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FEMA: DISASTER RELIEF  
OR DISASTER, PERIOD

Russell R. Dynes

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## **FEMA: DISASTER RELIEF OR DISASTER, PERIOD?**

Russell R. Dynes, Disaster Research Center, University of Delaware

After Hurricane Andrew hit the mainland of the U.S., the eye hovered over the Federal Emergency Management Agency. FEMA became a convenient target for criticism. In addition to the national media coverage of the storm, local stations from across the country armed with new technology did their own "damage assessment" and neophyte reporters sought out delay and inefficiency. Accusations of inattention and incompetence in the early days after impact were constantly contrasted with the mobilization of last year's "disaster," Desert Storm. That contrast suggested FEMA should have been there involved in rescue, providing hot meals and issuing checks for damaged roofs. Of course, a major disaster in a political year engenders controversy. When the Emergency Manager in Dade County, Kate Hale asked the question on TV on the evening of the day after impact "Where's the cavalry?", the blame was placed on Washington. Soon after, President Bush appointed Secretary of Transportation Carr to "coordinate" the Federal response. All of these media impressions and conflicting images made it difficult to understand "what should have happened" after Andrew.

## **WHAT IS FEMA?**

FEMA is a federal agency which gets attention in times of crises and that attention is usually negative and often misplaced.

The primary function of the agency is not to handle all disaster tasks itself but, rather to enhance the ability of state and local governments to plan for and respond to disaster. FEMA supplements state and local efforts to develop disaster preparedness and has a similar supportive role in disaster response and recovery. In Presidentially declared disasters, FEMA coordinates the activities of various federal agencies in support of local and state governments. In the usual sequence, when a disaster occurs, a local government may indicate to the state that response needs are beyond its resources and ask for help. In a similar fashion, a state affected by one or more disasters exceeding capacity, may request help from the Federal government. When these steps are taken and a Presidential declaration is made, a number of Federal programs providing disaster assistance become available. Consequently, FEMA establishes Disaster Application Centers where representatives of Federal, State and Local government as well as private relief organizations can initiate assistance for the victims of that disaster. Some of that assistance is available to individuals in obtaining temporary housing, unemployment assistance, loans for the repair and replacement of damaged real and personal property, and in some cases, grants to meet necessary expenses. Other FEMA assistance is provided to local governments for such tasks as debris clearance and the repair and replacement of public properties, such as buildings, parks and roads. The immediate mass care and shelter needs are handled by the Red Cross and other private relief organizations.

FEMA was created in 1979 to consolidate the pattern of disaster assistance that goes back to 1803. That legal tradition is based on the idea that disasters are the primary responsibility of local communities and that the responsibility of "higher" levels of government starts when those resources are exhausted. At the time of its creation, FEMA consolidated various phases of the disaster cycle-civil defense, national preparedness and disaster relief into one agency. From the 1950's to 1970's, much of community emergency preparedness had taken place under the rubric of civil defense. Federal policy was preoccupied with preparing for "enemy attack," but local civil defense directors became increasingly involved in their own community disasters. This created a strain between Federal interests and the interest of local communities. In 1977, the National Governors Association, reflecting local concern, called for the development of "comprehensive emergency management" which focused on a range of hazards and disaster related tasks and on local interests rather than those of national security. That emphasis culminated in the creation of FEMA, as an independent agency, but with the purview of the Executive Office.

While the first FEMA Director, John Macy, made considerable progress in the consolidation effort, subsequent political leadership has been uneven. Rather than being used as a political dumping ground as some have recently charged, FEMA has usually been ignored by the Executive Branch. After taking office, the Bush administration left the directorship vacant for over a year, the period during which the Loma Prieta earthquake and Hurricane Hugo

occurred. Local and state officials had hoped for an appointment of someone with extensive disaster experience but the delayed appointment was seen as having been influenced by John Sununu, then Chief of Staff. Sununu had earlier expressed public irritation at FEMA for delays in approving emergency planning for nuclear plants in his home state of New Hampshire. His role in the appointment of Wallace Stickney, the current director, was interpreted as a move to limit the activities of FEMA. In addition to the lack of support given FEMA by the Executive Branch, most members of Congress have little interest or knowledge of the agency, except when a disaster happens in their own district.

