FEMA failing. Three days after Hurricane Andrew blasted Florida, Hale held a press conference where she expressed disappointment. Frustrated by FEMA's slow response and the continual chaos evident in her home state, Hale asked, "Where the hell is the cavalry on this one? We need food. We need water. We need people. For God's sake, where are they?"<sup>52</sup> Within 48 hours of Hale's public plea, Bush sent in his own cavalry: 14,500 federal troops, and an additional 20,000 Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard units. To head the troops, Bush dispatched Secretary of Transportation Andrew Card to take over the response and recovery activity that had been the duty of FEMA. The White House bypassed a failing FEMA and took the commanding role.<sup>53</sup> Although FEMA believed it was responding with "better than average speed," the people affected by Hurricane Andrew, including Hale, were unsatisfied.<sup>54</sup> In stepped Bush.

Perhaps because of Hale's plea, Bush asserted a dominant executive role; when culpability was placed on FEMA, Bush sent in troops, lest blame be placed on him during a re-election year. However, Bush's reaction was misguided. The federal troops were being used contrary to their training. Unlike the National Guard, the federal troops were not trained in providing relief to people. The federal troops inserted into the disaster zone were taught to fight and kill, not deliver ice, and their increased presence created problems in Florida. For example, Frank Da Silva, Jr., captain of Florida's National Guard explained the clash between local and federal-level troops. "They [federal troops] really treat the National Guard . . . like they're nothing. . . . They treated all of my people like dirt," explained Da Silva.<sup>55</sup> What is more, Kathy Brechtel, a registered nurse at Homestead South Miami Hospital, found herself at 2 a.m. loading her personal 12-seater minivan with patients bound for the emergency room. When she arrived at the hospital, federal troops greeted

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<sup>51</sup> Keith Bea, "FEMA's Mission: Policy Directives for the Federal Emergency Management Agency," in Anderson, ed. *The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)*, 47.

<sup>52</sup> Wamsley and Schroeder, "Escalating in a Quagmire," 236–37.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Provenzo and Provenzo, *In the Eye of Hurricane Andrew*, 64.

Brechtel with a rifle pointed at her face. “Halt! Who goes there!” demanded the soldier. Brechtel remembered that it was “shaky for a few minutes.” Eventually, the situation calmed after a local guardsman explained to the rifle-wielding soldier who Brechtel was and what she was doing.<sup>56</sup> Even though Bush was pushed to send in his cavalry, dispatching federal troops revealed the persistent conflation of disaster relief and national security. Moreover, Bush’s efforts demonstrated that while the federal government showed a strong presence it had yet to develop an appropriate policy to respond to natural calamity.

Bush found himself in a quagmire and confused by demands for more active intervention against a backdrop of a conservative political era during a re-election year. As soon as he sent assistance, he faced charges of being an incumbent seeking to gain political support while he sagged in the polls. Hurricane Andrew provided Bush the political opportunity to fly in on a helicopter, don khakis and boots, and meet with disaster victims, essentially capitalizing on a calamity in order to boost his image; after the hurricane, though, Bush suffered in public opinion from the poor response.<sup>57</sup> Even perturbed Floridians interpreted Bush’s more direct role as a political strategy at the same time that they demanded federal government intervention, underscoring the paradox of continued conservatism amid expectations for a prominent federal role, especially for the President. Florida resident Peggy Marko asked Bush, “Are you going to save a country or are you going to campaign? Saving the country will get more votes.”<sup>58</sup>

Marko’s words showed that the American people in the late 20th century held the President accountable for responding to disasters. Americans demanded that the President have a strong presence in disaster relief operations. Walter and Mary Keller addressed a letter to Bush, expressing their desire for the chief executive to take charge: “We request you to ‘Pull out all the Stops’ in order to gain control in South Florida. Our feeling is lack of coordination is the most serious problem which exists with the relief effort. We urge the Federal Government to take the lead role in the coordination of this effort.”<sup>59</sup>

Even if Americans scoffed at the image of Bush stomping around in the middle of the muddy southern Florida disaster zone, Floridians expected and demanded

<sup>56</sup> Kathy Brechtel, “Andrew’s Aftermath,” *The American Journal of Nursing* (Nov, 1992), 16.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>58</sup> Letter, Peggy Marko to President Bush, 9/9/1992, Case No. 821573, DIOO2, WHORM Subject File, Bush Presidential Records, George Bush Library (hereinafter WHORM-BPR, BL).

