

# Heritage Lectures

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## Federalizing Disaster Response

*The Honorable Rick Perry*

It is an honor to once again speak in a setting where so many conservative ideas are cultivated and free enterprise is championed: The Heritage Foundation. It is good to see a leading light in the effort to limit the size, scope, and reach of the federal government: Ed Feulner.

It is that last notion—limiting the reach of the federal government—that brings me here today. To me, asking the federal government to take over the response to the next disaster or catastrophe would be a little like the British asking de Gaulle to attend to the defense of the British Isles in 1940. In other words, I think the federal government already has enough to worry about, such as the financial condition of Social Security, the enforcement of our borders, and ensuring that democracy flourishes overseas.

Federalizing disaster response begs a couple of questions: If the federal response to Hurricane Katrina was, as President Bush agreed, inadequate, then how am I supposed to explain to the people of Port Arthur, Galveston, Brownsville, Corpus Christi, and Houston that it is a good thing that Washington will take over the next time? And if the federal response to Katrina—a natural disaster that we knew was coming for several days—was too slow, how on earth can the federal government provide an effective and immediate response if there is no warning before a radiological bomb goes off in Dallas or a biological agent is let loose across the border from El Paso in Juarez?

None of this is meant to in any way impugn our military, which is the greatest fighting force on the face

### Talking Points

- The military has expertise in preparing for, fighting, and winning wars, but it is not a civil first responder. It doesn't have firefighters, police officers, and EMTs that go out into our various communities and respond to emergencies on a daily basis.
- The federal role in disaster response is to make significant resources available to assist states and local communities. The military's most vital role in a disaster is to provide specialized heavy equipment and aviation assets and the personnel to operate them.
- The lead role of federal officials should be to prevent disasters, not respond to them on behalf of states. It is vital for the federal government to keep out of this country those who would harm our people, and it is vital, once disaster strikes, whether man-made or a natural occurrence, for states and localities to take the lead because they know their communities best.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/research/homelanddefense/hl905.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/research/homelanddefense/hl905.cfm)

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of this Earth. I spent four and a half years in the Air Force, and my dad was a tailgunner during 35 missions over war-torn Europe.

### **The Proper Role of the Military**

I have a deep and abiding appreciation of our military's capabilities, and I know what the military does best: It has an expertise in preparing for wars, fighting wars, and winning wars. But the military is not a civil first responder. It wasn't designed to be. It doesn't have firefighters, police officers, and emergency medical technicians that go out into our various communities and respond to emergencies on a daily basis.

Even if you created an elite military division of first responders, how exactly would that work? Would they train year-round for disaster response, meaning that valuable manpower and equipment needed to win wars would be kept stateside? If that is the thinking, then it would be the equivalent of turning members of our armed forces into military Maytag repairmen: good for the occasional emergency at home but unutilized for the main mission of preserving the peace each and every day.

Even with their expert training, how could such a military unit better lead the emergency response when we have local first responders that respond to local emergencies every day in those communities? How would we get such a force to Dallas or San Antonio fast enough when there is no forewarning before a deadly attack and when lives are hanging in the balance with each second?

If the federal government assumed control of first response to catastrophes, I believe it would add another layer of bureaucracy, create indecisiveness, lead to rampant miscommunications, and cost lives.

### **The Federal Role in Disaster Response**

That is not to say there is not an important federal role in disaster response. There is. Federal officials should make significant resources available to assist states and local communities. The military's most vital role in a disaster is to provide specialized heavy equipment and aviation assets and the personnel to operate them. In the hours leading up to and following landfall of Rita, we made requests for specific military assets that were needed.

The point is that, instead of placing these decisions in the hands of a lead federal officer who doesn't have control over NORTHCOM assets, military decisions should remain with the state adjutant general, who serves as a single point of contact for the military response.

The purpose of the National Guard is to provide a state military force to respond to disasters. The Guard is fully integrated into the civil response force and trains with them regularly. If anything, we need additional resources for the Guard to recognize their involvement in these state missions.