Since its creation, FEMA has been given increased responsibility for many "new" disasters - urban forest fires, heating emergencies, refuge situations, urban riots, and emergency planning for nuclear and toxic incidents. With these added responsibilities, the 1980's has been a time when Federal assistance to states and local governments has declined. When state and local governments reallocated their resources, funding to support emergency management was often given low priority, and as a consequence the interdependent local-state-federal system was weakened.

There is no doubt, however, that in recent years, emergency management in the U.S. has improved. But, there are variations within and between states. Currently, greater attention is given to mitigation and the delivery of federal assistance in the recovery process is better organized and better expedited. Perhaps because of these improvements, local communities have increased

expectations of Federal assistance than before, but the primary responsibility of disaster response continues to be the local community. Under the current system, FEMA can only encourage improvements, not mandate them.

#### **WHAT HAPPENED IN HURRICANE ANDREW?**

The television coverage of the impact of the storm centered on South Dade County, especially Homestead, even as the storm moved on across the state and into Louisiana. Since the pictures of impact are inevitably dramatic, it is more difficult to show what did not happen. The death toll from the storm in the state was 13, which contrasts rather sharply with previous hurricanes - from Agnes (1972) 122 or Camille (1969) where the overall death rate was 255. "Saving" these lives was, in large part, a result of the effective implementation of evacuation plans which moved perhaps a million Floridians out of the intense path of the storm. That result was a product of the application of knowledge of how to warn people and how to motivate them to evacuate. The National Hurricane Center not only has improved its technology, but also increased its understanding of how to make warnings more effective. Also, evacuation plans developed by state and local governments with the encouragement of FEMA made that evacuation effort a major accomplishment, perhaps unparalleled U.S. history.

The necessary legal involvement of FEMA in Andrew was also expedited. Usually, Presidential declarations take time. For disasters that occurred between October 1, 1987 and January 31, 1989, the average time between a disaster and a Presidential

declaration was 23 days; over half of that time elapsed between the disaster and the governor's request. On Sunday August 23rd, before Andrew struck, Governor Chiles declared an emergency and signed a request to the President for a Federal disaster declaration. The hurricane came ashore early morning on the 24th and , that same day, the President made the declaration. The speed of that process was unprecedented.

Trying to sort through the claims and counterclaims of who asked for what and when in the first two days of the response is likely only to locate blame not enhance understanding. Damage assessment is always slow when it extends over a wide geographic area (Individual victims, of course, know about their situation immediately and assume that others know also). As the outline of the impact became apparent in South Dade, many of the most difficult problems were in the most economically disadvantaged and politically ignored parts of the county. While other parts of the county and the state would soon be settling back to "normal," the problems facing the local emergency manager were immense, hence the question "Where's the cavalry?" This was widely interpreted as a criticism of FEMA, a desire for military involvement and a comment on disaster agencies in general. At the very least, it was a response of frustration at the job ahead.

Developing a disaster response means essentially creating a new community system to deliver goods and services, when both the nature and the extent of those goods and services has only been determined hours before. The system has to operate in locations which have been singled out by the storm only hours before and to

populations whose needs that day are vastly different than they were the day before. To develop such a system means refocusing existing organizations into an effective and efficient pattern. This, of course, is a complex process since most communities never develop efficiency and effectiveness in dealing with nonemergency needs, known for months and years.

#### **WAS THE CRITICISM OF FEMA JUSTIFIED?**

Much of the criticism expressed through the media was probably misplaced, but the structure and mission of FEMA always makes it vulnerable to criticism, regardless of its actual performance. The basis for such criticism is rooted in the following conditions.

1. FEMA is the focal point of a complicated set of local, State and Federal relationships and can be blamed for weaknesses in any part of the system.
2. FEMA is the focal point of 27 different Federal agencies as well as several private relief organizations and can be blamed for weaknesses in any part of that system.
3. Presidential action in appointing a "political" coordinator like Secretary Carr can seem to imply that FEMA is not responding effectively.
4. Some of the criticism of FEMA by local and state officials may be part of a strategy to increase the share of the Federal government in previously agreed-upon formulas of shared disaster costs. (In Florida, the "standard" 75 percent share of the Federal government was "negotiated" up from 75 percent to 90 percent and then, to 100 percent.)



5. In a Presidential election year, local criticisms are more likely to result in increases in Federal sharing.

6. Some problems identified by the media as examples of implicit Federal inattention had little to do with the hurricane. For example, the extensiveness of unmet health needs among migrant workers in Dade County were not created by the storm but were chronic conditions, now seen in a new context.