<sup>59</sup> Letter, Walter and Mary Keller to President Bush, 8/28/1992, Case No. 349556, DI002, WHORM-BPR, BL.

presidential action. The initial failure of the state's efforts through FEMA left the President in a no-win situation. Bush insisted that his concern was in fact genuine, rather than an image-making attempt to gain political support. The Kellers felt relieved when on the same day that they mailed their letter Bush announced in a news conference that "the President



Hurricane Andrew did extensive damage to homes in Miami in August 1992, including the Silver Palm mobile home park.

is going to be on top of this.”<sup>60</sup> President Bush, like Peggy Marko, believed the politics of disaster relief was not about campaigning, but rather about saving lives and returning a devastated area back to normal as soon as possible—at least according to his remarks. “This may be hard for you to believe,” said Bush in the White House Cabinet Room on August 29. “I am thinking about what’s good for the people here. I don’t even think about the politics of it. We’re trying to help people.”<sup>61</sup>

It was undeniable that both the executive and legislative branches were very active in the relief process. On September 8, 1992, Bush made a White House statement on his proposed disaster relief legislation. Bush viewed the hurricane as a serious natural disaster to be handled by the federal government and was prepared to spend federal money for the recovery of Florida and Louisiana. He requested \$2.9 billion in emergency supplemental appropriations. Additional loan activity of over \$3 billion was also requested to assist in the rebuilding of homes, encourage economic recovery by providing small business loans, and help farmers who lost crops and farm buildings.<sup>62</sup> That same day, Bush sent his request to the legislature, determined to have the bill approved by the House and Senate before the close of the fiscal year on September 30, 1992. Bush wrote Speaker of the House Thomas Foley (D-WA) asking Congress to “consider expeditiously” the request for emergency money. Moreover, Bush hoped to minimize delay by keeping the legislation free of extraneous matters.<sup>63</sup> At 9:35 on the morning of September 8, Bush remarked in the White House Cabinet Room that he was asking Congress to move promptly and not entangle the legislation

<sup>60</sup> U.S. President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, 1993, 1447, and Pool Report, 9/1/1992, Folder FEMA-Hurricane Andrew, Subject File Marlin Fitzwater, OA/ID 6790, Bush Library.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 1452.

<sup>62</sup> U.S. President, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, 1993, 1501.

<sup>63</sup> Letter, President Bush to Thomas Foley, 9/8/1992, Case No. 361102SS, FI004.02, WHORM-BPR, BL.

in other issues.<sup>64</sup> By 10:25 a.m., the proposed legislation was posted by the Press Office and transmitted to the Hill.<sup>65</sup> The speed shown contrasted with FEMA’s slow reaction, but, moreover, it illustrated the ability of the executive and the legislative branches to cooperate with one another and to work swiftly to achieve desired ends. The legislative and executive branches were indeed active, demonstrating that in times of emergency the federal government had the capacity to act swiftly. Both Bush and members of the legislative branch of government recognized the necessity of passing the emergency supplemental appropriations.

With people in southern Florida and Louisiana counting on federal help, Congress wasted no time in passing the legislation. Rep. Dante Bruno Fascell, a Democrat from Florida, noted that Congress was “on the ball from day one.”<sup>66</sup> The bill, House Resolution 5620, sailed through the Senate (84-10) on September 15, 1992, and then proceeded through the House by voice vote on September 18, 1992. Congress served as an echo chamber of support for Bush’s emergency supplemental appropriation bill. Ultimately, the cooperation between the legislative and the executive branches culminated in the quick appropriation of \$2.9 billion in disaster relief assistance for Florida and Louisiana on September 23, 1992. In a remarkable illustration of speed, Bush signed the legislation into law on September 23, before the end of the 1992 fiscal year on September 30. The people of Louisiana and Florida, disappointed in the failure of FEMA, found satisfaction at the end of September with this second round of federal disaster relief. The funds available in the final legislation provided for \$5.8 billion in budget authority and an additional \$4.8 billion in federal loans.<sup>67</sup> Direct assistance to individuals, infrastructure repair, loans to assist in rebuilding homes and small businesses, and aid to farmers whose crops were destroyed by the wind and flooding were all components of the law: direct federal assistance had now become an established component of the modern welfare state.<sup>68</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite the formation of FEMA, the aftermath of Andrew proceeded in a way that revealed the continued practice of providing people with federal disaster relief: Bush

<sup>64</sup> Remarks in White House Cabinet Room, 9/8/1992, folder “Florida Disaster—Hurricane Andrew,” OA/ID 45567 Counsels Office, White House, Subject File, Bush Presidential Records: Staff and Office Files, George Bush Library.