When the state's resources, including the National Guard, cannot handle the full scope of a state disaster, that is when a governor should seek the assistance of the federal government. It is no different from when the national military cannot handle the mission requirements solely with active forces: It must call on the Reserves and Guard. In state disasters, the active duty military ought to be seen as our reserve force.

Think about emergency response in this light: When you call 911, do you want an operator who knows your community, or do you want someone at a switchboard in Washington, D.C.? As a general rule, I believe in the notion that decisions that affect you and your family are best made by government closest to you and your family. Do you think Port Arthur Mayor Oscar Ortiz wants to rely more on FEMA next time or his own emergency response personnel and the contacts in the state emergency operations center that are on the phone with him every day leading up to a storm and every day after?

### **What Should Washington Be Doing Now?**

This whole debate about whether federal officials should have a more direct role in disaster response obscures the greatest issue before us, and that is what should the federal government do right now to help those still suffering from these two catastrophes?

The national TV cameras have long since left, the floodwaters have receded, schools are reopening. You might think everything is getting back to normal. But did you know we still have close to 400,000 Katrina evacuees left in Texas hotels, shel-

ters, and other places of last resort? Did you know we still have 6,000 evacuees with special needs in our hospitals and nursing homes? What is the plan for these people?

The rebuilding of New Orleans should not leave behind the poor and the meek, those who had little before the storm took it all away, those who may not have gold cards or redevelopment dreams, but who simply seek a place where their children can rest their heads in comfort and security. Keeping people in hotels and shelters for months on end is not a plan; it is what happens until there is a plan. Transitional housing or trailer towns will be a less than ideal necessity, but they are not a return to true normalcy for many of these people.

Joining me today is an individual who has agreed to head Texas's response and recovery challenge posed by Hurricane Katrina: Texas Railroad Commissioner Michael Williams. Michael is working with various state, local, and federal agencies to meet the housing, health, and employment needs of evacuees. Michael is working to provide an orderly transition for evacuees, recognizing we cannot shuttle Katrina evacuees from temporary solution to temporary solution.

What we must be about is helping people who want to help themselves. Because of the roots so many evacuees have in Louisiana, many will long for a return to home, but if their permanent plan is to stay in Texas, we will welcome them and do what we can to help them become contributing members of our society. Texas has a long and storied history of welcoming people seeking refuge from yesterday's troubles to experience tomorrow's opportunities.

Regardless of where evacuees seek to plant their roots, we must transition the discussion as quickly as possible from displacement to rebirth, from the uncertainty of wondering where home will be to the hope of a new day and a new life for those ready to stop being hurricane victims and ready to start being contributing members of American society again.

So many of them want that. I know because I went to their shelters and talked to them. They want a rebirth of self-sufficiency, or to discover the

freedom of independence that they never experienced in a pre-Katrina world.

### **Housing Vouchers for the Displaced**

The way I see it, a lot of taxpayer money is going to be spent on transitional housing, health care, and unemployment benefits for these people in addition to the staggering cost of rebuilding their home cities. Many of those expenses are unavoidable. But when it comes to housing and relocation, wouldn't it be wiser and cheaper to give these displaced people housing vouchers so they can choose to rebuild their lives *right now* if they choose to do so?

In essence, the billions of dollars we will spend to relocate people through a series of temporary and permanent government housing projects could in many cases be given directly to them with the message of "Here's a helping hand; now take control of your own destiny." I think this is in keeping with the Spirit of America in two ways: First, we have always been willing to help those looking for a new start, and second, instead of the government telling them how to go about it, we would say, "Here is your fresh start; go make the best of it."

You might say that's a lot of money to put in their hands, but I think it would cost less to give people housing vouchers that could be redeemed on a mortgage payment or a rent payment than it would cost to construct temporary trailer towns, plus pay the assistance benefits for large numbers of people congregated in the same makeshift community where there aren't enough jobs. Vouchers can prohibit from going toward various vices that might otherwise benefit from such an infusion of cash.

This may not be the answer for everyone, especially those who long to return to their damaged cities and homes. For those people, only the passage of time and the rebuilding of the place they call home will get them out of temporary housing and into a permanent home. We should also provide cost incentives for evacuees to purchase FHA-, VA-, or USDA-financed housing anywhere in the government inventory.