7. In all disaster situations, organizations which give away goods and services are evaluated positively. Organizations which require justification and accountability are viewed as unnecessarily bureaucratic and "heartless." These agencies are usually housed in FEMA-organized Disaster Application Centers. (In a CBS/New York Times poll taken September 9-12, the military and the Red Cross were evaluated nearly twice as positively as FEMA, the Federal government, the Florida state government and private insurance companies. Interestingly, the sample in Dade county was slightly more positive toward the Federal government and FEMA than were other Floridians.)

It is, of course, difficult to know how many of the victims, as well as how many of the state and local officials, viewed FEMA as the designated first responder rather than as the designated first assister.

#### **AFTERMATH**

Historically, the aftermath of major disasters have usually been followed by legislation to "correct" problems. The fact that this is repeated over and over again suggests that much of that

legislation misses the point. Already there are suggestions of putting FEMA directly under the White House. That never worked effectively in the early 60's when the Office of Emergency Preparedness was a part of the White House and OEP, in fact, did become a political dumping ground. The solution to the problem of ties to political policy is more careful attention to the appointment of the Director by the President.

The suggestion that the military take over is often made, especially by those seeking a new role of the military after the end of the Cold War. While the military can provide useful material and personnel resources, calls for military responsibility suggest that outsiders can do a better job than locals. In-depth knowledge of the community is at the core of an effective response system. There will also be suggestions to reduce the "bureaucracy" in disaster assistance but, at the same time, there will be insistence on the Federal Government's fiscal responsibility and accountability, which will require some degree of bureaucratic control.

There may be suggestions to increase the staffing of FEMA. This has some merit, since the staffing level of the Office of Disaster Assistance now totals only 239 positions, including 65 in Washington. To supplement that staff, FEMA employs part-time reservists and people from the local area for specific tasks. Currently, FEMA not only has responsibility in Florida but in Louisiana, Guam, and Hawaii. In such times, FEMA staff are stretched thin. In addition to concerns about staff size, greater consideration should be given to adding staff who not only

understand the programs but also understand how to provide needed services to victims. For example, several recent disasters have placed high priority for staff with Spanish language skills and disasters in urbanized areas require workers who can serve people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

In the aftermath, there certainly will be increased attention to "negotiated" agreements calling for 100 percent Federal reimbursement. Officials from areas affected by the Loma Prieta earthquake, Hurricane Hugo and many other recent disasters will point out that their jurisdictions are currently required to cover their 25 percent share. In addition, if 100 percent Federal reimbursement becomes standard, there will be little motivation for any state to make efforts to mitigate future disaster losses. For example, some of the costs of Andrew come from damage from buildings which have recently been built in areas vulnerable to storm surge. A policy of 100% Federal reimbursement will make the Federal Government fully responsible for risks that municipalities have taken. In effect, disaster assistance can become a new entitlement program. The 100% reimbursement covers only public sector losses. Individuals are typically compensated by loans.

There is a more subtle lesson from Hurricane Andrew, likely to be lost in the discussion over blame and responsibility. The real lesson of Andrew is not found in the intensity of the winds but, in the vulnerability of certain groups to such storms. Hurricane Andrew disproportionately affected populations whose resources were so limited that they could not deal with what to others, in the northern part of the country and to other places the storm

traveled, would be marginal and sustainable losses. Andrew proved once again that populations still exist which cannot sustain income breaks and do not have the resources to bridge even short temporary interruptions in their daily lives. This pattern is not unique to South Dade county but has been evident elsewhere. After the Loma Prieta earthquake, migrant workers in Wastonville and homeless people in Santa Cruz experienced similar problems as did the rural poor in South Carolina after Hugo. Elderly persons on fixed incomes, marginally employed workers and minority citizens are among those hardest hit and least able to recover from disasters. Disaster not only creates physical damage but uncovers other "victims" who have always been there. No organization, including FEMA, can easily solve these existing chronic problems during the emergency period.

Much of the criticism directed toward FEMA in Hurricane Andrew is related to the difficulties of rapidly creating new service delivery systems, mixing private and public responsibility on top of local, state and federal jurisdictions. This diffused responsibility creates confusion and delays when action needs to be focused quickly. On the other hand, a system based on a military model which could mobilize more easily would undercut the pattern of decentralized power which has traditionally characterized the American political system and would bring its own set of problems.