<sup>65</sup> Letter, President Bush to Thomas Foley, 9/8/1992, Case No. 36110255, FI004.02, WHORM-BPR, BL.

<sup>66</sup> Hurricane Andrew, *Congressional Record*, 102nd Cong., 2nd sess. (Sept. 9, 1992): H8196.

<sup>67</sup> White House Memo, 9/21/1992, folder “Disaster Recovery—Hurricane Andrew,” OA/ID 45279, Lee S. Liberman Files—General Subject Files, Bush Presidential Records: Staff and Office Files, George Bush Library. Hurricane Iniki struck Hawaii as a Category 4 hurricane on September 11, 1992, causing approximately \$1.8 billion in damage. Typhoon Omar struck Guam in late August 1992, causing \$457 million in damage.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.



led efforts to provide individual assistance by allocating substantial disaster relief appropriations, something that the American people who were hit by natural disaster felt entitled to. The federal role in disaster relief and the expectation of voters for that aid as shown in 1992 illustrated that demands for aid were inconsistent with a so-called conservative tradition of American governance, suggesting a conflicted combination of circumstances. When Members of Congress and the President reacted to natural disasters they had to straddle two incompatible ideas: the persistence of a conservative tradition (at least in a rhetorical sense) and the reality of an administrative state and demands for relief made by the American people. Federal disaster relief, particularly a strong federal role in disaster relief on the ground, had become a component of the modern American welfare state.

By the end of September 1992, Bush and Congress accomplished their goals, providing relief after initial efforts did not work. But it was not enough to appropriate funds; certain systemic problems at the root of the failure of federal disaster relief had to be dealt with. As later natural calamities such as Hurricane Katrina (2005) revealed, Congress and the President were not successful in creating a thorough solution to provide satisfactory disaster relief. Of course, one may argue that even the best relief after a natural calamity would still be unsatisfactory. It is fair to point out that a successful solution to the problem of federal relief would have required not only an overhaul of the mechanics of disaster relief but also of the philosophy of government. For as bad as any one natural disaster was for the people affected by it, these emergencies were still not consequential enough to produce national consensus for a government that is overtly active and responsible for the administration of disaster relief through a welfare state. So, even though disaster relief had become a component of an expanded state apparatus, it was yet to be effective enough to satisfy the demands of disaster victims. Bigger government, so to say, was not necessarily better.

Study of a few disasters over the course of the 20th century illuminates a larger lesson. The federal government's involvement in natural disaster relief increased markedly at historical moments when the structure of the federal government expanded, modernized, and became evermore active in everyday life. That expanded role was first evident through the edifices of Roosevelt's welfare state. Roosevelt's New Deal came about due to a national economic crisis that prompted the creation of larger government because of demands for more organized help. In the midst of the economic emergency came the Dust Bowl—an environmental emergency that also required centralized assistance. In order to address both disasters at once, the President integrated natural disaster aid into existing New Deal programs, most notably the WPA and the AAA. Roosevelt's welfare state, which was formulated to alleviate the national crisis of the

Depression, provided the setting in which federal disaster relief was easily incorporated into the administrative state. Roosevelt therefore set the modern standard for federal-level disaster relief provided by an administrative state.

The American people then felt entitled to federal direction during natural disasters, and by the 1950s, PL 875 put that idea into law. This law also placed responsibility for disaster aid with the President. As a strong President, Lyndon Johnson used PL 875 as a mandate to expand disaster relief in unprecedented ways, providing millions of individuals with direct government aid. By the end of Johnson’s administration, the American people felt entitled, not only to federal direction, but also to individual federal relief. Despite a conservative resurgence in the late 20th century, the American people continued to expect federal-level help administered through the welfare state during moments of natural disaster.

As the governmental structure of modern states, including the United States, becomes more complicated over time, it follows that government becomes more capable of assuming more responsibility over aspects of life affecting its people. It also follows that as governmental structure becomes more complicated and administratively responsible, the people form higher expectations. And, sometimes, the government performs in a way that dissatisfies the people. This is particularly true when the state attempts to exert control over the natural world—a force that is often stronger than the best-laid plans of government.

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*Photo credits:* George H.W. Bush and displaced residents, George Bush Library; Dust Storm, Franklin Roosevelt and farmer, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library; Lyndon Johnson on plane, Lyndon B. Johnson Library; destroyed trailer homes, FEMA.