I have talked a lot about Katrina victims, so let me say a word about Rita victims. Many are still hurting:

some whose homes are intact but who don't have power and some who have no home to return to at all. But for all the suffering Rita continues to cause, I think it is an example of precisely why the federal government need not usurp the role of states and localities in responding to disasters.

We did not wait for the federal government to come to our rescue. We had a plan. We tested that plan in numerous exercises against numerous types of disasters, and we implemented that plan when Mother Nature bore down on our coast.

It wasn't flawless. If you were sitting idle in Houston traffic that Thursday, you might be quick to say there were flaws. But if you stuck it out, you also know you reached safety by some time on Friday at the latest, before hurricane-force winds began whipping through your hometown.

### **The Real Heroes**

There were some real heroes that went into action in the days leading up to landfall: state and local emergency personnel who courageously moved thousands of Texans with special needs to places of safety; troopers who went by nursing homes to make sure no one was left behind; private-sector leaders who, of their own volition, sent fuel into Houston when it was needed most. And after the destruction rained down on Southeast Texas, more than ten thousand utility workers swung into action, many volunteering from out of state, to get people power so they could have air conditioning, refrigeration, and the comforts of life once again.

This didn't take the federal government to get it done, and if it ever does, I'm afraid it won't get done—at least not fast enough or well enough for the people of Texas. As I said earlier, the federal government has plenty to worry about right now, not the least of which is the porous nature of our 2,000-mile border with Mexico.

### **Border Security**

Let me conclude with a few remarks on border security as someone who leads the state with roughly two-thirds of our international border with Mexico. Based on intelligence, we know that al-Qaeda and other terrorist and criminal organi-

zations see our lax border enforcement as an opportunity to import their operatives, weapons, and narcotics.

The border is under such great siege that in the first seven months of this year, the Border Patrol in Texas picked up 119,000 illegal immigrants who did not originate from Mexico—OTMs, as they are called in industry slang: Other Than Mexicans. Among those illegally seeking entrance are people from countries with a known al-Qaeda presence, such as Iran, Iraq, Bangladesh, and the tri-border region of Paraguay, Brazil, and Argentina.

So many are coming over the border that federal officials are taking desperate measures, such as busing OTMs to towns like San Angelo, a mid-sized West Texas town 150 miles from the border. These illegal immigrants are sent to their community with little information on who they are or what past they arrive with. And here's the worst part: Because of a lack of detention space, they're asked to show up at a detention hearing weeks later on their honor. Most never do.

Last week, I announced a state border security plan to provide resources from my office to ramp up the law enforcement presence, the number of investigators, and the use of technology to track and deter this threat. But it is not a state role to enforce our international border. It is the role of the federal government.

If you are wondering how the federal government will respond to future disasters, look at how they are responding to the ongoing threat of disaster posed by a porous border and a treacherous enemy that seeks to take advantage of it. Yes, we appreciate the additional Border Patrol agents and the funding for new technologies contained in the latest homeland security bill, but it is not enough.

They should hire many more Border Patrol agents, expand the use of technology at and between ports of entry, and authorize homeland security funding to pay for law enforcement positions and overtime to expand patrols. And federal officials must significantly expand detention facilities so cities like San Angelo no longer bear the brunt of a nonsensical deportation system that depends on the honesty of those who have already

broken our laws. It's only a matter of time before the federal "catch and release" policy leads to another terrorist attack on our nation.

### **Conclusion**

All this brings me to this conclusion: The lead role of federal officials should be that of preventing disasters, not responding to them on behalf of states. It is vital for the federal government to keep out of this country those who would harm our people, and it is vital, once disaster strikes, whether

manmade or a natural occurrence, for states and localities to take the lead because they know their communities best.

I appreciate this opportunity to speak on these important subjects and hope you will join me in urging Washington to take a political version of the Hippocratic oath: Do no harm.

—*The Honorable Rick Perry is Governor of the State of Texas.*